

Kolbeinn's Isle

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I

The Battleground

I am a deep-sea fish forced into the shallows, was the last thing my friend said to me before he hung up, mid-conversation, some time ago. He had since been admitted to a psychiatric ward and his words had been bothering me for the past few days. What had he meant? The dwindling daylight pushed its way through the living room window this December morning. The branches on the tree outside were bowed by the snow that had taken hold, there was frost on the grass, brown flower corpses in the beds.

A thrush appeared and attempted to peck some food from a rather depleted fat ball swinging in the wind. We had hung it up in the autumn, but really, it was now the song

birds needed feeding, I thought. I stared at the plastic net which hung and swung. “Nets to catch the wind” as is said of the art of poetry.

The thrush had hopped down to the ground and was nervously rummaging in the brown leaves. If it didn't find something to eat, it wouldn't make it.

I thought about the lectures on my calendar. I was starting to dread them, it felt like a paralytic poison was being pumped out of my solar plexus, inundating my whole body. It was frightening to experience; a single thought caused some glands to start secreting bitter substances into my system. All the unanswered emails, everything I had promised. The book manuscript which had seemingly gone to wrack and ruin...

Suddenly it hit me, this wasn't the way life was supposed to be. The fleeting relief, which called by from time to time, was a blessing. I was a person with feelings, for fuck's sake. The existence assigned to me became strange for a moment and it struck me that Dante had been half way through life when he hurtled through his hell, perhaps it was my turn now. The state of play at half time was lamentable and prospects for the second half were poor. The upcoming lectures made me feel sick, the idea of having to stand in front of people and talk about something when my heart was no longer in it. Why poetry? Why stories? They hadn't saved me. I was...

Can you even hear what I'm saying!/? My girlfriend had got up from the breakfast table. You should visit this friend of yours. Can't you just call the university and tell them you're sick? He needs you now and maybe – she paused and held back what was on the tip of her tongue, sniffed, as was her habit, before she continued: Perhaps some good would come of it – for you too. You have become so distant, my darling. I have to be shout at you to be heard, like I'm transmitting through a broken radio. We live in the same house. Why did we move in together? She came over and hugged me from behind: Where have you gone? Where has my good old boy gone?

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My friend had always had depressive episodes, but this time it was different. This is what had happened: a dam had given way and a black, viscous mass had flooded out and drowned all hope. According to his mother he had given up, he couldn't endure this thing called life any longer. He stopped getting up and when it reached the point where he was no longer able to meet his own basic needs, he was admitted.

I had always looked up to this friend of mine and so it didn't leave me unmoved. It prompted in me a mix of sympathy and curiosity and, possibly even back then, a hope that I could help him was ignited. An old philosopher once said that saving just one person is enough, you don't need to save the world. And I had been pretty lucky over the last few years, I had managed to secure a firm foothold and could provide for myself without having to work around the clock, though I was constantly afraid that everything would come crashing down if I ever lost my grip. So, I was, to some degree, trapped and never free from anxiety; the constant pressure on my soul had turned my insides barren, I was a man without qualities. It had ebbed away – my so-called inner life.

Nevertheless, I felt it was my duty, as the somewhat sturdier of the two of us, to invest time in this friend of mine who had given up at the halfway mark. I considered the warmth with which he had always spoken of honouring ritual, saying that nothing could ever change without some kind of transformation ritual, it was a prerequisite of each and every metamorphosis. Only through ritual could you escape life's illusions. Maybe I held

a desire of my own to wake up a bit, to feel connected, not just to my depressed friend but to my fellow man and to beauty, to my good old self, if I could only approach him in good faith, with a pure heart. I wanted to find a ritual, an action, to help him, but what would it consist of?

I decided to cancel my lectures and visit him, to buy a new fat ball and hang it out for the thrush. So, the ritual. This was the provisional plan: I would ask him to tell me about his feelings, both current and past. I would listen to the story of his feelings; I was sure this would help him to understand his own despair and, additionally, consolidate our bond. All he had to do was tell me whatever entered his head, because our clearest recollections are those laden with feelings. He could tell me about emotional memories that emerged, omitting details like chronology and all the exterior things that make no difference; for example, when we remember a spiteful comment or praise, we remember the feelings provoked without there being any particular significance to the shoes we were wearing, or the nature of the place it was said in, or what the weather was like that day. I had begun to hate the type of literary 'realism' in which people strive to 'capture reality' by describing how a 60-watt light bulb, Osram brand, in a dusty chandelier, casts light on the pleats of a middle-aged red head's grey dress, at the same time as the shadows between her wrinkles become more pronounced. Why did no one ever say anything about the most important things? Or was the existential wound no longer poetry's raw material? Had I completely misunderstood everything?

I dreaded visiting. What if meeting him made me depressed too? I tried to imagine it as I drove into town. Commissions would tail off if it came out that I had depressive tendencies. And then I wouldn't be able to afford my mortgage repayments. The stack of unpaid bills would steadily increase in size. My girlfriend would leave me. I'd end up broke. Reach for the shotgun.

Just as I was about to spread my brain out on a wall, I slowed down and said out loud, this won't do. I had to fucking pull myself together, now! I was stopped at a red light whilst having this intense discussion with myself and looked over at the car next to me. A young girl was in the back-seat, fair-haired with two gleaming eyes that stared at me. It was like she was of another world. We looked at each other, she smiled and waved, bathed in the polar night's brief but powerful beams of light. I couldn't muster a wave back. I just stared and woke up when the car behind me honked its horn.

