

**IN SANITY**  
**WHAT**  
**CRAZY**  
**LOOKS LIKE**

**(In) Sanity**  
WHAT 'CRAZY' LOOKS LIKE



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*Every market  
has its madman*

- VERY, VERY OLD PROVERB

When I was growing up there was a man who used to live near the bus stop (or, if he didn't he frequented the area a lot). Every time I was around the area, he would be standing – sometimes stark naked – singing to the heavens. In his own way, I imagine, his existence was blissful. He was what I knew someone crazy was.

He was what crazy looked like.

In this country we have a habit of insisting that crazy needs to look a certain way. Things like depression and bipolar disorder do not exist to us. Many times, we torment people who are different in this way. We hurt them even when we don't know we are hurting them. "Your happiness is your choice" and "Don't be a downer" are things we say, often. And this is hurting people.

This book is a collection of various stories by Kenyans about mental illness, about discovery, about stigma, about understanding and love. These are stories that move, breathe, stretch and feel. If I were to give you any advice, it would be to read without abandon. To move with the essays to wherever they take you, and then to remember that these stories are true.

1 in every 4 people is affected by mental disorder(s).

You know someone.

I know someone.

And yet still we refuse to empathize. We refuse to help or understand. That's what is really crazy.

Enjoy the book.

*Michael Onsando*

# *The Unbearably Slippery Nature of Reality*

**Aleya Kassam**

A heart attack is supposed to loudly announce its arrival. Bark orders with a gruff voice. Stomp into the room and raise hell.

You are supposed to be alarmed to it, by the clutching of the chest, sweat dripping down the face, a wheezing for breath. Dramatic. It is not called an attack for nothing.

The last thing you expect is for it to sneak up like a cowardly thief, slyly stealing a piece of the heart and leaving only a whisper of a footprint in its wake.

Mama had a heart attack, but we don't know when. They found the remainders of its shadow in one of the multitude of tests they did.

It could have happened whilst I was cutting her nails, that day when she winced in pain.

It could have happened when we were giggling at the dinner table, my affectionate Grandpa having just laid a fat kiss on her cheek, and she rolling her eyes at his sentimentality.

It could have happened when she was asleep in her chair, feet encased in her fluffy slippers, her favourite Maasai blanket wrapped around her frail shoulders, eyes closed, the only sign that she was still alive, the gentle rising and falling of her chest.

She is back in hospital. Her heart is damaged and her lungs are gasping at the effort of taking on the load of an exhausted heart.

She coughs constantly, a grating sound, like her lungs are scraping onto her insides for dear life.

Her dementia has gotten much worse. Her brain, starved of oxygen, has retreated to places she knows well. Memories that are vivid. It stays there for hours.

The first sign of her brain's betrayal came several years ago. As a family, we sit together each evening for our daily prayers, and mid-recitation Mama started

making mistakes. Our eyes sprung open, and we would look at each other and giggle. Having been scolded as children whenever we made a mistake, we took great delight in adult imperfection.

It should have struck us as unusual. To falter with words that you have memorized and recited every day since you were a child. But we were far too distracted by our glee.

Then she started forgetting our names, saying every other family member's name before she happened on the right one. Still, we found this amusing. We teased her about it. Mama is renowned for her wicked wit, and we assumed she would find it as funny as we did.

I wonder if we would have noticed the look in her eyes, perturbed, confused. The dementia was a shape shifter.

It started taking on the visage of habitual forgetfulness.

*What day is it today?*

*What did we eat for lunch?*

*Where is your father?*

The questions became so predictable, we had a notebook with the answers already scribbled down (she is very hard of hearing), and would flip the pages, pointing to the relevant answer.

We did not stop to think that if we found this frustrating, what it must have felt like for her, to forget even the mundane.

Beyond the forgetting, we started noticing something more sinister. She would get stuck in the maze of her history.

*We must get home now, before the school closes. We should not be here so late at night, it isn't safe for two young girls to walk home when it is dark.*

Or

*Thank God you are home, beta go and tell your brother Nashir (my dad), that there is food on the stove. I am so tired. I am going to rest my eyes. Tell Nashir I will wake him up for school tomorrow.*

Or

*Don't touch any boys Aleya. Don't you know you can get pregnant if you touch boys? Remember Khatun, remember how her mum beat her outside mosque, calling her kutari (bitch). It is because she touched a boy. Don't even touch Khatun, it might spread to you, and you might also get pregnant.*

It would happen before she fell ill. Before a cold. Before an infection. Before the flu. A wave would come over her, washing over the present, coating it with thick impenetrable layers from the past. It became our measure for if Mama was falling ill. We would notice a cough, or a sneeze, and we would start scratching at that layer, testing her.

*What is my name?*

*What is my relationship with this person? (Pointing at my mother)*

*Where are we now?*

It became a more reliable test than taking her temperature.

We didn't stop to think how any of us would have felt if we had six people huddled around us, peering down, firing out questions, waiting to pounce on the slightest mistake.

We cracked jokes. It became our coping mechanism. If we didn't laugh, we would cry.

So when Mama always brought up her brother in law's name during these spells, my sister and I would giggle, tut tutting with conspiracy, we theorized that perhaps Mama had a lifelong crush on her brother in law. What if one day, a forbidden secret slipped out of her mouth? A secret love tryst? What a scandal!

Or when she was stuck in her childhood years, her whole demeanour would take on the unselfconscious freedom of a kid, and swinging her legs, she would widen her eyes and tell us to beware of the *mzungu's* Hallelujah flowers that they used when burying their dead, as that is where the ghosts of the spirits reside.

She would stick her tongue out at us, and pluck the inside of the top row of her teeth with the nail of her thumb, making a splatting sound, the childhood symbol to say 'I am your friend.'



It was incredibly precious. To get a glimpse of what she must have been like as a little girl. It felt like discovering treasure.

Then it stopped being the extraordinary, and became the ordinary. Somehow, this uninvited guest that had lurked in the corners, took centre stage, began to control her life more. It was bossy. It was loud. It was unreasonable. It was the seventh member in the Kassam household, and by far the most demanding.

Its constant presence changed our lives. It hovered over every minute of our lives.

Finally we stopped to think. We reminded ourselves that Mama was not her dementia. That it was like a veil that we had to see through, to find the granny we loved so much.

The granny that used to read the newspaper cover to cover every day, stopping to ask us about words she didn't understand, predictably picking the awkward.

Woman chops off Man's Genitals.

*Aleya, what are genitals?*

Or the granny that would put on her white tackies, hair perfectly coiffed and hair-sprayed, to walk around the neighbourhood every evening in her bright print dresses.

Or the granny that would tell us *maru loi na pee* (stop drinking my blood), as we ran around the house as kids, throwing powder on the floor so we could slip and skate about.

Or the granny whose smile was literally like a big bear hug around your heart. In all of this, we learned not to reason. We learned that the rules of logic did not apply. We learned patience. We learned to stay with her, in the memory, in the wave, in the emotion she was going through. We learned not to judge. To just be.

But sometimes we forget.

Yesterday at the hospital, she was stuck in a horrific place. She lay in the hospital bed at Accident and Emergency, insisting on the curtain remaining

open, eyes transfixed at the scene in the room. The shop was getting robbed, and she was in the middle of it. Experiencing it for hours. Screaming at me, to get us out. ***Get us out. Get us out.*** She grabbed the metal bars on either side of the bed, trying to move them.

She looked at me with accusing eyes. What was wrong with me, why was I not getting us out of there?

She threatened me, pleaded with me, cajoled me, tried to persuade me, and when all else failed, started to heckle.

A woman with 86 years' worth of heckling experience is not to be messed with.

I relented. I thought maybe if I played along, it would give her some comfort. I pretended to use all my strength to move those bars aside. I grunted and wiped my brow. I squeezed my eyes and sighed heavily in frustration. She bought it. Almost.

***Have some courage Aleya. What is wrong with you? If you can't even muster this much courage at such a young age, how do you expect to pass your exams?***

My granny has a warped sense of how old we all are. She is still completely impressed that I can drive.

After several hours of this, I thought perhaps if I stop responding, she may calm down. So, I am ashamed to say, I ignored her.

She looked at me, eyes brimming with betrayal.

***You are just going to leave me here like this?***

This went on for another couple of hours.

I cracked. My eyes filled with tears. Part despair at my inability to help her. Part loathsome self-pity.

She scoffed at me.

***Huh. You are the one crying, and I am the one trapped here in this nightmare!***

Reality is such a slippery thing. The things we know to be truth. Absolute. How dare they turn around and slide through our fingers? It is frightening. The mind can be a terrible, terrible thing.

# *A Madness Foretold : Part 1*

**Awuor Onyango**

***Location 1 : Université Laval, Quebec, French-Speaking Canada.  
February/March 2013.***

*"How are you finding your classes Aurore?"*

I had told her to call me that because it comes close to my name and means the same thing. I'm meeting with the Law School dean about my progress... rather, my lack of. I arrived late for this semester and have been in a half-hearted fight with some lecturers who won't let me into their classrooms because I TOLD them I was late. If I had snuck in quietly quarter way through the semester none of this would be happening.

I am hoping to use my charms to get Madame Brais to coerce them into letting me sit for the exams. I haven't really been to class either. I've been locked in my room using the English channel for white noise...and the noise has been white! Sometimes it's talk shows by that guy who does *Survivor* and that Ricky Lake who used to be good at talking but now excitedly interrupts her guests as if scared that at any moment someone will tell her the show has been cancelled.

I find myself waking from an illusion to catch entertainment news about American celebrities. Once in a while I float out of my thoughts to find that I had been watching *Days Of Our Lives* and *The Young and the Restless*, shows I am surprised are still on with characters who have all slept with each other and really just stare awkwardly at the screen waiting for the all-powerful scriptwriter to kill them off. During the weekend I switch to one of the French channels and watch an omnibus of *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and *Cleveland Show/American Dad*. When I have time I read through some Law book or another, always with a bunch of highlighters in hand, hoping to make the words bleed rainbows.

Well, some lecturers wouldn't let me in their classes.

I wonder about my French accent as I speak. She seems to understand what I am saying, so I suppose I am a successful fraud.

*"I wanted to talk to you about that. It seems we can't register you for this semester since you came late."*

No! She has to be on my side! My friend told me to cry if I have to, if I don't pass this semester then I have either failed my year abroad or confined myself to Québec City, much longer than I can stand. None of these options seem viable. I remember my inability to cry; I have to find another way.

