



PROSE | SUMMER 2021

Personal Illness Narrative: On blooming

By Grace Ellis

My psychiatrist suggested I start cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) before medical school. I was working through a major depressive episode—my fifth in eight years. It was becoming clear that Prozac and I would be pals for life. I felt wildly ashamed, and also a bit liberated.

On the first day of class, I met Amy. “My name is Amy, and you can call me Dr. Bloom,” she told me.

“I’m Grace. I’m not really sure how this is supposed to work, but I feel excited.” She smiles.

“Great. Tell me about why you’re here.” I pause. Where do I begin?

Do I begin with the most obvious symptom? When I lost the taste for food and fifteen pounds? It was winter break of my junior year in high school. Two weeks earlier, a young man walked into the elementary school in town and murdered 26 kindergarteners. I was seven miles away, I was sixteen. I was spared from an evil so disturbing and unimaginable that just beginning to think about it could make you vomit.

Or do I begin with what has been most challenging for me: how the world lost allure and months became grey? I spent days drifting farther from myself, my thoughts distorted by a version of me that is still painful to remember. I was sick, and I was high achieving. This kind of illness is invisible.

A few years later, I found myself in a place I hope I never return to—where disturbing thoughts break the numbness; perhaps you are familiar with this.

I learned that these colorless episodes were caused by a chemical imbalance inside my brain. I learned that this is called depression, that other people experience this, too. I learned that no one will understand why you are depressed, not even the people who have helped you grow; not even yourself.

You will feel lost, and you will feel lonely, and you may learn, like I did, that your depression is validated most by a gradual change that feels sudden one morning. The medicine you are told to take finally works.

It feels fitting to begin here, too. At a time when serotonin hung around in my brain, days I was energized by sun shining through the window, life blooming around me. I felt radiant and alive. I was becoming the woman I never thought I would be, returning towards the person I almost forgot about when I was depressed.

But this bliss fades. After all, major depressive disorder is a chronic illness. Serotonin plateaus and depressive symptoms rebound. Of course, not as bad as before, but it still sucked, and I was disappointed.

A few episodes later, I resigned. In darkness I found light in still dark places.

So, I tell Dr. Bloom that I'm starting CBT because I feel fragile. I want to better manage my depression.

"It sounds like you're self-aware. That's a good place to start!" I smile.

She's curious about what makes me feel fragile, and I tell her "life." We laugh. But it's so true: it's August 2020, and I am grieving. It seems many people are, too.

"And for the purposes of insurance, I'd like to get a sense of how long you expect this to take," she said in a tone that was genuine and measured.

This? What the fuck is "this."

It's hard to imagine who I would be if I was never depressed. "This" takes a few appointments and unpleasant weeks to process. Dr. Bloom and I talk about thoughts and distortions. We return to me feeling fragile, resigned, helpless. She helps me understand how these feelings influence the way I behave and how my behaviors reinforce unhelpful thoughts.

I begin to trust her, trust that she will help me feel better: resilient and sturdy. I tell her things I have never even said out loud.

We talk about my lowest days, and she asks if I ever thought things might not get better.

I think about the breakdown I had in January, about learning of my friend's death as I boarded a 27-hour flight to see her. I remember watching the sun rise through the plane window, in disbelief that the world could still be spinning. I cried as I flew farther and farther away and for a moment felt comforted by the idea that our paths might be crossing, ascending through the atmosphere. I thought of her entering a place I imagined to be so peaceful and still—another dimension, another (place that makes the most sense to you). There is beauty in this sadness, but mostly I felt shame for ever having wished I could be there sooner.

CBT has elucidated the patterns of my mind. I am forgiving the ways I coped when suffocated by the weight of each day and consumed by the fear that this detachment would be overwhelming and present forever. I was sick.

I am learning how to move with grace through this world, to see light in myself and in the spaces around me: yellow sun shining through trees as I walk and run, the unexpected ways I appreciate someone is touched by joy, smiling behind their mask, the rhythm of a nice day.

CBT has also helped me meet myself where I am right now: I am here. I have always been here.

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