There, in front of the traffic lights, I remembered my dream from the night before. My girlfriend and I were going to the theatre and I had high expectations of the performance. The curtain went up and a herd of dancers in grey came out onto the stage. They had large codpieces, which, it goes without saying, emphasised their exaggerated masculinity. They stood in a row and created a barrier or a wall by linking arms with each other. They stepped sideways, synchronising their movements, as though they were a single beast with many feet. Intense, harsh cello music accompanied the dancers. On stage, in front of them, was another dancer, spry and clad in white, slighter than the others. He tried to force his way through the grey wall, but it closed up and pushed him away, in a manner I found quite brutal. There seemed to be no way through. The figure in white became upset, I sympathised with him in the dream. At least he was trying! When the battle looked to be lost, a woman in black entered the stage. She was pale with a stern expression, she had these dark, glowering eyes you wanted to avoid looking into. She drew the stage curtain behind her and soon she had concealed all the dancers. She turned towards the audience and said:

There is nothing behind the curtain. Thank you for being here this evening. Now, go home!

The audience clapped and began shuffling out, all except for me and my girlfriend. We remained seated; I didn't want to accept that the performance was over. Then the woman picked up a shot gun and aimed it at us. I woke up with the feeling that something just didn't add up. We'd been cheated out of a show, which I knew was continuing behind the curtain, where the dancer in white would, eventually, in some unfathomable way, manage to break through the wall. He would find a way to trick them. Awake, a trace of my sympathy with the dancer in white remained in my mind, but it faded away like the taste of a rare fruit disappears in your mouth. The time was half-past four. All important dreams arrive at half-past four.

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The staff on the ward greeted me warmly and accompanied me to my friend's room. He was laying on the bed with his back to the only visitor's chair. It was an armchair from Ikea, the kind that always gives me a stiff back. A window faced onto a yard and some bare rowan trees. His hair was unkempt and stuck out in all directions. I spoke to my friend's back; it was strange, I was unsure if he could hear anything I was saying. Here's the idea, I said, I can come here for a few hours everyday and listen to you if you want to talk about what's eating at you. I wanted to help, provided that he would allow me. No response. There was a little radio in a corner, I got up to turn it off. The programme was about music composed in response to the Poetic Edda, I had been listening to it in the car; as I was about to turn it off, an old balladeer began performing a verse from The Hávamál. I stood with my hand on the device and waited as he delivered:

I know that I hung,
on a wind-rocked tree,
nine whole nights,
with a spear wounded,
and to Odin offered,
myself to myself;
on that tree,
of which no one knows
from what root it springs.i

Then, I turned it off. I put my phone on the table and hung my jacket over the chair. I said that if he wanted me to, I could make recordings of him talking for him to use when he one day wanted to write his autobiography, or he could just get rid of them; I would send him the files and at the same time delete them from my phone. Listening to his own voice would perhaps help him to see himself from an outside perspective and, who knew, lead to understanding and recovery.

After a while he turned towards me, groaning. I was shocked at what I saw. He wasn't exactly beautiful beforehand, my depressed friend, but it was like he'd been deflated. His eyebrows bulged out of his skull and his cheekbones and jaw poked out of his masculine face. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot and the darkness at their centre radiated pain. He had sleep in his eyes and white foam in the corner of his mouth that

he'd been lying on; his beard was neglected, his face pale and damp. Blueish wreaths circled his eyes and his crows feet scored a line stretching almost to his ears, in short: he was like a white stone that had fallen from the sky.

He looked at me. Then he recalled his gaze and said: You don't believe in poetry any more. Even though you are hanging from that tree, just like Odin, you have no desire to become wiser. You have become a brute with empty eyes.

It tore me up. I tried to maintain my mask and said: Well, Merry Christmas to you too! I told him that I only wished him well, that I was there as his friend. I reached for my phone, lying on the bedside table between us, on a red Christmas tablecloth embroidered with gilded bells, decorated with green leaves and black juniper berries. I remember it so clearly because I was shaken. The tablecloth itself did not interest me in the slightest.

He cried, could I not see that the path between us was overgrown! As a result of the lack of recent traffic. I couldn't just show up out of thin air and expect everything to be just fine? I whimpered, but had no answer.

After this it was as if all sense left him. He said I was flirting with her, I didn't understand what was going on and when he raised his voice and eventually started screaming, a nurse stormed into the room; she lay right across him on the bed. She had some kind of phone gizmo in her ear and shouted "guard" and "sedatives in fourteen", answered by muffled voice from the gizmo, which seemed to be part of an internal communication system rather than a phone.

Soon he was shouting so loudly I was afraid the news that the whole lot was my fault would reach the hallway. The nurse shushed and tried to calm him, this slim female figure was notably strong and held him down with considerable force.

It was painful to see madness engulf my friend in this way. Another orderly came in with a syringe, tipped him over on his side and emptied it into his backside. My depressed friend lost his spark. There was something repulsive about it, he shook a little to begin with and then his resistance just sort of faded away, leaving his head hanging askew, as if he'd lost touch with it.

The nurse followed me out into the hallway. She said that it could become difficult to reach him going forwards, he had recently shown a tendency for violent behaviour. I interpreted this as her making efforts to both excuse and, at the same time, justify the syringe. She spoke without turning a hair, with the composure she'd maintained while the spectacle played out. I probably needed to expect to be without him for a good while still. They didn't know that much yet, he was still being assessed, but everything pointed in the direction of serious schizophrenia in addition to a vigorous bipolar condition that, in all likelihood, had been left to develop freely for so long that it had entered into symbiosis with his personality. And if there is also a personality disorder, it could be really quite serious, she said in subdued tones, as if she was ashamed to say it out loud. It was a bit odd how she was strictly official in one moment and blabbing about him in the next; I thought her duty of care would require confidentiality about things of this sort.