"I didn't come late of my own volition." I announce, thinking Africa > Kenya > Elections, things she can Google and confirm but won't have to because I am so convincing she will believe anything I say...a half-truth will do! Half-truths always do! Look, it's an election year in my country and there was some violence in Kisumu and that delayed me a bit, obviously. Nothing I could do about electoral passions boiling over!

I don't think anything on my file says I am from Nairobi. Even if it does, my father was directly involved in the Kisumu nominations... so involved, in fact, he didn't seem to notice me stay home a while longer!

*"That is unfortunate! Why didn't you call or email?"*

I don't understand why she won't just call the lecturers now and tell them I will be sitting for the damned exams! I aced Constitutional Law last year, without ever stepping into a class and given the fact that I sat almost half way through a different exam before realizing I had not signed up for Maritime Law all together. I don't see why I am being barred from the set of frivolous non-entities that I picked for this semester!

Something wet slides down my right cheek and then I become an incoherent English speaking puddle that she is struggling to comfort. Backup is called, phone calls made and my peaceful non-existence shattered forever. I will be seeing the school's only English-speaking psychologist on Wednesday. Until then Madame Brais will feed me, call my room to check that I am breathing and implore me to take a walk in the snow that's higher than my knees, sludge that somehow gets to my feet every time, and fog that feels like an eternal night club with only a smoke machine and no lights. I will drink one mocha

and feel satisfied for a week because the floor of my bedroom is a black hole that threatens to swallow me forever and eating is overrated. It also takes an average of six months for the human body to eat itself, so as long as once a week I ingest something, I should be able to live a bit longer. No one seems to understand this.

The psychologist asks me to see the doctor, after a handful of questions that seem to lead nowhere. I walk to the doctor's little office and meet the receptionist.

*"You're from Kenya?"*

She smiles really wide; it means nothing.

*"I was in Kenya in 1990. My sister and I were on safari there. I would love to go back! Such a beautiful country."*

I was born in 1990, I manage to say. I don't even know if the words come out because I am crying again. I don't know if it's because I regret being born or I miss that place I was in before birth, or the innocence of childhood, or Kenya. Maybe I am jealous that she gets to remember Kenya in 1990 when I don't and we were both there! All I know is something this lady said is making me cry and she might never talk to another patient again after this! The doctor will see me now; this irks me because all I want to do is be invisible.

*"What is wrong?"*

I am tired

*"You look tired."*

That's because I am.

If I had the energy I would shout at him, but there are so many screams stirring in my chest, I am afraid I will burn his face off if I make a sound. So I talk to him as if he is a timid mouse that needs soothing from all that is wrong in this world.

*"What are your thoughts on life?"*

Is he a doctor or an existentialist philosopher on a secret mission?

*"He's trying to find out if you are a suicide risk,"* someone says.

*We wouldn't want you to commit suicide here you know. We'd have to honour you in some way so as to make the school not look bad, and like we treat our international students poorly...and that takes money and PR.*

He doesn't say this of course, but the thought of my face plastered all over the Canadian news slotted somewhere between the pothole that the neighbourhood in Montreal is complaining about, and the sandwich fight that is now an attempted murder case because one of the participants was 'deathly' allergic to tomatoes, is enough to make me want to smile and say 'I am all better now.'

Existentialist with empiricist leanings and when I'm really going at it I get a bit solipsistic. I thought I liked Ayn Rand but objectivism isn't for me.

I shrug.

I don't know how to say that in French, if he needs me to say that in French I will just announce that it is a deep, recalcitrant ennui that has me by my throat. I find it hilarious that I cannot say it in French! Existentialism is inherently linked to Sartre, Empiricism to Descartes; both are French men, there is of course my Kantian Romanticism which remains unaccounted for, and my Camusian Absurdism.

He nods his head and smiles. I've been using my words as swords lately... mostly because I don't want to see anyone or smell them or sense their troubles or be interested in their lives. It was Sartre who said that hell is other people; I believe him.

*You get to go home with antidepressants.*

He doesn't say this either, just hands me a prescription and asks that I go to the mall and get these drugs.

True to form, I go back to my room and switch on the TV, sitting on my bed... the only gravity defying floating island that keeps me from sinking into the black hole. My coat hangs on the door and makes the shadow of a lion. Lions; the laziest of the privileged male species in the world! Human males cut a close second...both are exalted for nothing. This coat is an asshole! And my subconscious is obviously too Sigmund Freud for my own liking.

I had felt such a deep sense of betrayal when I got home and realized that I had just bought a red winter coat. Under the strobe lights of the shopping complex, it had been a delicious tangerine hue...and my skin looks so very edible in tangerine and my English winter coats were no match for the -60 degrees Celsius of Quebec city. I came home and it was red.

RED! I loathed the colour! I avoided people who liked it...they always seemed to thirst for blood to dip their toes in. They always had a murderous intensity...I always hit a wall with them; I didn't know if I had put this wall up, or they had. And here I was with a RED winter coat; if I didn't hate the mere sight of people I would have taken it back...but now this is what shielded me from shark-jawed snowflakes that yearned to bite into my flesh.

The phone rings...my room phone never rings. I never gave anyone this number! It's the first of many of Madame Brais' calls...calls to make sure that if I feel like killing myself I do not.

*"Suicide is alarming. Suicide creates alarm. Please, don't kill yourself".*

I do not feel like killing myself...I wonder if maybe I feel like killing myself but I'm the only one who doesn't know, and one day I will wake up and find a knife in my chest and scream 'You Bitch!' at my own betrayal. I was once friends with Yukio Mishima, and I have half-heartedly asked people who disappoint me to consider suicide by seppuku; a sword to your spleen! I have casually said *a sword to your spleen*.

*"How do you feel about going home?"*

I do not relish the fact. Sure, I hate Law School and this place, and if I had energy to spare I would hate everyone...I hate this place so much I will not die here! But going home? I count my words before I say them.

Listen, my dad has a lot on his mind and I am not good at failing in anything in case you haven't noticed...

*"You hate what you are doing here."*

It's been weeks I think, of being cajoled into seeing the psychologist once or thrice in a week, and calls from Madame Brais and finally convincing myself to buy the drugs as long as I bought art supplies as well. I don't need a doctor;

I know how to get myself out of a funk. Usually some writing, some drawing, some painting and sunshine do the trick; I've been here before in England.

*"Your drawings are incredible."*

I smile at the compliment; I'm not good at swallowing them. I've never been to an art class in my entire life. I do love art galleries though.

I suppose I am too tired to be my usual guarded pithy self.

*"Do you paint?"*

Not really.

*"We have an art school, you can go there and try it and see how you feel about it."*

The thought of being in a place with people makes me want to crawl back into my room. I don't know why I can't stand the sight of anyone anymore. I shower at 4 am because no one is around then. It takes so much energy to pull myself together enough to walk to the vending machine and buy something to eat. When I do I feel like Batman...as if I have to leap from shadow to shadow to avoid being seen or recognized or pulled in by humanity. And here is Marcel, the psychologist...with his eyes always prying into me, and his Québécoise English always curious in his tongue, like a glass of wine being tasted and judged insufficient, and his valiant efforts to get me to be comfortable and talk. I always imagine what I will tell him when I am on my bed...but by the time I levitate mercurially into his office I am so tired and angry at having seen people that I do not want to say anything.

*"Can I buy one of these drawings?"*

Why would someone want that particular sketch? It's a woman being accosted by humanity; they have no mercy on her. She is naked and on her knees, holding her head to the ground begging to be left alone but a crowd gathers anyway; staring at her with their lives. I look up at him; *is he a schadenfreude?* I never look up at him. I am always looking at the collection of stones that he has in a bowl, or the 'primitive' statuettes he's lined up from some Inuit collection or outside the window. Today he's won something...my curiosity.

*"I love sketches...they seem more authentic and imperfect...more artistic."*



I stare blankly at him. Who am I to judge if he derives pleasure from other people's pain?

I had learnt the word when I was ten, watching *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*; it had felt delicious in my mouth. I think of Schopenhauer...Arthur, I call him, as if we had known each other intimately; He had said that to envy was human but to savour schadenfreude was devilish.

People eat all kinds of things on this earth, things you couldn't put on a menu. Some people eat shame, others pain, others eat curiosity and imagination, others still ambition. I had always held tight to these pieces of me, wore my shame like a crown and wielded my curiosity and ambition like a grenade... would today be the day I give my pain away? Perhaps he can rid me of it.

*"You're very artistic...even the way you talk..."*

He announces softly to me, even though I barely speak to him. This is where it's going.

I could now announce that I am either Salvador Dali incarnate or his secret lovechild with Sam Beckett, which, though empirically and scientifically impossible...pfft science! Or I could nod my head and say something...milder.

I had told him before that I pictured myself sliding on the snow and cracking my head open...and the thing that displeased me most about this possibility was that my red blood would stain the white snow and I personally found the contrast between red and white devastatingly ugly.

*"I think I have a high functioning schizotypal personality disorder."*

I sigh softly.

Let's move this along then shall we? If you want to eat my pain then here it is.

Either he doesn't know what that is or is curious as to how I would come to that conclusion. I do not tell him that I first suspected it when I was four years old, that at seven I was half convinced I was a sociopath. He pulls out the DSMV and I continue to talk; I want to get to the part when we sing *kumbaya* and dance around a fire.

I feel cajoled into emotional bonds, including those forged by my family. I don't think I've ever made a friend in my life... I'm just put in an awkward position where someone decides we're friends and I have to play along because I don't quite understand the rules. I sometimes wonder how I would feel if I didn't feel so responsible for everyone else's feelings. Would I love them? Is that sense of responsibility love? That sense of having to shield them and/or comfort them from the harshness of this world? I do not like intimacy...I find it to be violent and invasive. I don't think I am delusional; it's just that everyone else thinks in a linear manner and I think...laterally, for lack of a better word.

I think in explosions and expanses, and they think in straight lines. I also happen to think that I'm simply ahead of my time but would have been better placed in the past. I believe in William James' multiverse theory; that I inhabit the same space/time continuum as Arthur Schopenhauer and Frantz Fanon. I believe the secret to immortality is in art and writing. I do not like the colour red or people who do. Sometimes I ask them if they like the colour red...other times I just KNOW that they like the colour red, and I avoid them as if they want to crush my heart in their hands just to use it as a stress ball. I hate the fact that I am going to be successful and that this success is going to be mine alone; that there are people who will be left behind, that I will have to donate to charities and volunteer so that I do not feel bad about my own success. I want everyone to succeed; to this extent I believe I am an anarcho-communist...or at least that's what Malatesta told me

He looks up from the book, nodding his head

*"Malatesta? Errico Malatesta? Is that your friend?"*

He, Bakunin and I hang out sometimes...so I suppose he is.

