

A Prelude to Insanity

Hollywood Boulevard, Hollywood, California, August 11th, 2006 – the complete chapter

I have always been strongly compelled to organize, categorize and understand every piece of information in my life. Now, as I felt my mind expanding infinitely in all directions, the flood of ideas through my brain was becoming almost impossible to handle. I was, for the moment, still able to control it, but I was close to being overmastered. The hardest thing was to figure out simple priorities against the raging background of my thoughts. And now the pressure was vastly increased by the screamingly high priority of not worrying my partner, Ben. He'd called me, out-of-the-blue, almost in tears because I was late for our meeting with our couples' counsellor, and I'd immediately set off to try to get across to West Hollywood.

At all costs, I thought, I had to protect him from worry. For weeks, I'd known that my increasingly confident and ambitious demeanor had made Ben anxious. I knew he thought that I was becoming slightly manic, so I'd got into the habit of concealing things from him: I didn't want his worry to restrain me from achieving my goals. Ben's last boyfriend had had episodes of intense mania as well, so this only increased my desire to hide from him all signs of any behaviour that he might wrongly interpret as manic.

For the moment, I could still wrestle my thoughts to a stand-still long enough to remind myself, every other minute, that it wasn't life-or-death. If I missed the meeting with our counsellor, Ben would be upset; very upset: but we'd get through it.

At the Renaissance Hotel on Highland, I tried to get a taxi, but the hotel staff ignored me. I became briefly and savagely furious with them until, once again, I managed to recall that my sense of urgency was self-imposed. But that thread of rational thought kept disappearing in the vastness; I couldn't hold onto it for more than a few seconds at a time. Each time it slipped my grasp, my focus would return to the urgency of protecting Ben at all costs.

I wasn't scared about myself, however, until I rounded the corner onto Hollywood Boulevard. And then I felt, just for a second, that it might be possible to drown in the deluge of my own thoughts.

I tried again to hail a cab. It was rush-hour; traffic barely moved, and all the cabs were full. I was, by now, almost panicking with the urgency of saving Ben. It had finally become impossible for me to have a rational perspective; I really was drowning.

I redoubled my pace, crossing through traffic to catch a cab in the other direction, anything. Once more I momentarily recalled the lack of real urgency, but only briefly, before crashing back, with increased violence, into a skewed sense that making the meeting with Ben and our couples' counsellor was life-or-death.

I steeled myself: 'Calm down, there's no rush.' A second later, I looked at the time, and started to run. The clash of priorities began to feel like a pile driver in my head; then a constant thunder. I ripped my expensive watch – a sexy, masculine watch with a wide leather strap that Ben had given me – off my wrist, and threw it, along with my cell-phone, into a parking lot, hoping that if I could no longer tell the time, the raging confusion would cease. But it only got worse.

Dimly through the clattering chaos, I momentarily heard a shining clear note: instead of worrying about Ben, I should take care of myself. This was my own crisis now, not Ben's: I was falling headlong into the void, and had to save myself. Moreover in saving myself, I'd save Ben too. If I lost my mind, Ben would shed far more than the few tears he'd cry at my missing our counselling appointment. It seems so obvious now; but that's a symptom of mania: that you can get so consumed by something that it makes you blind to all other priorities. In this case I was so driven to protect Ben that I was quite literally driving myself insane.

That gleaming note I'd felt moments earlier disappeared again in the gathering murk; I felt my sanity slipping away; I knew I needed to medicate myself immediately, either with drugs or alcohol. I pitched into a Mexican restaurant.

'I need a drink,' I grated out to the petite hostess, who looked at me worriedly, taking in the contrast between my wannabe-superstar appearance – six-foot-six, hair spiked with blond highlights, dressed in a tight-fitting, black open-necked Miu-Miu shirt – and the desperation presumably written on my features.

'You'll have to wait for a table.'

'You don't understand, this is an emergency,' I shouted.

She looked at me as if I were an alien, and then shrugged. I strode into the bar, grabbed a bottle of tequila, and walked out, ignoring the bartender's flailing arms and angry shouts.

I was on Sunset Boulevard by now, just east of La Brea. I drank about a fifth of the bottle: it tasted foul. Vodka is my drink, I thought randomly. My mind was still falling into chaos; the alcohol wasn't working.

I went into a 7-Eleven, where the cashier looked up at me, startled, seeing the open bottle of tequila in my hands, not exactly looking like a typical wino.

'Call 911!' I said, urgently.

The cashier barely even made eye-contact with me before switching back to his customer. I couldn't understand why nobody could see my pain. I was running into intense alienation wherever I turned.