When I got back home and tried to get some work done I couldn't get his cries about everything being my fault out of my mind. About the overgrown path between us. It was only then that I began to understand the situation my friend had landed in. It was disquieting that the nurse had so little hope for his recovery and I found her depiction of my harmless, poetic friend as violent unfair. It is understandable that health professionals try to avoid giving false hope, but I couldn't help feeling that there was something

damaging about the way he was being treated.

Later that evening I was leafing through an old psychology reference book from 1926, which, coincidentally, I had in my library. In it, schizophrenia was defined as “a cleaving of the mental functions, incidences usually lead to softening of the brain.” I shuddered at brain softening.

Next I picked up history’s first textbook on depression, which I had bought on a trip once, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* by Richard Burton. Burton was no more encouraging than the nurse, writing about melancholy spreading throughout the body. “If they hear, or read, or see any tragical object, it sticks by them, they are afraid of death, and yet weary of their lives, in their discontented humours they quarrel with all the world ... and because they cannot otherwise vent their passions or redress what is amiss, as they mean, they will by violent death at last be revenged on themselves.”

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I left my friend alone for a good while. Every time his bulging face and cutting remarks came into my mind, I tried to will them away. I still couldn’t avoid sadness at the thought of our friendship dissolving; what about the fond memories we shared? Would they just disappear and no longer be part of my life? As if forgetting didn’t smother everything anyway, it hardly needed any help. Were we, then, in the process of destroying our most precious possessions – our memories? That demanded a cold ruthlessness. It wasn’t right. And who was going to lend him rent money the next time he got into trouble? What would happen to him?

Besides, you could turn the whole thing on its head, if for one, honest moment you considered it seriously: I was the one living a hollow life. My thoughts revolved around how to maintain my freelance lifestyle. I had stopped writing poetry and read little or nothing, unless it was *useful*, no fresh metaphors came to me, I no longer played with language. My inner life had ground to a halt and only the ashes of the spark that had once lived in me remained. I had veered towards what pleased other people over what I wanted and could not match my friend’s conviction or fascination for anything. For sure, he had every reason to attack me – I was, in a way, a sterile brute.

I was jealous of him at the same time as I loved him, not least because, in this modern reality, he was so helpless. I had realised a long time ago that we were starting to drift apart. I had become one of those contemptible people who turned their backs on the poetic life and he had noticed. That’s why his comments had, over time, honed their edges – the climax had been reached during my visit to the ward. It hurt, he got under my skin. We had got together on and off but more and more time had passed between meetings over the last years. I loaned him money, I never got it back but let it go. Despite all this I couldn’t grasp why it was *him* and not me who had been admitted to a psychiatric ward with depression.

Christmas came and went and there was sorrow, as the poet said. My girlfriend pointed out that his reactions were totally normal for someone suffering with depression. They keep people at bay, push them away with harsh words. You have to understand that they aren’t themselves. I couldn’t take it personally. A depressed person is naked and ashamed and wants to be invisible. That’s what was behind his rejection – that’s why he was so scathing of me. You have to show him that you’ll be there for him whatever happens, even if he is hard on you, she said. She thought I should stick to the plan; in the

end he would open up to me, but it could take time. Why hadn't she left me long ago? I thought, mumbling something about not deserving her. She was both beautiful and happy, while I was just a burned out shell. She should leave me to fend for myself. I just wanted her to be happy, the way people are, inside their houses. I would end up dragging her down with all my problems, finally sinking our relationship and I didn't want her to drown with me. She talked and her adorable dimple came into view. She said maybe our wreck would be a good one, as they said in the olden days about the hulks of sailing ships off the south coast. She smoothed my hair down to my chin, she knew such caresses always made me demure; she said: You must not give up, my dear.

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And the memories of my sensitive friend at his best rose to the forefront of my mind. Like when we went interrailing together in Europe and he would sit for hours, staring at a curtain fluttering in the wind – a perfectly formed dance, he said – or when he watched with delight an older couple sitting across from us on the train. Elderly people who know each other down to the last detail and still love each other – he said they were one of life's greatest wonders. No one pays them any attention and the few times they are noticed, they're dismissed as the most natural thing in the world. That's how he used to talk, my depressed friend.

On another trip, when I had taken him to a concert in Stockholm, there was an incident at Arlanda airport. My friend was sitting, staring at some men waiting for their flight. Two of them were wearing shiny suits and ties, the third, without a tie and in a somewhat crumpled shirt, stood next to them making small talk, although he didn't really say that much. My friend stared at them so fervently, I was worried they would notice. When they had gone he turned to me as though he had witnessed a great event, he whispered: Did you see that? I didn't understand what he was getting at.

He said that in that scene you could behold all of it, the degeneration but also the hope of the mode of life that currently prevailed. To him it was like watching an illuminating one-act play. This was the theatre of reality, he said. They were wealthy Norwegians in the salmon business. The one standing next to the other two seemed a little younger. His clothes signalled his lower class but he had clearly fought his way up and got some sort of business off the ground that the other two were either going to enter into partnership with or buy up. The rich were buying the poor and then selling at a profit. The working class man exuded contempt, according to my friend, not jealousy, just pure contempt. He presumed this stemmed from the man's down-to-earth upbringing, perhaps on a farm or in a little village, where the conditions had imprinted in him a clear sense of justice or empathy that he struggled to suppress while conversing with 'the chosen ones', as my depressed friend called the other two.