I don't mention that Malatesta died in 1932, I don't even remember when Bakunin died...and I shrug away the mention of my arguments with Kropotkin about anarcho-communism.

I love the DSM-V; The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition. I sometimes like to leaf through it and laugh at what is considered madness. Schizotypal personality is characterized by irrationality and intimacy avoidance. I've never cared much for the bounds of rationality, because I am

always trying to stretch them. Intimacy avoidance...I could write the book on how to do it while looking like you're an open book; hiding in plain sight is always the best option.

*"Your intonation... it's flat."*

I am too tired to pepper my voice with false hope.

Part of Schizotypal personality disorder, I point out.

*"Also part of Asperger's."*

He adds, as if seeing me for the first time.

Have I heard of Asperger's before?

*"It's in the autism spectrum... sort of anyway."*

He explains.

Marcel flips through the DSM to the Asperger's page. I can't be wrong about myself can I? But then, he's the one who went to school and studied these things. Autism?

My phone is in the habit of ringing. I once looked for the plug that makes it function but couldn't stomach the thought of Lise, as Madame Brais now has me calling her, bursting through the door because I didn't pick up my phone. My room has been mine alone since I got here...and my paintings are here now; happy paintings about drowning boats and women who have the heads of chickens and the proportions of tsunamis, paintings about the darkness that I sink into in order to forget my existence, the way I find the world distasteful, the aches I would have felt had I not met the one person who understood most of me. My phone is ringing...I brave the troubled sea that is my carnivorous floor and reach for it; the journey tires me. It always feels like sharp pieces of my broken mind seer onto the soles of my feet when I step on the floor.

Daisy?

Hi?

It's my big sister; she convinced apartment security to give her my room number. This isn't particularly shocking. I come from a tribe of Amazons.

Where we get the strength to trudge through whatever is on our path, I do not know. Tears on my part; I never wanted to disappoint anyone.

*"Come home. We love you."*

I have never known love to give one freedom. To the best of my knowledge love is always used as a noose around one's neck; do not go too far from us or you will die of it. This was the tag at the end of the tether; I was being pulled back into place. If you're going to die do it to my face!

I can't even speak past the joy of hearing her voice and the reminder that I have a family that I need to take care of.

I picture my niece at the funeral. The first time I met death I was seven years old. I stared at my uncle, ashen and sleeping in a suit, and I wondered when he would wake up and stop everyone from crying; I do not want that for her. I picture my best friend shouting *"I can't believe this bitch is dead!"*...

I always die before he does; I always leave people behind.

Okay, I whisper through my tears. I was going home. I had no energy to fight her or argue. I was going home.

*"How do you feel about going home?"*

More like how do I feel about you emailing my family and scaring them into demanding that I return?

I do not say this, I smile... I always smile; that is where all my secrets go.

Good... I mean I'm a failure and I will cause them nothing but trouble...but they asked for it.

*"What will you do once you get home?"*

Stare at the sun.

*"With your life, that is."*

Life is meaningless, it doesn't matter.

But you should do it anyway, Gandhi adds in my head. Swear if I could wring the optimism out of you Mohandas!

I hide this silent conversation with Mohandas Gandhi behind a deliberate smile. I can tell my answer is insufficient; he is searching for something, some sign that he has succeeded in our interactions.

*“Are you going to go back to Law School?”*

I hadn't thought of it. I would want to finish what I started...but...

No.

I realize now that the reason my floor was a gaping black hole was because my floor was really a metaphor for my Law career. I already had a job lined up and a future as an ICC judge just waiting to unfold, if I did not get out now, then I would never get out.

*“Will you go to Art School?”*

Ha! I think of the art schools at home. Nothing comes to mind. Will Art School even have me? What will I tell them? That I started drawing because I was depressed and my schadenfreude psychologist thinks I am talented even though his own taste in art is a bit questionable? I think of smiling my way back to a London art institution with my “I'm an ethnic, black girl from Africa with a dream of greatness and you want me to be your alumna if you're going to keep luring Africans to study here” face. It didn't get me into Oxford Law (I suppose their quota was filled) but it got me into an English Law and French Law degree...so who's to say it won't get me into a Fine Arts degree?

I would love to go to Art School.

I would also love to see my father's face when I burn the possibility of being an ICC judge in his face and ask him to pay for me to study Art.

My father... I didn't want to disappoint anyone yet here I was! I am ashamed. I have to go back home, I am told. What will I tell my family?

*“The best thing you can do now is be with your family, see the sun...”*

*Remember you owe them a responsibility to be happy and content with a life you're not a fan of;* he doesn't say this. He also doesn't say *‘Go die there!’* I think they would fire him if he did. He, however, offers me one of the rocks from his collection. I think of my sister always comically shouting ‘Tarusa Mawe!’ (We will throw rocks) whenever someone doesn't bend to her will.

I take it.

# *Dark Chocolate*

**Phyllis Muthoni**

Liquid velvet over teeth.

You forgot yourself sometimes,  
a streak of goo down the corner of your mouth.

This was the glue, the balm  
that held you together.

You the medicine man,  
completely in charge  
of its administration.

A bar for traffic jams.

Two for a failed exam,  
and the entire factory  
when Jimmy broke up with you.

I watched you the way a prisoner  
watches the warden;  
observed the cocoa eat up your teeth  
and the darkness eat your soul,  
heart and body ingested by acid vomit.

Eyes fogged up  
by the thing we could not name.

For it wasn't quite sorrow;  
it was as if your entire being  
gave itself up and gave up on itself.

The doctors with their theories  
about chemicals, neurons  
and disposition also didn't get it.

It was my burden, not to figure out  
but to bear, to swallow, and stomach  
my little girl who got lost in the business of being alive  
but not living,  
cured and upheld by candy.

The day we buried you I went through your things.  
Not in the tender way bereaved mothers do,  
sniffing a shirt here,  
hugging a sweater there.  
Mine was the fury born of helplessness.  
I dumped things into bin bags,  
and drove them into the dam.  
I didn't want anyone to inherit them  
lest they too be taken by the darkness.

I don't cry over your smell, your footsteps,  
I don't miss your broken body  
the way I miss the girl who died at fifteen  
while her body lived on in misty blackness  
till it was seventeen.  
I don't know the sharp pain of the newly bereaved  
because I grieved two whole years  
before you killed your body.

I will not turn your life into a treatise,  
I shall not build shrines or pedestals.  
I have made my peace with your departed-ness.  
Today I shall air the house, clean up your room.  
And tomorrow I shall put the house up for rent.  
Or sale.

# *It's All in Your Mind*

**Kevin Rigathi**

In Kenya, we want the best for the mentally ill. It's not a debate. It's not controversial. We all agree that they should have our support. Ask anyone and you'll get the same answer. We should help them.

Unfortunately, we don't all agree on how we should go about giving that help.

Even more unfortunately, we don't even agree on what classifies as a mental illness.

If you're screaming and ripping apart your clothes in the street, then you pass the social test and are fully certified. Your credentials have been verified. You may be on your way, you mad naked, man. You are indeed mentally ill.

However, if your condition is not quite so obvious then you will run into some resistance. You will find that people have a list of expressions in store just for you. A language for the mentally ill. Are you depressed, bipolar or suffering from some other form of anxiety disorder? Then you can count on some phrases working their way into the conversation.

*"It's all in your mind. It's not that big a deal. You just need to ignore it."*

Worse still, if you have the temerity to actually have an eating disorder like anorexia or bulimia, then not only will you not be considered mentally ill, you're also...

*An attention seeker. A spoilt brat. Ungrateful for what you have.*

The prevalent opinion seems to be that if it is not plain and clear then it is not truly mental illness. It is not an issue about your health but, at the most charitable, something you can overpower with nothing more than will.



Because it is in the mind, it is less real. Less harmful. Less in need of real attention. And when you try protest this point of view, that's when they will trot out the next phrase in the list.

*"Just get over it!"*

Every time I hear someone say this I'm tempted to grab a shovel, whack them over the head and (quite sympathetically) say "Don't worry about it. It's all in your body. Just ignore it. You'll get over it." Unfortunately, shovels are never lying around when you need them and I don't have that kind of courage anyway. That's also not the right way to deal with things (or so I'm told).

I understand that this reaction to mental illness is a lot less sinister than it comes across. It is not moustache twirling villainy that leads people here. It is the consequence of bad lessons. Cultural assumptions that have shaped who we are more than we'd like to admit. When people say these things, they actually think they're helping. It's just tough love. I know this because I was once one of those people.

It's not that hard to understand when you think about it. Every one of us has picked up habits and mannerisms without knowing where we got them, and we all hold some things to be true without knowing why. It's part of life. I'd even go so far as to say that this is not the problem. The problem comes about when it's time to let go of those false beliefs. We talk a big game about wanting change (ask Obama), but when it's time to actually walk down that road we're a little more hesitant.

When it comes to mental health, the reason many of us are so reluctant to change our minds can be chalked down to how we see ourselves. We're the good guys. To admit that some of these people have legitimate problems is for most of us an admission that we've behaved poorly. An admission that we may have failed them. That we may have been cruel. That we may have made things worse. In the end, it is so much easier to imagine that they are either weak or spoiled, isn't it? Even the simple things, like admitting many of us use the word 'retarded' offensively, become

a massive problem. We could easily change how we talk, but the effort of arguing that it's not offensive seems worth never facing the implications that we've been wrong all this time.

It's called the Semmelweis Reflex. The stubborn refusal to acknowledge fault because it supplants what we've always known and done, especially if it means you've been at fault. The reflex is named for Ignaz Semmelweis, a doctor from the 1800s. His claim to fame was discovering and putting forward an idea that seems so obvious to the modern mind that it's almost impossible to imagine that it was ever controversial. His radical belief was that doctors should sterilize their hands before performing medical procedures. In fact, it was even more obvious than that. What he was actually saying was that *"If you've been handling dead bodies, you should wash your hands before you attempt to help a woman give birth."*

Can't argue with that, can you?