I shouted at him, 'Call an ambulance, now!'

'Fuck off!' he told me.

I was amazed that he didn't seem the least bit scared of me. I slammed my fist onto the counter, and poured the bottle of tequila all over it.

'Now will you call the fucking police?' I needed help, any kind of help. I knew I needed to be restrained and medicated.

A young gay customer yelled at the cashier, 'Call 911!' The kid led me outside.

'Here, I'll call them,' he said, soothingly.

I tried to sit down, but I couldn't keep still. He couldn't get through to 911; he was on hold for ten agonizing minutes; I couldn't wait. I crossed the street through moving traffic, and entered the strip-mall on the corner, which contained a Starbucks, nail salons, and some jewellery stores. I thought the police would come eventually, and I was concerned now that they'd think me dangerous, that bullets might fly.

The tequila was finally slowing down my thoughts. Somehow, I suddenly instinctively knew the worst of the crisis was passed; I'd saved myself. But there were still the consequences of my actions to deal with, and I was still far from being myself. I heard sirens, so I went into one of the salons to sit peaceably, my hands clearly visible so the police could see I wasn't armed (although it's not clear why I thought there was the possibility of a shoot-out). I was completely exhausted and intolerably thirsty. The tall Asian transsexual who was doing somebody's nails, kept looking over at me, a half-smile alternating on her pretty face with curiosity. I prayed she wouldn't say anything to me.

The police never came, so eventually I went outside. I still wanted to go to the emergency room, but maybe now I could do it without police involvement, I thought. I

convinced a kindly Filipino security guard that I was having a medical crisis, and he lent me his cell-phone so that I could call 911.

He had, ironically, a blue-tooth headset, my first exposure to one despite my recent over-immersion in technology, and it took me a while to get it to work for me. But I couldn't get through to 911 - I was kept on hold for even longer than the kid across the street had been. I knew Ben would be worried. It seemed impossible, but it had only been thirty minutes since I had left the Renaissance after failing to get a taxi there.

I finally gave up on getting through to 911, but I didn't know who else to call. I didn't want Ben to know what had happened - at least not yet. But Ben's cell-phone number was the only number I knew by heart, and neither of my therapists had listed phone numbers, so finally I had no alternative but to call Ben. He was frantic. He'd been calling and calling, getting my voicemail. I told him my cell-phone was dead, and asked him not to ask me any questions; just come and pick me up.

At last I could let the tension breathe out of me. I thanked the security guard for the use of his phone and asked him if he could please find me some water. He looked at me dubiously, so I started to pull off my \$300 belt to offer in exchange for a bottle of water. He relented and got me a bottle of water, declining the belt.

When Ben picked me up, I had to figure out how to explain to him everything that had happened that day (because, you see, this headlong rush through Hollywood was only the climax of an astonishing day.) I knew it wasn't the right time to tell him anything about what had preceded his tearful call from our counsellor's office less than an hour earlier. Nonetheless, my mind was still racing, and there was the manic temptation to explain myself fully. I kept holding onto the fact that I couldn't possibly tell him everything without scaring him; I had to simplify things. I kept saying to myself 'breathe', as a mantra to remind myself, through the haze of explanations yearning to be spoken, not to be driven to make Ben understand everything. I wrote 'breathe' on a scrap of

paper as we drove home, because I didn't trust myself. And once I got home, I wrote it out again, on more scraps of paper, so I'd see it everywhere.

Later that night, as I got ready to take a shower, I looked at the scrap of paper on the sink with the word 'breathe' written on it. I suddenly had the image of Ben finding it, picking it up, and thinking it was another indication that I was not entirely in my right mind. We had a decorative bowl in the living-room full of pebbles of green glass bought from Pottery Barn. So after my shower, I grabbed a few green pebbles, and left them in inconspicuous places replacing the pieces of paper (they being so much less obvious than tiny bits of paper, of course.) Now I knew that every time I'd see one of those pebbles, it would remind me of 'breathe', and I'd stop trying to put into words what was going on in my racing mind.

But would I still remember 'breathe' in the morning? I surreptitiously stuffed a pebble underneath the sheet on my side of the bed, knowing that whenever I woke up, the physical discomfort would reconnect me to 'breathe'.

The next morning, things returned to a surprising degree of normality between us. We were both anxious about what had happened, but also eager to please each other. I felt sure that I'd never again let worry for Ben drive me to the edge of insanity. I also knew that it was going to take a lot of dialogue before he could fully understand what had happened the previous day. I had no idea there were even worse days to come; that the first, as yet undiagnosed, manic episode of my life hadn't wrought, by any means, all the damage it held in store.