The man in the crumpled shirt tried to hide his contempt. He smiled now and then and threw in a few monosyllables, laughed to give the impression he was present. He was so good at playing his role that the other two took the bait and didn't notice the disgust they kindled in him. My friend said it was most noticeable when they were talking about the 'losers' they were excited to crush or buy up. The elites condescended to the tie-less man, in all likelihood they would harvest the profits of his years of toil.

My depressed friend said that, in the enforced subjugation of the tie-less man, you could see it all: He found himself in two irreconcilable worlds. One world governed by

his own ethics, which were built on a warm upbringing among ‘the losers’, where he had learned that all humans are connected to each other – because you can’t turn away from that in a small society. In the second world he was pushed into the froideur of the chosen ones, who had obviously been born into the upper classes and looked upon those below them with inherited disdain.

This still does nothing but expose the question without answering it, said my friend as he munched on a sandwich that I had bought for him. That question is, in the end: What becomes of the tie-less man when the others have knotted their ties on him? Does he, in this new environment, lose contact with his humane ethics, and will his contempt for the norms and values of the rich transform into self loathing when he is forced to live according to their codes? Will he then surrender to them despite himself, as an accountant who steals a little bit and finds it’s perfectly okay, not bad at all, and so steals more? And will this lead to the tie-less one trying to erase what remains of his old sense of justice, replacing it with justification – that’s just the way it is, you’ve no choice but to play the game? And maybe his internal conflict will prompt him to do penance by financing a sports hall in his old village, upon which the metamorphosis will be complete as he throws himself into a holy war alongside other financiers by stealing from the masses?

Or not? Asked my friend as he stuffed his face with the sandwich. Will the principled germ at his core survive and stop him from enriching himself further after the sale secures him a fortune? Will he, in fact, come to value, above all else, being able to look his fellow man in the eye, the integrity he was instilled with as a child intact? When all is said and done, my friend said, our futures are controlled solely by the feelings we give most power to. This is what the battle is all about: Is it possible to eradicate a person’s original, deeper emotional register, or not? Solidarity and respect for nature and beauty are fighting egotism, greed and cynicism. Emotions – they are the true warriors on life’s battleground.

This is how I remembered him being able to hold forth, my depressed friend, his jumping off point being three men he’d seen in an airport. When memories like this visited me, I felt it would be ill advised to give up on my friend. He had few confidants, I knew that. Who would help him, if not me?

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I didn’t come up with anything better than simply bringing along some candles the next time I visited him. Apparently there is evidence that people argue less with a naked flame between them; I hid them in a large Advent wreath, though Christmas had already passed. A little light – a little hope. When I arrived, he was sitting up in bed with some pillows supporting his back. He looked better, his face was still swollen and his empty, bloodshot eyes stared at the white wall in front of him. It is amazing how cold and institutional the environment on such wards can be, they are precisely the sort of places that could do with some green foliage and colourful murals to brighten things up. His hands lay on the bed like a pair of alien appendages. It reminded me of his characteristic sense of humour which found its expression in aphorisms that no one understood: If your throws are hopeless – throw away your hands.

I lit two of the candles in the wreath and sat down; he paid me no mind. I repeated, a little haltingly, that I wanted to listen if he wanted to talk.

When the silence became deafening, I made some small talk about this and that, how my son was getting on, news from friends in common. I told him about my ex-wife and how everything was pretty much the same, despite the many years since our divorce. I tried to speak in soft, muted tones, but in the end I gave up as he showed no interest in my prattle. The nurse came in with the daily dose of pills and a glass of water. For the first time I got a clear view of her, as I had been so agitated during my last visit. Her face reminded me of another I had seen recently but I couldn't remember where. This lifeless face of hers made such an impression on me it was impossible to forget it.

My friend devoured pill after pill, when he asked if this was the Effexor, she said yes. Was this the paroxetine? And this the Tafil? Tafil, she corrected him, yes, that was right, she said and praised him for his knowledge of his medication. She smiled compassionately at him. It looked as though he placed the tablets on his tongue before taking a sip of water and washing them down.

When she had gone, he lent forwards over the edge of the bed and spat the tablets out onto the floor. I ran into the bathroom, fetched some toilet paper and scooped them all up before flushing the evidence away. I praised him for how thoroughly he had fooled the nurse.

This pill rubbish, he said and wiped his mouth, is built on the hypothesis that depression originates from a lack of serotonin in the brain. This hypothesis has never been proven – and so – never disproven either. The opposite has been shown to be true; when people are given medicines that lower the serotonin level in their brains, they don't become more depressed. The industry doesn't ask about that. These happy pills would be of far more use if they were made of sugar – you would get the placebo effect without becoming an impotent, insomniac bastard.

We sat for a while without speaking. I realised that he didn't want to open his heart that day either. I tried to lighten things up with some jokes from Northern Norway (the only kind I know), he didn't laugh, but looked at me with a degree of sympathy. He started, in the middle of a joke, to whisper something, as he had done before, about the nurse being dangerous. He was not quite himself.