Apparently, you can. Doctors were outraged by the mere suggestion that the deaths in question could have been their fault. After all, anyone could clearly see that a gentleman's hands could not possibly transmit disease. What more evidence could they need? Even after Dr. Semmelweis demonstrated the efficacy of his theory there was still opposition. In the end, his measures were not even adopted within his lifetime. To bring this full circle, the good doctor died in an asylum.

While the above case certainly had more nuance than I've presented (this was before they even knew germs were a thing), the major cause of the conflict was that it was against what was understood at the time. Even after successful experiments, people did not want to let go of what they had always known. How they had always acted. The cost for this stubbornness was paid in lives

Fast forward to today. Physical health is much less of a problem. It's still got its flaws, but now concern about it is ubiquitous. It is not restricted to hospitals anymore. Almost everyone accepts that you need to be healthy all the time. It is almost impossible to avoid hearing about what to eat

or what exercise you should be doing. I know of a certain organic food stand with a tag about being part of the “health fashion trend.” I’ve always found it an odd choice for a slogan, though you can’t help but admit that there’s some accuracy to it. Healthy living is now fashionable.

Here’s an illustration to demonstrate just how far the health initiative has seeped into society:

I once admitted to a friend that I had eaten fries for lunch every day for a week. She was horrified, to say the least. She, who I have never heard say more than two consecutive sentences without a joke, sat me down and gave me a lecture. It was a pretty comprehensive one, too. All the “whys” “whats” and “hows” were covered in great detail. She even bought me (a healthy) lunch. I was touched, slightly bothered and, if I’m being entirely honest, wondering if I could pull this off with different people and never pay for lunch again.

That case is slightly more than you get ordinarily but it’s not all that surprising. People don’t just care about their own health, they care about the health of those around them. Sometimes so much that it creates new problems with diets and fat shaming, but that’s a discussion for another time.

This leads me to the inescapable conclusion that many of us don’t consider mental health to actually be a part of health. We don’t treat it with that level of seriousness. We aren’t willing to be so helpful or even to put that much work into the prevention of mental illness. If anything, we foster a climate that seems almost designed to make things worse.

If you’re mentally ill in Kenya, it would probably seem to be in your best interests to shut up about it. You don’t want to appear weak. You don’t want to be mocked and scorned. You don’t want the stigma associated with it, all of which will without a doubt be accompanied with no help whatsoever. So you hide it. You keep it to yourself and that’s not a safe place to be. You might need support. You might need counselling. You might need medication. The lack of these things will in all likelihood

make your condition worse, until it can no longer be concealed anymore. By then, it is more difficult to deal with, and sometimes the necessary measures aren't pleasant for any of the parties involved.

So what can we do? For starters, you don't have to do much. The first step, which is both easier and harder than it sounds, is to starting to take mental health seriously. In the same way you wouldn't immediately dismiss a child complaining of some persistent pain, do not do so with depression or anxiety. These conditions are not, contrary to popular opinion, habits teenagers are picking from "The West". If you stop and think about it, a Kenyan child has a lot to be stressed about.

Whenever I think back to my own primary school life it never ceases to baffle me. The whole time, I was convinced that KCPE was the most important thing I had ever encountered in my existence. In my mind, failure meant that my life would be over. I didn't study to learn, I studied to pass exams. I strained to achieve what now seems to be a fairly minor (and particularly useless) accomplishment. When was the last time anyone even wanted to know what I got in KCPE? I don't think I could even tell you what my individual grades were now. Three months. That's entire span of time that grade held any value for me. Was it worth all the stress it caused me?

For all that, I had it a lot easier than some. Unlike many children in this country, I wasn't considered the lucky ticket. The entire community wasn't counting on me to pass that exam and indicating that I was the one who was going to save them. That was not a burden I had to carry on my 13 year old shoulders. I can't even imagine what that's like. Seeing as this is the climate that we raise children in, is it really so surprising that so many of them commit suicide after receiving their results? And even when they don't, exactly how much damage is being caused here? If you have some pre-existing conditions already, what does that do to you?

My parents tell me they sometimes have recurring nightmares when they're stressed. They have different ones, but the worst have to do with exams. Sitting in that room and realizing you don't have a geometrical

set, or your pencil breaks and you don't have a replacement. More than thirty years have passed, they've been through so much but their minds still associate stress with exams. Exams that were used to get university degrees they don't even use anymore (they don't do anything related to what they studied in the first place). That's what has them waking up in a fright.

This, to me, is a large part of the problem. Schooling in Kenya takes negatives and frames them as positives. Unbelievably tired? You're supposed to be. Stressed? You're supposed to be. Panicking? That's normal. You're not allowed to complain about these things. I compare it to being in some (hypothetical) athletics program and you sprain your leg. You talk to your trainer about it and he blows up in your face.

*"You're a track star. Leg injuries are to be expected. What are you whining for? Get back to practice. Do you see your friends whining? You think they have it any easier? Get over it."*

So you run on that leg and to no surprise, it gets worse every time, but now you've learnt not to say anything. You just bear the pain silently until you can't do it anymore. As for your companions, the ones without injuries? They learn an important lesson too. Don't speak up. A lesson they carry on to their careers. For themselves and for others. It's all part of the job, right?

I'm talking about schools because change has to start somewhere. If we're going to spend such a significant portion of our lives in them, don't they owe us a little something in return? Something besides a multiple year course on how to pass exams? I believe that schools right now not only make existing mental conditions worse, they encourage attitudes that cause a lot of the problems I've pointed out in this article. Not only is there little useful learning on the academic front, the social attitudes being learned are damaging.

Now, I don't believe that schools can "fix" mental illness. That's way beyond their purview. But part of what makes being mentally ill so difficult is that

people believe that it's somehow your own fault. That because of some weakness in you, you called this upon yourself. You're not sick. You're weak. School has a lot to do with this line of thinking. If we can fix that attitude, then we're already halfway there.

It's all in your mind? Then raise the alarm.

# *The Makings of a Sex Addict*

**By Anonymous**

What can I tell you about myself? I'm a single mother of two wonderful children, I'm half Kenyan but grew up in Britain my whole life, I like reading and nature walks.

Oh yeah, and I'm a sex addict.

It's not something I talk about often, but unfortunately it's a rather large and inescapable feature of my life. I wanted to write this essay to discuss underlying personality traits and mental health issues commonly suffered by sex addicts, and why many people make the move to sex addiction as a coping mechanism. However, when I started to research this essay I found that there is a huge amount of scientific information with definitions, symptoms, causes, treatments etc., but very little personal documentation about how this actually *feels* and affects people like me in everyday life.

There are bitter and biased articles from [hurt spouses](#) or churchy, preachy articles about how to spot a sex addict in your congregation and what to do [about it](#), but this makes people like me sound like predatory, dangerous individuals with no morals, no control over our actions and insatiable sexual appetites.

***Lock up your husbands ladies, I'm on the prowl!***

In reality, I haven't chosen the way I am. Seriously, no one would choose the battle I have to fight every day to keep my thoughts and actions on the straight and narrow. Sadly, it's a battle that I often lose, but the war is a long term thing.

## **What is Sex Addiction?**

Just for a moment, I'll follow the example set by those other papers and briefly mention what sex addiction actually is, but I'll do it in my own words as an addict, and in as simple language as possible:

- **It is a progressive illness** - If left untreated, it will get worse and behaviour will become more extreme.
- **Where sexuality is used in the wrong way** - instead of sex being a celebration of love, sex becomes a desperate act to feel good about oneself and make a connection with instant intimacy (if sex is the end result behaviour), or using pornography to create a feeling of desirability and success without the risk of intimacy.
- **Where sex or porn is used to create a “high”** - there is now research that suggests the brains of sex addicts have imbalances in dopamine and serotonin, which are neurotransmitters associated with mood regulation and pleasure. Also long-term sexually addictive behaviour re-wires the reward systems of the brain, so addicts feel that they must continue with these behaviours or they may not survive. So, sex addiction is now being viewed by many professionals as similar to drug addiction.
- **When the high wears off, sex addicts will experience withdrawals and cravings** - this is partly to do with a “comedown” from the neurotransmitters, but also stems from a need to reenact the rituals and behaviour patterns of getting close to our “fix”. Sex addicts will go to great lengths to avoid withdrawals.
- **Sex addicts will usually experience shame and self-loathing from their behaviour and seeming lack of control** - this is a common theme described by every sex addict I have spoken to, and of course this is something I have experienced myself time and time again. When I was caught “in the bubble” of my sexual behaviour, I was completely powerful and untouchable. The next day, I could not look myself in the eye in the mirror, and I’d tell myself “Never again!”
- **This shame and self-loathing will not stop the behaviour from resurfacing again and again** - in fact, I’d repeat the same crazy stuff at the next available opportunity just to make myself feel better.



- **Sex addicts will start using deluded thinking to explain and justify their behaviour** - Many, many excuses can be used, such as *“I was bored/tired/stressed/angry/horny/lonely/happy/excited/celebrating/commiserating...”* the list is endless and we genuinely manage to fool ourselves. Yes, outright lies can be told, but the reasons behind those lies are often true to the individual. Defensive towers are built with this skewed thinking to protect the self.
- **Sex addicts will block out risks that their behaviour will bring** - risk of disease is obvious, but consider money spent on escorts or prostitutes; getting on the wrong side of the law with public sex, voyeurism and extreme internet porn; having no spare time because planning our behaviour and fantasizing about past behaviour is all-consuming; and having to more or less live a “double life” so that other people don’t find out
- **All in all, it leads to an unmanageable life** - My own addiction causes me a great deal of guilt and confusion, but I wasn’t caught in the trap of active sex addiction for long. I have seen how bad it can get. Sex addiction steals and ruins people’s lives. In the most extreme cases, I have seen people who have lost their partners, children and friends. I have seen marriages break down. I have seen people lose their jobs, homes and even face jail and restriction to their personal freedom. At the very least, each and every sex addict at one time or another feels that they are a terrible, worthless, broken, isolated being, with no idea how to change, or how they even got there in the first place.

How do I know that I’m a sex addict? Is it because I have a high sex drive? Well, yes.

However, many addicts do not want sex at all, because pornography has left them so switched off to the opposite sex that they cannot stop viewing them merely as sex objects for their own gratification.

Is it because I think about sex all the time? Yes, sexual fantasy and obsession is a feature for most addicts. During my worst times, my every waking moment was devoted to thinking about or chasing sex.