I didn't know what to say or do, so I just started talking and told him that I could no longer find my voice. As if I were nothing and thought nothing. It seemed lopsided, that I was coming here to help him and get him to talk about his feelings, me, who had myself become unable to feel. Maybe I was experiencing what most people did in mid-life and, perhaps, it was also the reason only authors' debuts were any good.

What a load of rubbish, he said quickly before he went quiet again.

Then I began to talk about what I had been reading about feelings in the neuropsychological literature, which was, in and of itself, a clear indication of emotional numbness from my side. I explained how feelings have their roots in the prefrontal cortex, from which plastic neural pathways and lateral nuclei go directly to the amygdala, the primitive brain. I felt sure there was no electrical activity in my prefrontal cortex. Given that it was a person's core, my core was as good as lame, I said to my depressed friend, what's more, the left-hand side of the prefrontal cortex is where a person's resistance to the impressions and importunities of the world is found and I felt this resistance was missing in me; it was skewered just like that American's, the one who was impaled with an iron rod, straight through his skull. He was transformed into an animal they said, he was totally normal in every way, with perfect motor function and clear speech, his memory performed well, but he had no feelings any more, he was

inappropriate and revealed his genitals to young women with no shame, he said and did whatever occurred to him. He went from one thing to the next, could not maintain his focus on anything. Everything became immaterial and banal, he couldn't even feel sorry for himself, that's how numb he was, this American.

It happened in the 19th century and neuropsychologists love this case. He was employed in a travelling circus and the hole in the front of his brain as well as the iron rod itself became an exhibit, he became a celebrity, akin to the Elephant Man, but he was just an animal, or something much more dangerous than an animal, because the most destructive thing on this planet is an emotionally numb person, which is what we are on our way to becoming, all of us. It makes me depressed to think about it, I said to my depressed friend, who suddenly uttered:

It's true what they used to say in the old days, that humans think with their hearts, not with their brains.

Exactly! I said, happy to have finally got through to him. That's exactly what they mean, that is if the heart represents emotions, because this chap with a hole in his prefrontal cortex, he became incapable of rational or sensible thought – because he no longer had any feelings! He couldn't do anything, couldn't create anything, couldn't give or take, he couldn't, because to do so you have to be led by emotions, socialise. The circus sacked him, he ended up at odds with the dwarves and the clowns, not even the tough as nails lion tamers managed to bridle him and in this we can see people being polarised against each other – I think it's happening to all of us, slowly and insidiously, alongside the algorithms' surveys of us, so that machines can seamlessly take over what we are losing.

And while Orwell wrote that individuals own nothing but a few cubic centimetres inside their skulls, because everything else belongs to Big Brother, we now see Zuckerberg and co. in Silicon Valley are uninterrupted in their conquest of more and more territory within the frontal cortex, the part of the brain that was allowed, by civilisation, to grow around the primitive brain over the course of millions of years, the part that enabled humans to understand nature and develop a sense of community – which meant that our species survived; our prefrontal cortices constantly at work. Now Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok, Newsfeed, porn and you-name-it are well on their way to taking over this sensitive part of the brain, they have made it into a battleground, I said to my depressed friend, or not a battleground, exactly, more like a dance floor where people dance to the beat of the thoughts and feelings that these authorities decide we should have.

My depressed friend had been patiently listening to me and, when I took a break, he spoke in a calm voice:

You'd think it was you who was depressed. You are talking about the foolishness of the present day, but you yourself have no profound feelings. It's like you're talking about yourself. There is something else deep within you which provokes your pessimism. Something you haven't managed to classify or understand. You come here, raging like a chimpanzee about the widespread lack of emotion, but you can't even show me any compassion.

We are each responsible for stoking our own fires, they used to say long ago, and when it comes to me, he sighed and stared straight ahead again: I feel like I'm on fucking Kolbeinn's Isle, that desolate island in the furthest north.

And even more so since you arrived.

The wind went out of my sails. He could use words like a weapon, my depressed friend. I don't know, I don't believe I'm a masochist, but I was happy for him to carry on, to let me hear it, I welcomed the crack of his whip. I knew that he had greater resources to draw on than me, he was a deep pool and knew all there was to know when it came to feelings.

But then something happened which severed the connection we were in the process of developing. When he, at long last, began to talk, the nurse came back in. She said that visiting hours were over. It was typical. Something always comes between me and my friend. A close connection with a person who understands you is like a purifying cleanse for your heart – why can it never be left in peace.

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I got signed off from work and cancelled my lectures for the foreseeable. It would come at a heavy price, eventually derailing me, but whispered in my ear was the ancient wisdom of the poet, Gunnar Ekelöf: that the irrational was rational – in the long run. Maybe my depressed friend would rise up like a phoenix if I just surrendered to him?

It is apparently normal for people visiting psychiatric patients to start sharing their own experiences and crises. Perhaps it is a pitiful way of reaching out, expressing to the person who is sick that you have also felt, bodily, what they are going through, a kind of I-understand-you-so-well support, which the patient, on the contrary, experiences as the visitor being tremendously self-obsessed, leaving them lonelier than ever.

Unfortunately I fell into this trap, most likely because he didn't want to talk the morning that I made my next visit. He just stared into space, straight at the institutional strip lighting, I didn't know what to say or do to help him and silence fell. After a while I started to talk about something that had recently happened between me and my ex-wife, the mother of my son. It was, in and of itself, quite an everyday event, but, just the same, it had left me with a clump of feelings that had somehow latched onto my nervous system and stayed there like a fish in a phantom net. The feelings the episode had evoked were comparable to a white, blinding light accompanied by a piercing, high frequency sound. A white fire smouldered within me, I was convinced that the first person to encounter the embers would immediately go up in flames. It was the white fire of violence that led you to ruin, if you were unable to master it.

Just before Christmas me, my son and my girlfriend had a lovely little celebration at home. My son has totally embraced my girlfriend as a bonus-mummy. She has also been patient and kind, as if he were her own child. I cherish their warm relationship in the depths of my soul.

I had brought home a juniper bush from the woods, like in the old festive song, and put it in the Christmas tree foot, it worked fine and we danced around it and sang all the carols we knew. I prepared grouse with date soufflé for dessert, my son's favourite, and he opened his presents from me and my family. I walked him home, happy and full after our little Christmas party on the darkest day of the year. My girlfriend left for a night-shift.

It was nearing ten o'clock that evening when my son called about some Christmas presents he had left behind at my house. He was going to give them to friends at school the next day. I asked him to meet me halfway, we lived just ten minutes apart, because, as

was usual for the season, I was preoccupied with lots of small errands. When I reached the halfway point and didn't see him, I called him. He told me that his mother said he couldn't go out. Fine, I said, I'll come over, my voice a bit clipped as I knew exactly what was brewing. I decided not to utter a single word, just to hand over the presents, not to create bad feeling just before Christmas. The next day they would be travelling to his mother's parents for the holidays.

My son came to the door and took the bag of presents, I gave him a little hug and went back down the stairs, but as I did she stormed out into the doorway. He was behind her now, and she got started. I have asked her hundreds of times not to argue in his presence, she can say whatever horrors she likes to me, *just not within earshot of the boy*.

Then the theatrics were underway. She thrust her hands out, it was not in keeping with the circumstances. She shouted that I must be crazy, sending the boy out so late at night, alone in the dark and rain, didn't he have an early start for school the next day? I needed to pull myself together, I had lost touch with reality, I was inconsiderate, I needed to promise never to do something so stupid again, she raised her voice, the boy's face was frozen behind her, come on, I thought, it's nearly Christmas, then I could no longer make out what she was saying, egotist, idiot were distinguishable in the verbal flood, before the white fire inside me began to roar. I mumbled that I had delivered the presents to the house just as I had been asked to, there was, in fact, no problem to address. I looked at my feet and, with my umbrella jammed under my chin, attempted to somehow protect myself from the accusations that were raining down on me, thinking: right foot forwards and now left foot, you just have to walk, turn your back and walk, don't look back, don't listen and don't say a single fucking word.

I described this to my depressed friend, he seemed to listen, he had turned his head towards me a little, like a bird attending to a worm in the earth. As was usual when he was concentrating, he twirled his long beard around his fingers.

When I had got out onto the street, I continued, she stood in front of the door and yelled after me that I was a useless father and risked losing parental responsibility if I didn't get it together, she would take me to court. Now, I could disappear back to my sweet girlfriend, like the miserable wretch I was. And I had disappeared, into the rain, aware that I didn't only want to disappear into the darkness, I wanted to disappear from the surface of the planet. It would never be okay, it would be war until ... until what? I was enveloped by a claustrophobic feeling, I felt stuck and I tried to walk faster, as you always do when bothered by thoughts that weigh heavily on you.

The Christmas Peace was broken. My poor son, what a gift for the holidays. I didn't want to call my girlfriend and burden her with it all, she had talked about my ex as 'the third person' in our relationship, so I started drinking to try and dull the white fire inside me, but my head continued to throb with fury at my ex-wife.

So that was that, I said and apologised for visiting and infringing on him with such workaday rubbish, of course it was just superficial nonsense compared to what he was going through, I just don't know what to say, I said to my depressed friend. But he perked up then and asked me to pass him another pillow for his back. He raised himself up, looked into my eyes with concentration, he was thinking, I could tell. I became afraid that he was about to get angry with me for disturbing him with such drivel.

It sounds as if you have ended up in a Roman urn, he said, then adding, with a somewhat absent expression: as Mallarmé would have had it.

I explained that in fact this wasn't the whole story, as when I got home that

evening, she started calling, obviously to remind me that I was the worst creature to be found crawling around on the surface of the planet. I didn't answer, turned the sound off on my phone, drank more, as I have already mentioned, I tried to go to bed but couldn't bring myself to turn my phone off completely (who knows when someone will call and tell you that you are loved) and so my room was illuminated, as if by *the evil light*, far into the night. At half-past two there was a knock at the door, she had got into the building. I opened up, like an idiot, saying that I would call the police, but she raised her voice, demanded an apology, I was afraid the neighbours would wake up, she's standing there in the hallway in the middle of the night shouting abuse and it's nearly Christmas, I mean, we are surrounded by darkness and people should only say beautiful things to each other and ...

You don't need to say anything else, my depressed friend said, continuing: I can imagine what happens next. You give up. You start to feel for her, even though there is a gross distortion in your sympathy since you are genuinely angry with her, however, you also know that she needs to function as a mother to your son and if you don't back down here, as you clearly consistently have throughout your relationship, both in order to protect your child and so that she doesn't get caught up in a manic cycle and create a bottomless hell, it will be your fault and your son will suffer. You choose to hold yourself responsible for her mental health, she is certain that you will give in and despite the fact that you have steadily increased the duration of your resistance, she knows that you will give up in the end, otherwise she wouldn't be visiting you in the middle of the night. She knows you have compassion within you, at least for your child, and she would very much like to feel this compassion herself, she wants to see proof of it and won't give up until you give in. The underlying threat can be expressed like this: Or are you going to drive me to insanity?