Is it because I have no morals? No, I have morals, but during active addiction I lose them completely, because my addiction is bigger and more powerful than my conscious thoughts. I often think "This is wrong, I shouldn't do this" but a fog settles in my brain and then I'm free from my morals. It is a very liberating place where I don't have to take responsibility for my actions (until later, and trust me the comedown is terrible), and it's also very addictive.

Is it because I can't control myself? The word "control" is hard to define in this context. Sex addicts can control their behaviour and go for periods without sex, but this is known as "white knuckling". An addict will believe they have their behaviour under control, therefore they will then give themselves permission to go on a bender, "safe" in the knowledge they can "stop at any time" (think of an alcoholic having dry spells). So, overall, there is no control.

Is it because I don't care about myself? Yes, sadly that is true, but I am learning the error in that kind of thinking.

To illustrate the above points, I am going to tell you a story. This is the reason that I realized I was a sex addict:

7 months ago, I went to a house party. A group of very nice looking men lived together, and I had had my wicked way with a few of them. They were all sitting drinking, and I gravitated towards one of them who I had previously had a couple of mind-blowing nights with. The fact that he was getting married in a month's time was of no consequence to me at that point. We were flirting a little, but then he suddenly started fighting with another one of the guys. I didn't know what was happening and I hate fighting. His mouth and hand were bloody and he kept accidentally smearing blood on me while he was drunkenly posturing. Eww. It was a stressful experience.

Looking back, I was really rattled by all that. Here is where I am different from other people. Instead of dealing with it, I chose block it out, and I did that by approaching one of the other guys who I knew was interested in me and started flirting with him. He was a very willing victim, and soon I was sitting on his knee while he was kissing my neck.

I found some stupid excuse to go to his room, but he knew the score and followed. The clothes were off pretty soon. Soon I was rolling, I was high from my drug. We didn't actually have sex, he was too drunk to perform, but he helped me push the stress away. Between his kisses and caresses I found my peace, my safety. I was safe in the fog I had created, and not even another friend barging into the room in the middle of the action could stop me (Although, I'd slept with him too so him seeing me naked was neither here nor there. No, not the fighter. Another guy).

I'm not done.

We got dressed and we all decided to hit a club. The guy who I had just been with, who had been so happily pleasing me an hour previously, began to ignore me. I guess I was a box that he felt was ticked. I was still safe in the fog so I just ignored him and didn't feel snubbed. That is a risk of being intimate with men that you don't care about, and who don't care about you. I blocked it out and danced.

I'm not done.

We drove back to their place and the fighter appeared. He was sober and showered and no longer blood stained. I was just starting to lose the buzz of my drug so I decided to top myself up to keep my high. I found some stupid excuse to go into his room and...well you can imagine the rest. Another mind-blowing night to fantasize about later.

Afterwards, I spent a couple of days in this blissed-out high and spent endless hours having romantic fantasies about the fighter. Then the comedown arrived and I felt truly, truly awful. How could I have done that? What was I thinking? I could not justify having sexual contact with 2 different men in one night. Stressed out or not, that was not normal. Oh my God, I'm abnormal. There's something wrong with me. How do I fix it? Can I fix it? Who can I turn to?

It went on and on. I was ashamed and terrified.

It was not drugs or alcohol I was craving. I have a very different intoxicant and it was in complete control at that point. There are many other stories,

not all as bad as that, but that was the last time I was truly out of control to my addiction.

## **So, what makes a sex addict?**

To ask a simple question - is it nature or is it nurture?

The answer is - both.

Referring to literature again, it appears that all addicts (alcoholics, drug addicts, gamblers, exercise addicts) share some physiological traits:

Biologically, as well, as addicts having neurotransmitter imbalances as mentioned above, addiction is highly hereditary, with many sex addicts having parents or siblings suffering from various other addictions. Addicts are seen to have a lower level of cortical arousal, so we display extroverted behaviours to “top up” our low arousal level with adrenaline, as well as showing “thrill-seeking” behaviour. For sex addicts this could be engaging in risky sex, or looking up progressively more extreme pornography to up the ante.

Psychologically, while there are no set personality traits that cause addiction, addicts have several personality factors:

- Impulsivity and compulsion (sex addiction is not currently recognized as an illness in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), but it is described as Excessive Sexual Drive in the International Classification of Diseases by the WHO. Some professionals maintain that it’s a branch of obsessive compulsive disorder. You know, just to confuse us more.
- Valuing being different, combined with weak commitment to socially valued goals for achievement
- Having a sense of social alienation and a tolerance for deviance
- Heightened stress and lack of coping skills

Just being predisposed to these natural-selected personality traits and biological quirks won’t necessarily lead to sex addiction, but teaming up with certain environmental factors can lead to disastrous results.

A traumatic childhood as a prominent feature in most addicts I have spoken to, but not all. This doesn't always mean physical or sexual abuse, but it often means having parents who cannot emotionally nurture a child (sometimes due to their own addictions or mental health issues) which can lead to many small perceived traumas. This can lead to a child feeling uncared for, and many will then make the leap that they are not worth caring for. The more sensitive children may turn to outside influences in an attempt to alleviate the inner pain they experience.

## **Mental Health Implications**

What does it feel like being a sex addict?

Imagine you have a best friend. I'll call her Addie. Addie is a lot of fun. You feel free and strong when you're with her. When you're sad, Addie will do her best to make you feel better by reminding you of fun times to try to make you feel happier. When you're happy, Addie's presence makes you feel amazing - powerful, desirable, sexy, beautiful, smart, strong and if you mess up you can say "It wasn't me, but bless her cotton socks, Addie got carried away again. Won't that girl learn ha ha ha!" Honestly, you just don't know what life would be like without Addie.

Sadly, Addie is crazy and out of control. She is exhausting, infuriating, and sometimes you do not understand why she does what she does. She becomes a larger and larger feature of your life until you have forgotten where you end and Addie begins. And when you try to break free, you realize that Addie has cleverly made a cage - you are afraid of life without Addie. She hurts you, over and over again and you can't stop her. Addie is stronger than you, she bullies you, she controls your thoughts and actions and you're afraid of her. You feel yourself disappearing a little more each time she makes you do something that makes you ashamed.

And Addie is a part of you, and always will be.

It really, really sucks.

I have been attending Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA) meetings for six months. While I can never consider myself “cured”, I am happy to report that my life is improving, one day at a time. I have met various sex addicts, and I can honestly say that it can affect anyone, at any age, from all walks of life, at any time. This is by no means scientific, but I have picked up a few common themes from observation and conversation with other addicts:

- I am yet to meet any female addicts whose sole problem is pornography. The female addicts I have spoken to will watch porn, but the main problem is sex with multiple partners. However, most men’s main problem is porn addiction, with sex outside of relationships, cybersex and purchasing sex in various forms also featuring.
- All of us have problems dealing with stress.
- From what I have seen, we are a highly immature, rebellious, selfish, self-pitying, self-centred, sensitive, creative and proud collection of people.
- We suffer from fear, and over-react to stressors in everyday life.
- All of us have problems with self-esteem and self-worth. This appears before sex addiction takes hold, and is worsened as we begin to hate ourselves for our active sexually addictive behaviour.
- Many of us have had difficult relationships with our parents and have had what we perceive to be difficult childhoods, but that is highly subjective. Sexual abuse does not feature highly. However, many people will not reveal to that to others during meetings or phone conversations, so I have no idea of “official” figures.
- Sex addiction is overwhelmingly a male issue, so female addicts feel extra stigmatization and guilt.
- Self-destructive tendencies feature highly. This could stem from not feeling cared for during childhood, therefore not feeling worthy of happiness.

- We feature “all or nothing” thought patterns and struggle with moderation. Indeed, sex addiction, alcoholism and overeating overlap.
- A distorted sense of time. Addicts can literally lose days of their lives watching pornography, and I have seen myself lose hours in sexual texting or fantasy. Time flies by when we are in active addiction, yet drags by at a snail’s pace when withdrawing.
- Addicts often feel isolated, alone and that no one else understands.

It has taken a lot of soul searching, but I am done with blaming myself for being a sex addict. Whether it’s my brain, personality, upbringing or all three that led to me being an addict I’ll never know, but none of those things are my fault. However, I do not for one second condone my reactions and resulting actions because I still chose to be led down a path where I put sex before everything else.

Guilt, self-loathing, low self-esteem and low self-worth feel like familiar garments to me. However, I am learning to move on from the past, see my place in my addiction and stop blaming everyone else. By forgiving myself I can begin moving forward. This is thanks to the 12 Step SAA program, which is a journey of spiritual discovery linked to a fellowship of men and women who support each other in moving towards recovery.

“Recovery” is not defined as abstinence, rather it is freedom from those behaviours which cause us shame. Every individual chooses the behaviour that they wish to stop. In my case, I no longer wish to have sex outside of a relationship. There have been a few close calls, but at this time I have not had sex in five months. I am very grateful for this. I have no idea what the future holds, but I know I’m not alone.

If you have read this essay and feel it resonate with you, know that you are not alone and help is available.

# *My Funk*

**Maryanne Nderitu**

The simplicity of my 12 years of age ensures my first suicide attempt does not work. I dare myself, in front of my friends, to swallow eight tablets of Panadol. Beneath the courage of the dare, I am tormented by life. I try again a year later, this time after mixing household chemicals. My younger sister walks in on me as I am about to drink it. I tell her I am doing a science experiment; she buys into the idea. I pour the concoction down the drain. I never tell anyone what I was trying to do, or what agony I am going through.

I have no name for it.

I top the class in the national examinations at the end of primary school. That was what everyone expected of me; success. My achievement masks any worries I have. They will go away. I proceed to a prestigious secondary school. But here, I am always ill. Today it is nausea, tomorrow a migraine. I am wrongly treated for pneumonia, because of the panic attacks I suffer. The shortness of breath sends me to cardiologists; it must be a problem with the heart. I spend more time in hospital than in school. To date, the hospital is a second home to me. When I walk in, I engage in small talk with everyone, from the doctors to the janitors.

I am an outgoing child, the leader of the gang, usually the cheeky gang - the one that gives nicknames to teachers and plays pranks on others. The hottest guys know who I am. I choose one.

The teenage romance doesn't last long. I am smart, pretty and witty. With time, this changes. I become withdrawn but keep up appearances. I pretend to like school, continue to lead in activities and clubs yet I am just living through the motions. My grades take the hardest hit. The teachers begin complaining; I am branded an emotional attention seeker, a pretender who even faked her illnesses so that she could get away from school. Nothing much will come from me, they say. Those four years are nothing but torture. I stick through it and stumble out with an A-. The teachers are dumbfounded.



Until one doctor mentions it, depression is not a word I am familiar with. I am 19, at the height of my teenage years when this lifesaver realizes there is more to my numerous physical ailments. I am glad to put a name to it. I can now identify with the sense of worthlessness, guilt and never ending shadow of grief. But the battle has just begun.

I am put on one of the mildest antidepressants. It is a pretty, pink tablet. It is akin to swallowing smarties with water. These do not seem to work, so I am switched to a stronger brand. When these do not work, the dosage is increased. And so it is, until I have literally gone through all the drugs that exist.

"How much should I give her?" a nurse asks her colleague.

"The whole dosage," the reply comes.

I get an injection and go home. The oral tablets were not effective.

A week later, I am back to hospital. A doctor dismisses me as catatonic. I cannot talk or walk. The dentist attempts to keep my jaw in place with a bandage, but it won't sit still. My whole body suffers from involuntary movements. Two weeks later, after a series of tests and medication, a psychiatrist says the injection that was administered to me was too much for my age and weight.

In campus, hours of study still don't help as I fail test after test. This is a first in my life - the overdose affected my short term memory. I take a semester off and move to a different university, to study a different course.

I start again.

The drugs pull me down. I battle to get out of bed every morning. Each morning is a rush to get to class. The psychiatrist suggests electroconvulsive therapy. The drugs have no effect. I cringe at the thought of having electric current rushing through my brain. I switch doctors. I still cling on to hope of recovering. Another cycle of drug therapy begins. It does not get better.

Everyone says I have it all (the dean's list and student leadership is meant to bolster this). I do not believe them. I have nothing. I am not pretty, I am not smart. I am barely living. I graduate with a first class degree. What does it matter?

I want to die.

Out in the real world, there is no shelter from pain. Few people know the secret of my life. I dread the low self-esteem. I yearn to have others understand me; those who matter to me, as well as insignificant others, and the society, who I think need to know what has caused the delay in the advancement of my life. I seek to explain the increase in weight, the eruption of rashes on my forehead, my inexplicable absences from social life, my inability to cope with post graduate school work, and the reluctance to get a job, which I am qualified for anyway. I spend a tremendous amount of time trying to make whoever I meet understand their curiosity; this way I feel understood, loved and accepted. At least 'they' now see why I can't forge ahead.

But what happens if they do not understand? What happens if they think I am just a spoiled brat who hides under the covers as soon as the first inklings of difficulty show up? This happens all the time. No one really gets why I have gained so much weight, and the daring ones suggest I should abstain from the pizza offers on Tuesdays and Fridays. I battle with feeling accepted and hate comparisons with other people who have life handing them snags but are able to keep going.

*'Do you see that lady selling tomatoes there? Her husband cheated on her and left her to raise their three kids alone. It is hard yet she moves on. What about you?'*

I loathe myself for not being like them, for not being able to deal with my 'simple' problem, or to others, one that does not simply exist. I suffer for not being able to do what these people suggest.

*"God loves you, and he surely doesn't want you to kill yourself. If only you loved him more. You have to want to live, really, life is so beautiful. It is up to you. If you want, you can get out of this,"* those from church say.

I now think God has left me.

Surely, where is he?

Why does he let me cry alone?

My life is at a standstill. I am the bridesmaid who never catches the bouquet of flowers. There is no one who will love me, not with the dark clouds I move around with. I hide in my room and close the shutters. I survive three months of vacillating between wanting to live and wanting to die. Within the darkness, I read and research.

I have had enough with the drugs, which seem to give me no relief. Why am I suicidal whilst still guzzling down these chemicals? Why aren't I getting better? At the height of what others call lunacy, I give up the drugs cold turkey. I wake up one morning and flush the stash all away. The reward is a month of intense withdrawal symptoms. I suffer from paraesthesia and spew away my excess weight. I resemble a drug addict. I spend Christmas day shivering and drenching my sheets in sweat. I listen to the others making merry. But I am determined. I would rather die than go back to the drugs.

I replace the drugs with a healthy diet and natural healing practices. I am introduced to mood mapping, a method propagated by Dr. Liz Miller. She is a trained Neurosurgeon and Occupational Health Physician. I am encouraged by her personal experience. Through her method, she was able to overcome her bipolar depression. Every day, four times a day, I plot my mood and my energy. I keep track of the cycles. I jot down short notes on how I feel at those moments. I learn to differentiate between feeling anxious and depressed. I discover ways to stay calm and active. I see patterns in my moods.

I am not a morning person; I prefer to work late into the night. I despise sad movies and people who only have sob stories to tell. My morning cup of coffee makes me depressed, as does the occasional glass of wine. I give them up and devise ways to make fish, water and milk taste good. I thank God I have never liked sugar.

I can barely outrun a tortoise, so I begin to walk. I get activities that move me out of the house to get my daily dose of vitamin D. I declutter my room and place a desk next to the window. I sit and stare out of it as I take in the beauty of nature. I unleash my kitchen prowess and experiment with baking.

I arrange for a weekly date with a therapist. I talk about what triggered the depression in my teen years; I talk about what it meant to me. I talk about

the neighbour's dog that keeps me up at night and the boy that told me that I was fat. I talk and talk and talk. I then connect the dots. I realise these are the events that have been bogging my sanity down all these years. They are looking for an outlet. I have found it, and I am not letting it go.

# *A Madness Foretold : Part 2*

**Awuor Onyango**

## ***Location 2 : Nairobi, Kenya. April 2013 and beyond***

Dad picks me up from the airport. I am sure to apologize for the trouble and let him know it's not his fault. We don't hug, and I do not cry too loudly. My mother hugs me; my sisters are home to look at me and ask what is wrong. I have lost weight, I am not eating, I cannot sleep. I had practised what I would say when they asked...because they were going to ask! Looking at them, I think of all my childhood nicknames...weirdo, demon child, crazy daisy.

*"Do you even have emotions?"*

My sister had asked me once.

*"Of all my children, only you can do a PhD. PhDs break peoples minds...and yours is already broken."*

My father had said to me as my sister went for her masters. Why are they shocked that it came to this? I tell them about the Asperger's and the schizotypy.

*"Not everyone is a hundred percent upstairs."*

My crying sister assures me.

Nairobi is blurred and beautiful through my uncontrollable tears, full of things that make me anxious; noises, people, smells, sunshine that threatens to pierce your skin with thorny rays. It feels like someone painted it a slight sepia tint. The ground seems too alive. I haven't seen ants or felt grass rub itself against my ankles in months and it all makes me want to scream at nature to leave me alone! Here, everyone and everything is watching everything I do and I am trying to smile and pretend, but I woke up and there was a red broom in my room which looked like a vein and I thought the wall was pulsating and closing in on me, and I tried my best to hold back the screams. I miss the darkness of Canada, the silence, the lack of humanity, the lack of eyes. My mother comes to check up on me, standing there with her concern

wielded like a bat, beating me back into shape. I always leak out though, as soon as she leaves I leak out and search for a darkness to hide in.

I can't go outside...I don't trust outside.

I can't sleep when I can hear the neighbour's dog breath as if it was right in my ear and when every car that passes by assaults my senses.

Dad hasn't been around and it has been weeks of me uncurling myself and crawling out of dark places to appease my worried mother. I trick him into taking me to the hospital and beg the doctor to refer me to a psychiatrist. The doctor is reassuring;

*"You don't look Schizotypal at all...and Asperger's is something you can just look at someone and say they have. You'll be fine. I'm referring you to a psychiatrist; she's a nice lady. You will like her."*

I always wanted someone to love me for my mind...but this psychiatrist is crazy! No...apparently I am crazy. I thought it was not possible to be more depressed. She arrived late. I was there, sitting in a room full of people, drawing my niece so that I wouldn't have to interact with them or smell their life stories and wonder after them as I usually did. The woman next to me is impressed by my charcoal drawing. She announces to everyone that I could draw everyone in this room!

You are not my family. I do not care for you. If you try and prod me into normalcy I will hiss at you!

I want to say this, but I smile.

The nurse asks me a few questions; I can't answer them.

*"Any history of mental disease in your family?"*

My family is mental

She smiles at this, as if her family is too.

My Aunt Hellen committed suicide. My sister is named after her.

That is all I know. I who asks people for their deepest pleasures have never asked my family for our deepest secrets...looks like my dad will be the one to answer her questions.

The psychiatrist apologizes for being late and stares at me as if she is looking through my soul. I know she isn't and I do not play along. There is no art in her office, no sign of books, no photographs, no whispers of humanity. I had practiced what I was going to tell her...I had traced my weirdness to its very roots and was going to lay them bare before her and say "How can we put this together without blunting my edges. I do not want to fit in a box" but sitting there with her looking through me, I just wanted a pat in the back and a send-off.

Actually I would like a short stay in a mental ward...It's very Sylvia Plath, I know, but it would give me some space from my family and their constant need to see me up and running again.

*"We don't do asylums anymore."*

She says when I ask casually.

So...the Canadian Psychologist thinks I may have Asperger's, I have always thought of myself as functionally schizotypal like Dali, she thinks I am schizophrenic, and my sister took it upon herself to find me another psychiatrist, one whom I could like and relate to, and this one thinks I am bipolar; fine! I am not mentally sound! I get it! How I am not mentally sound is subject to great intellectual debate apparently.

I thought my visit to the psychiatrist would be a relief... I only feel a solid dislike for her. She gave me a prescription and asked to see me in a week. This worried me because the person before me was being seen after three months. I stared at the pills for a long time... I even thought of taking them, a perfectly functioning individual could rise from five pill bottles. I would need five bottles of pills for the rest of my life just to keep my feet on the ground. Who needs feet!

*"You look worse."*

I shake my head.

What does she want, that I spring out of depression in a week? That I run through a meadow with my coconut bra and loin cloth singing praises to Ra and Hathor?

*"Did you take the medication?"*

No.

I want talk therapy...but not with her; so I don't say anything.

*"If you don't take the medication then we will have to inject you."*

She smiles.

I do not fear injections.

I don't have the energy to tell her that that's not a threat.

The nurse notices that I am a human being and not a brain that needs to fit into a DSM definition of some kind of psychosis or another. She speaks to me softly. She has a daughter (fictional or real) about my age and thinks I am just too young to be in this position. I can put my life together and get past this. It is important in life that you function...otherwise society will have no use for you; and society is dangerously utilitarian.