It reminds me of a so-called hypersensitive dictator, she is seeking sustenance in your guilty conscience and triggers it constantly in order to gain control over you, she points out what you, according to her, have said or done wrong, now or a long time ago, and she will always find something, a sentence that was said in the middle of an argument many years ago, the poor judgement you showed in asking your son to walk between your homes late at night ...

I don't know if that's quite right, I spluttered at my depressed friend, who, seemingly enlivened by this analysis of communication between me and my ex, continued:

What's alarming is how she kind of alienates you from your son by attacking you while he's there. It's like she wants to see you turn pale and speechless, she knows that you won't defend yourself in those circumstances, because if you made a full throated response, she would be able to say: You are evil, imagine arguing in the child's presence! She is unable to reflect on her own behaviour, she shuts down and can't think straight. There is an existential dimension to all this, as if it delights her to rage at you and grind you down, as if she is then able to validate her sense of self through you. You have undoubtedly been close in the past and strengthened each other's identities, she doesn't want to let go of you; I don't know, I'm trying to understand this destructive pattern which plays out between the two of you, he said, my depressed friend. She is jabbing at your weak points, it's very normal, she knows that you can't stand being criticised or called a fool, of course, no one enjoys that, but she knows that she triggers something unresolved within you that makes you angry, you feel threatened because you believe

what she says and that is what's sick about it, she wants you to get angry just as she is angry, because she knows that you won't put it behind you, instead you will lock it inside and experience pain and depression, good, good, she thinks, but you have a problem accepting that people can behave in this way, perhaps because you are afraid acceptance would lead you to lose your faith in humanity – you are afraid of that. And it is totally wrong. You both need help.

That's why it must feel as though you have ended up in a Roman urn, they are tapered at one end, where you feel your soul and your whole existence pressed into a smaller and smaller space, hence this image from Mallarmé, but that's another matter. I can see that she loves to see your back laid bare, I'm sorry to use such crude imagery, but that's what it looks like, when you eventually ask her forgiveness, in the middle of the night in your own home, which she has invaded, she loves to hear the report when she cracks her whip; it's a malicious pleasure which confirms to her that *she really exists*, she wants to see your back turn red at each stroke especially when the skin starts to split and bleed from the welts, apologies for the image, I would contend that there is some sort of sadomasochist dynamic which has developed between the two of you and it's conceivable that you get a form of fulfilment as the victim, a kind of rough, martyrish spitefulness that lies deeper than your wrath, which you escape into as your only way out of it all while still maintaining a shred of reason, that you are stuck in your role as the victim too, but you still get angry when you are forced into it, he said, my depressed friend, that has to be what you're getting at with this white fire inside you. But it's a little complex, because she has clearly got the idea that she is your victim, and is attached to the victim role, it increases her pleasure to see you defeated and that – please excuse me for saying it plainly – is pretty sick. Seeing you as *her victim* neutralises her experience of victimhood and resurrects what she sees as the fundamental imbalance between you – she feels you have abandoned her, you have ruined her hopes and dreams, and as long as she is bound to that perception, she will try to ...

This was the moment the door was thrust open and the nurse appeared in the doorway. I hadn't seen her anywhere when I arrived on the ward and was sure she wasn't on shift. This time there were no more niceties, either. At last I realised that she reminded me of the woman in black from my dream about the dancers, the one who closed the stage curtains. I scrutinised her face. There was something inhuman about it, expressionless and mechanical, it was exactly what I feared the most. A dark cloud followed her as she waded in, upright and filled with intent.

What on earth are you doing, she said sharply. Busting in with your dirty shoes and making him sicker than ever with your pathetic marriage problems! I can see now, with hindsight, that the words 'marriage problems' are innocent enough in and of themselves, but when she said them, it sounded like I was harbouring a terrible virus that I was about to pass onto my friend. What was worse was my uneasiness, awakened when I thought it over: Had she been hiding in the bushes listening to our conversation the entire time? I felt dirty, I had just been trying to get through to my friend.

She cut my depressed friend short when he tried to defend me. I began to feel peculiar, it felt like someone had stuck an awl in my chest and was twisting it round. Why couldn't we talk to each other? The nurse went on and on as she threw the duvet over my friend, there was something maternal about it that prevented criticism; her attitude implied: Here I am, doing all I can to care for him so he can get better; then you come along and spoil everything. My friend protested and raised his voice but she quickly

responded with a syringe and placed a shot in his shoulder. He rolled his eyes and began shaking in his bed. It seemed to me that she had far exceeded the dosage and he was having a natural reaction to the poison he'd been injected with. She lay over him and held him down until the worst spasms passed.

She looked at me. Her black eyes were piercing, like those of a falcon or an eagle. As my friend's last tremors receded she said: Look what you've done!

You can't just come here bothering him like this and demand that he analyse your relationship with your ex-wife. Then she softened, she said she feared he would decline if I put him under such pressure. It could go wrong. She said that she, ultimately, had to defend him, he was *her* patient when it came down to it, she was responsible for his welfare.

I apologised unreservedly, I said that I didn't know why our conversation had taken this turn, likely just to keep it going, to get him talking, I didn't know. I tried to speak to her amicably, tried to prove to her that I was not the enemy, that I had the best intentions and only wished to see my friend overcome this ordeal.