I look up schizophrenia. I only remember Halle Berry in a movie where she was a "crack whore" that had left her child in a dumpster during a schizophrenic episode; she was in court fighting for custody. I look like a crack whore who would leave her child in a dumpster. I watch *"Perception"* with my sister.... the main character has the same symptoms I have...he is schizophrenic, so maybe I am. My sister says I was special from the very start, that it is a gift not a burden; that my senses are seventeen times as alive and I should use their screams for something. Dr. Pierce in *Perception* seems to be dealing with his shit quite well. I research Schizophrenia, so does my mother, she thinks she does it secretly but computer history and the folder downloaded on her desktop with the title Schizophrenia sell her out.

My father thinks it's because I haven't been to church in a few years. He is also the only person who dislikes the psychiatrist more than I do. I think she asked him some uncomfortable questions. How dare she diagnose his precious future ICC judge with schizophrenia? He is always threatening to find me a new psychiatrist, and I am always hoping he does; as long as it's not my cousin. He always shouts at her during my visits at the psychiatrist.



Once I went with my mom, because my psychiatrist asked nicely. We sat in the waiting room when I recognized someone. I sat there for a while, staring at him as discretely as I could, until I was too excited to be quiet! My mind was roaring with possible meanings to this coincidence.

Mom!

Mom!

My mom leaned in

That's Billy Kahora!

*"Who?"*

Billy Kahora!

*"Billy Kahora?"*

My mom can't whisper and he looks up. I almost jump out of the window but my mom won't let it go

*"Who is Billy Kahora?"*

He's a writer mom.

Okay.

*You sat next to David Rudisha during an eight hour flight, looked at photos of him on a dias receiving a gold medal in a Kenya uniform and still had no idea who he was; but now you're sitting in a psychiatrist's waiting room excited about a writer no one else in here knows. Do you see the world you live in?*

She doesn't say this, of course; but I hear her think it.

I smile apologetically, wonder if I should walk up to him and ask if he'd like to see my writing.

Why would he want to see my writing? What good will it do me? I can't even write anymore; impulsive writing is a sign of schizophrenia!

*I met this girl at the psychiatrist's and she said she could write;* I picture him saying. He's not here to see my psychiatrist. He's seeing a dermatologist who shares the waiting room. I saw Billy Kahora today!

I have to go outside with my sister and two friends by my side; it's embarrassing. I am usually the strong one. We end up at *The Nest* for a chill movie night where the rest of my friends are.

*"What are you doing home?"*

I quit Law School. I'm also depressed and possibly schizophrenic.

Silas carries me off my feet and says

*"About goddamn time! What were you doing in Law School anyway?"*

Someone else says

*"Oh my god! You have to watch 'A Beautiful Mind!'"*

These are the problems with intelligent, creative people! You, Van Gogh, Jack Kerouac...y'all need to keep your shit together! Keep your shit together!!!!

These were my friends! I could be a raging lunatic of a post-coital murderer and they would be okay with that; not just okay, but supportive.

No one has explained why I am home. My mother told her friends that I was sick and they all prayed for me. My sister and I had a misunderstanding and I cried for an hour; she had to apologize, but I was so overwrought with the thought of losing the one family member who sometimes understood me that she was just left sitting on my bed riding out my sobs until I fell asleep.

My mom always comes home and asks *'How is she doing today?'* and they discuss me in silent voices...except my mom can't whisper and I have the hearing of a bat because of my reduced latent inhibition. What happens is the brain usually picks out what to block out and what to pay attention to, sieving which stimuli to reply to and which one to ignore. My brain has basically decided 'screw that' and lets in almost everything. I can look at a fly, hear it buzz, feel its rough skin without touching and see its proboscis pulsating even hear its eyes move; imagine how I feel being in a room full of people!

I have managed to guilt my father into paying for Art School. I watch him cry. This is the second time in his life that he has cried; both times I have watched him. The day I arrived home from London for the summer, my uncle died in a helicopter crash; it was in the news when I woke up from the excitement of home. My father was sitting at the dinner table with tears in his eyes.

I apologized, he said we had to go see Aunty Margaret, he and I, because my uncle had always taken a special interest in my education and we had to show respect.

This time he was seated on his bed, his hands covering his eyes as he cried.

*“Of all my children why you?”*

He felt guilty, confused, lost...he didn't understand what had happened. He feels as if he traded me in for his aspirations. If only I could feel the pain he felt! He hasn't even told my uncles; just one or two to ask for recommendations about psychiatrists that could heal me.

On an ordinary day I would heal instantly and be there for him, but today I feel an indignant rage.

I am the one who cannot trust my own brain! Me! And I have been here before and I have survived it, and I am trying to survive it this time with your help. You either offer it or watch me degenerate! Whichever you choose, do it in silence!

I leave him there crying. I would never do that to my father, yet there I was without remorse.

He pays for art school, after letting me know that the Dean of the Law School said I could join Nairobi if I wanted. Almost a year later, he gets me a psychiatrist I can stand. When I have to take the day off from school to see the psychiatrist I always say I am going to see the doctor; I have a kind of terminal illness and I have to go for a check-up every once in a while.

Once in a while I tell someone that I suffered from depression; I never mention the schizophrenia. I am still too attached to the Schizotypal personality disorder to believe the schizophrenia. I also still picture myself as a crack whore who leaves her baby in a dumpster during a schizophrenic episode. I am not free from it...at some point something will happen and I will be back on my bed, rowing my way through the turbulent carnivorous seas. It does not leave you...depression, Schizotypal personality disorder and schizophrenia... they stain your being, ever threatening to spread across your face and silence you forever.



# *This Is Kenya*

**Mugo Muna**

*"So all those people from Westgate should get therapy?" he asked.*

*"Why not?" I responded.*

*"Even if you managed to get therapy for all those people," he said, "what are you going to do after the next incident?"*

He had a point. After this incident, there would undoubtedly be others. Matatu madness. Insecurity. Natural disasters. These are all real threats that could bring distress and misery back into people's lives.

He explained that because of these constant occurrences, you would need to be in constant therapy to just keep on living. So instead of living such a life, Frank thinks it's better to come up with your own way of managing and just press onward. Or simply: just deal with it.

Admittedly, this solution sits poorly with me. But I guess I have my own coping mechanisms. Whenever I am in a big shopping mall and everyone is happily walking about, I'm still thinking about how poorly the security guards search people coming into the malls. I am thoroughly convinced that I will be caught in an attack at some point. Because of this certainty, I've decided that I am okay with losing a leg. Either leg. Just leave me with the ability to sit in front of a computer and churn out words. That's all that is needed. But I doubt the aggressors would be so kind and listen to my pleas. Nevertheless, I have come to terms with it.

I am underplaying my acceptance a little bit.

Not only is the leg loss okay, but I have also been mentally designing the prosthetic that I would have made for me. It would need to be something that mimics the function of the lost leg but the form would be radically different so that you wouldn't think that it was a real limb in the first place. Think chrome and jagged edges. But that's crazy! Right? Right! These shouldn't be the thoughts running through my head, but they are present.

A friend of mine recently returned to the United States after working in Kenya for a little over two years. Her friends said that she was acting strangely and that she should go and see a therapist. Upon visiting the doctor, she was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

She later made the claim that most of the people she knows who go back to the United States after living in Kenya also end up with PTSD. At first, this statement can seem a bit hyperbolic. Because it could be interpreted as saying that everyone in Kenya has PTSD, which is ridiculous.

Then I remembered that I've never seen as many dead bodies as I have in my time here in Kenya, and it is impossible to really know how those snapshots of suffering affect a person. Can you really be okay after seeing a recently deceased human being? It changes you. Maybe not immediately, maybe not intensely, but there is a break between your past and present self. And what about the second time, and the third time? What does this compounding of experiences do to a person? Maybe there is something to that post traumatic stress theory.

But just being aware that something is wrong is not the same as dealing with those sensations. My aunt once said, *"If it is your day, it is your day, but don't jump up looking for bullets."* On one hand, this is fairly sound advice about bullet evasion. On the other hand, it is a really fatalistic approach to dealing with your emotions. I hate this idea of giving up all my agency and just seeing where the chips land in the end. Is there a more proactive approach? Can these feelings of helplessness be combated instead of accepted? What options are available? How do you deal with it?

Despite all these questions, I find it impossible to talk to people about my mental state here in Kenya. Often after hearing a traumatic story, someone within the group will utter the phrase that grates against the fiber of my very being. A collection of words whose frequency is irksome, but persists nonetheless.

**This is Kenya.**

A statement that is supposed to summarily explain and codify the experiences that we intake every single day. It is an expression that is both meaningless and offensive. Just because our lived sensations do not equate to the ideal does not mean that we must blindly accept the present. Such a brief assertion serves as a catch-all to end all discussion about a topic. It is a phrase that shuts down any dialogue and engagement with the emotional core of the situation. And does its continual use speak of a fatigue of discussing these experiences? That it is easier to heap the blame elsewhere than to confront those troubles? Do the people using this saying truly believe that it is a satisfactory way to explain someone's experience? Whether or not people truly accept the ethos of the phrase, it serves as means of terminating, rather than furthering, any meaningful dialogue.

Beyond that single statement, it is difficult to talk to people about sensitive emotions because it can feel as if they are listening not to empathize or support, but simply to share that story with someone else. Waiting for all the juicy details so that a transcript of my words can be passed on. Of course this motivation doesn't describe everyone, but it taints the way conversations unfold. That lingering fear of being talked about. Of other people snickering in secret over your honest outpouring to a not so confiding friend. Because of this fear of being talked about, I modify what I say and tend to emphasize the positive things going on in my life and neglect to mention the more negative. Call it pride. Call it snobbishness. Call it whatever you want. But I am more likely to talk about a night out dancing than my continual sadness caused by my breakup. So I end up sounding cool but still mull over the same thoughts with no catharsis.

As my buddy George told me, *"You guy. You better kill that story. They could tell someone. Who will tell someone. Who will tell that girl you are interested in."* Ultimately, the fear of being talked about isn't just about being embarrassed, but also a fear of losing standing in the general community. With so much to lose, it is often easier to just keep those thoughts to yourself.

Which is crazy given the levels of community engagement in this country.