But when I showed humility the intensity of her anger seemed to grow in equal measure. She imitated me with a sentimental and obnoxious voice, as children do: "I'm not the enemy, I only want what's best for him," then followed a paroxysm of rage, the upshot of which was that I should get out, I had bothered my friend enough for the day. I could seek assistance elsewhere for my pitiful, trifling problems, which were unquestionably attributable to me more than anyone else. She snorted with disdain and asked with contrived puzzlement, how could I think of coming here and tormenting him with such griping and moaning! I made my escape.

What did she mean exactly, that my problems were 'attributable to me'. She was inscrutable and the conversation had got to the point where everything is taken out of context and distorted into misunderstandings. My phone was on the table, I fumbled after it and with the other hand picked up my jacket, as she screamed abuse at me that I won't repeat here. I stared at the floor, took the same old steps towards the door, right first and then left, step by step, then all that remained was to turn my back and leave. But, as I went, my depressed friend said something behind me, softly and penetratingly, words that are hammered into me, even though I was in no state to grasp them then. Of course, it hadn't crossed my mind to stop the recording on my phone and when I listened back to it I froze inside as he said:

You spineless bastard. It's you that's sick – not me.

*

The time had come for me to take a stance on my depressed friend. I knew that it would become harder and harder to reach him after my last visit. If the nurse didn't come between us, she would be able to incite other personnel against me and who knew what other plots she would hatch. She was so fierce, nothing delicate could survive near her! I imagined scenes in which she had me forcibly admitted too. She scared me, it was strange, being fearful of someone in a caring profession, someone who was supposed to look after mentally ill people. She had this distinct stare, it prompted a bottomless guilt.

The decision had to be made – was I strong enough for this idealistic task, did I want to fight on, or would I give up my friend? Sometimes I thought of things my depressed friend and I had done as children. Like when we made hang-gliders and flew a

little before we crashed, made motorised go-karts, rowed away from land on a raft and went to sea ...

I didn't want to watch my friend fade away into this woman's clutches. I don't want anything to waste away and disappear, deep within myself I felt I was rooting for life and that, in itself, was a good starting point. The other thing I knew was that I could very well end up frozen inside long before any tears forced their way out. I wanted those tears and a connection with my feelings, I wanted colourful and positive emotions – like the ones I knew were among the feelings my friend experienced before he became too ill. I wanted, for fuck's sake, not to lose to some unfeeling nurse. Who was she? Who was she really?!

I could get in touch with the doctor in charge of the ward or write to the hospital board about the matter and try to make sure that she couldn't come between us any more. I would explain that I firmly rejected that I was a bad influence on my friend. I had to find out about her shift patterns, be sure not to show her any deference, even though you would usually be prepared to do so when interacting with doctors and nurses. It was a lie that if I were to submit to her and try to be friendly, everything would be fine. A lie. The truth was, that would be tantamount to standing still; no change for the better would be achieved. She wanted my depressed friend to wither away.

*

One morning I managed to dig deep and find some energy, helped by healthy anger. I wrote a long letter to both the head doctor and the hospital board, in which I described the nurse in question as best I could. I didn't know her name, of course, just her initials from the badge on her breast: M.R. I demanded that I be able to visit my friend without her interference. I understood she was of the opinion that she was doing what was best for him, but pointed out that I had a different perspective and that I, as a personal friend, had a lot to say on the matter. People cannot forfeit their human rights when they become ill. In closing, I expressed my wish to take him off the ward, for example on a drive, or to my home for dinner. I thought something of that sort would be good for him and during hard times, friends were important.

Days passed in cold uncertainty that drained all my energy. At last an email arrived from the head doctor. I was allowed to visit my friend on the ward when the nurse in question was not on shift but he was, first and foremost, her patient and I had to respect that. If he were to be allowed to leave the ward, he would need to be escorted, to ensure his well-being, which was, at present, the hospital's responsibility. That I could have 'a negative effect' on him had been recorded in the patient's notes, an effect that could hinder his recovery. And my behaviour 'gave rise to some challenges'. The hospital's decision regarding an escort had to be respected, otherwise my request would not be granted.

Both my girlfriend and I were amazed at the stuff about an escort, but despite this I tried to see the positives in the letter. First thing the following day, I went down to the ward. My friend looked better than the last time I was there, I even spotted a twinkle in his eye when he spoke to me. My depressed friend said: It's the most beautiful miracle that you are here with me again. There is glory in this, it's a great credit to you.

I replied that the honour was all mine, that I was, in some ways, scraping the bottom of the barrel with my existence, I also got something out of talking to him. I told

him that I was sort of stuck in old feelings, painful feelings, feelings I was ashamed of trying to escape from. You drag these primitive feelings around like they're a silicon sex doll, kind of slimy and stuck to your back with suction cups, vibrating when you are in the company of others. It's not enough that you're having a shit time, you're ashamed of it too!

And then there was the disappointment that constantly overwhelmed me when I understood that I wasn't getting even the slightest bit better, no matter how I tried to get a handle on these feelings, analyse them inside and out, talk about them and write them down. They just oozed over me like the demonic Boyg, without form or colour.

It's common knowledge that, my friend said, "no one knows from what root it springs", as was said long ago of that mysterious tree, which we all somehow get snarled up in from time to time. My depressed friend tried, as usual, to be supportive, he always wants to give of himself, it's what makes him a great person. He referred to Chekov, who said that if you're only going to write one book, make it about a person who is imprisoned and then finds their freedom. And could this not also be true for me, if I spoke honestly and sincerely, might I also find a loophole or an exit I didn't already know about?