We have community support like I have never seen. My cousin's house burnt down, and the outpouring of support and love that his family received to have the house rebuilt is astounding. I mean, who needs 4 sofa sets? But that community support and love is not enough. Of course it is welcome. Of course it is comforting. But there is a limit to what you can share and how open you can be with a group of people. My cousin talks about the outpouring of support, but he doesn't talk about the fear he had when he was fighting the fire. He doesn't talk about the thoughts that cross his mind when there is a surge in electricity (the fire was caused by some electrical problem in the house). Maybe these things don't bother him. Maybe they do. But I doubt he will start talking about his fears of another fire right after receiving another sofa set for the house. And that's the problem. It's that willingness to be vulnerable. That willingness to show the flaws around your life that is lacking and, inevitably, is harmful to our own psyches.

Being open has its risks. Ridicule being the most fearful, at least for me. I don't want to reveal my innermost insecurities only to be laughed in my face after getting the courage to talk about them. Fortunately, I have a group of friends with whom I feel comfortable sharing my insecurities and doubts. But not everyone is that lucky to have a support network that they can truly depend upon, and what is our solution for them? Keep putting on airs? Keep on keeping on?

And not all people will cope in the exact same way.

I cope with my experiences by writing. Whether it is simply writing an email to a friend to detail the foolishness that I have just witnessed or typing out my own deeper, more troubling thoughts, writing is a catharsis that can't be provided by any other medium.

This does beget questions: How are you supposed to deal with trauma? How are you supposed to deal with those complex sets of emotions caused by some black swan event?

I think we have to be more open with one another. Yes, life in Kenya



is hard, but that doesn't make your emotions and experiences any less valid or real. We can't continue to stigmatize those who are struggling with their own mental challenges.

Imagine the relief just from hearing some else talk openly about the aftershocks they experienced from a traumatic experience. That feeling of knowing that you aren't the only person trying to figure out how to keep moving along every day. That you aren't the only one who gets pulled back into those moments and it feels like you can't escape it in the present. For the walls of perfection to be let down, even for a moment, and for imperfection and flaws to shine forth for the rest of the world to see and scrutinize.

*"What do you think they are going to do with the Westgate building," I asked recently.*

*"They'll probably just refurbish it and reopen the mall," my friend responded.*

I don't know if I like that thought. Just adding a fresh coat of paint to the veneer of our suffering. We can't keep rearranging the emotional furniture in our minds. There has to be a realization that mental health is as important, if not more important than our physical health. You wouldn't hesitate to go the doctor when you feel something is wrong with your body, but when you can't move on after a shocking event, why do you just hope that time will help you forget?

This is Kenya. This is how it is, but not how it should be. Let's talk about our fears and anxieties since silence isn't really working.

# 24 Hours of the Day

Anne Moraa

*This is true - if creatively so, if only emotively so, if only my truth. I can only write it now, years later. Yes, there will be numbers and data, and you need to know them, but this isn't about the statistic. This isn't about the fact. One of the hardest parts about depression is the inability to explain it to those who do not know.*

*This is for those who do not know.*

Midnight. I am watching some DVD and holding it in.

3:00 am. Time moved fast. I just kept hitting play and the next one and the next one. I love when time passes me by like this – it means another day has passed and I have not killed myself. Congratulations.

I fall asleep – I don't know when.

I don't dream when I am in deep sleep. I dream enough awake.

I wake up.

It is 11:40 a.m. My phone blinks too bright. I fall asleep.

It is 12:37 p.m. I contemplate opening the curtains. There are slivers of sharp sun. I know people out there are working. I have work. I can't do it. There is too much time in the day. I will myself to sleep.

It is 12:48 p.m. There are 13 missed calls and 5 messages. I won't open any of them. I made the mistake two days ago of picking a call from an unknown number. In my sleepy haze, I was tricked. The boss found me. I made up some excuse that neither of us believed, and it was the jolt I needed to get the job done. But that kind of lightning energy is shockingly brief, and it burns, I am telling you, it burns. I was singed from those days ago and too weak to carry on. I remember I used to work hard and was inspired and talented and striking.

Remember? What happened? Six months ago you were...rising. Now? There are 13 missed calls and 5 messages and the numbers collapse in on me like

boulders and I cower from the phone under the covers thinking that if I hide it will go away.

It is 1:03 pm. My stress has subsided. I am wholly indifferent. I think that may be worse.

It is 1:29 pm. I am starving. I should eat. There is food ready in the fridge. I have a fridge. I have food. Half the country lives on less than a dollar a day. There are people starving every day and I am certain, no more than an hour's drive away someone is starving to death. I am ashamed of myself. I remember that I am privileged. I remember that I went to good schools and have a loving, supportive family.

I have no reason to be sad.

I remember crying on graduation day, but only to myself because I was meant to be happy. I remember how I felt then, and now. I feel a kinship with the students who kill themselves post KCPE/KCSE, gazing into the endless future and knowing that every road leads to failure. I was never that brave. I had a good upbringing. I *should* be happy.

But I am still hungry. And my legs cannot move. I push the duvet off of me. I look at my crusty toe-nails and cannot remember when I last showered. I should shower. I should eat. All I have to do is stand up. Simple, stand up. Kill Bill plays in my head. She, the lead, willed her toes to move after years in a coma. Muscles atrophied and all, she willed them to move. I can move. I will move. I feel her pain. I went to the doctor a few weeks ago because I had odd burning pains in my legs, as if I had been running marathons all day. He said inactivity leads to such pains. He asked me if I exercise. I consider this daily movement, the sweat-pouring exertion of effort I must make in order to stand, intensive exercise. But I lied. I said I exercise moderately. I smiled. He prescribes B vitamins. My toes still haven't moved. My stomach rumbles. The effort to move my toes feels more than the effort it would take to starve to death. I close my eyes and lie to myself that I am asleep. My sleepless dreams are many. I am sitting in a cage and I have the key, and I have the lock, and I lock it myself. I lock it, and no one can pull me out, it's safer in the cage. There are 100 birds around me, flying high and wide and furious into the sky, and

I can't quite keep up with them. They are flying so fast and high and I don't know how they do it, I don't know how.

The exam is about to end, and everyone else is done and it's the last two minutes and I am furiously scribbling but my pen ran out of ink ten days ago. I am weeping by myself and it feels amazing. A baby grabs onto my leg with the grip of a hyena's jaw and doesn't let go. It's screaming "*Nataka maziwa mama, nipee, nipee!*" and I try and nurse it but my breasts are bone dry. I am powerful beyond measure but the power cripples me so I crawl. My sleepless dreams are ratty thoughts running in mazes, bumping into each other and, starving, ripping into each other and gorging themselves on my malnourished blood.

It is 5:00 p.m. I have tried on four outfits. I took a quick shower and hastily painted the scabby toe-nail. They can't tell in the dark. I need to look professional but casual, effortless but purposeful. I need to be put-together. My friends can tell I am off. They know it. I know they know it. They give me the courtesy of pretending not to notice, but carefully peel themselves away. They are having coffee without me sometimes, and I understand why; my conversation is stilted because my ratty dreams don't segue well into conversations on horrible bosses and beauty and men and living life actively. I think they are meeting even today – one was delightfully vague about the time. She said happy hour but I heard the others warm laugh in the background – not mean or exclusionary, simply warm, because I am not there to cool it down. I will meet them after and they will pretend it was a spontaneous meeting and I will pretend I was too busy to come over. We understand each other.

It is 6:21 p.m. This stretch of road curves down to a steep incline. Brambly bushes barely cover the dry, hard ground. The car leans towards the incline – it would be so easy after all, another tragic accident, no one to blame – but I steer it back. Not really because I am afraid to die (I have toyed with the idea, I have).

It is 7:38 p.m. Everyone is talking about work now, and school. There is a boss who is slightly too sexually aggressive and another who gave a weeks' worth of work and expected it to be complete in like 1 day? Can you imagine!

Of course it was finished, of course I did it but eih. It moves smooth back and forth between them. I used to be in the middle of that but now...

*"My boss is insane. As in that stress! Ngai! Kwani who does he think he is - at least Anne you are just hustling by yourself."*

*"Yeah its work though trying to get things off the ground. Sent a proposal out today."* [LIAR]

*"Mmm."*

Silence.

*"Yeah, well not sent, but you know, worked on. It takes so long, so much time. But [LIAR] I have been working a lot on my writing and poems and stuff [BIG FAT LIAR], editing them out and memorizing them and stuff. As in that inspiration is flowing [LIAR NO ONE EVEN BELIEVES YOU KNOW] and...yeah, between that and the erm...proposals... so much stuff [LIAR LIAR STUFF FOUR TIMES IN ONE RANT LIAR LIAR THEY CAN TELL LIAR LIAR]!"*

I am not altogether certain if I said those words out loud. Conversation blurs after this. I cling to the words "Proposal" and "Stuff" like a canoe and paddle in a seamless sea.

It is 10:37 p.m. I wish I could find an excuse to leave. But then they'd know I am faking it. It's not that it isn't fun, it is. It's not that I don't like them, I do; I love them. They are my friends and sisters and soul mates and they are amazing and wonderful. That's the problem; they are amazing and wonderful. They are living their moment. I am hovering above myself, judging harshly.

Midnight. I am dancing and tipsy. I am pretending to smile. I am not sure how much longer I can keep my lips stretched this way.

# *This Is Not A Farewell Note*

**Phyllis Muthoni**

Dying can be a lot of work,  
but in the end it resembles a single act of daring  
or wisdom. I know what they will say:  
I was so young; robbed of the best years;  
the future was going to be all mine...

The way the past has been?

I have studied how to do it. Not the methods –  
the options are fairly straightforward –  
but how to find the guts and psyche;  
how to knock on that door, wait for him to answer,  
and say, here I am, take me by the hand.

What does he look like? Come to think of it,  
is it a he or a she? I think it has to be a he.  
I never knew my mother,  
and I would like to go imagining she was kind and gentle.  
He, on the other hand, is likely to be red-lipped  
like my father when I brought home a poor report card;  
scorn dripping down the chin like saliva on a rabid dog;  
ready to tear into anything: the furniture, the son.

It's OK, I guess. Someone might finally be happy to see me.  
Will he jump up and down, carry me on his shoulders  
the way they do the country's best students, singing,

*Anaweza, Anaweza Bwana?*

Will he hoot with delight like an owl caught a mouse  
Or will it all be gentle?

Anything will be gentler than a life of why-don't-you:

...be like your sister

...become a doctor like him

...stop tinkering with my bike and the stereo

...just blooming try harder

...stop being a useless disappointing lump

Time has come to go.

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