

Interlude I - 2006

Part 1 – Mexico City, Spring

Several months before the crisis.

Now that I'd been living with Ben in Hollywood for over a year, the honeymoon ease of my relationship with him had been eaten up by my own insecurities coupled with loneliness and insufficient occupation. I went through the spring fighting against depression so withering that by late March I was driven to trying the one anti-depressant – Lexapro – I hadn't yet tried, despite knowing it would dramatically inhibit my sex drive.

I was in Mexico City for training when I had my first intimation that something had changed. I was staying in the Four Seasons, just across the street from the Torre Major, the tallest building in Mexico, in which my company occupied an entire floor. I was the only non-Mexican in the class, except for the teacher, a large, cheerful man from our corporate headquarters. At the lunch-break on our first day, the students, all of whom worked for my company, invited the teacher and me out for lunch. I declined; I could see the naturally generous friendliness written on their features, and knew that sitting with them at a table where the only other non-Spanish speaker was the outgoing teacher, would make me feel even more wretched inside.

That night, rather than being challenged by my consciousness for the sin of hiding in my hotel room, I walked in uncomfortable humidity along the Paseo de la Reforma, which, I seemed to remember from a previous visit years earlier, was a lively street; however, no matter how far I walked, through plazas, past banks and musty hotels, I

didn't find any sign of cultural city life. The cobwebs in my brain seemed to stretch out into the streets, clinging onto the buildings, robbing everything of color. I trailed, with extreme tiredness and despondency, back to my hotel, ending up sitting in my room after all, feeling acutely unhappy, the two more days ahead, including one extra day I'd booked for downtime, seeming to stretch into a haze of misery.

By noon-time Friday afternoon, I was free of class, and had the rest of the day and much of Saturday to myself, a moment I'd been dreading since my depressive attack the previous evening. I was once more tempted, as I had been the first night, to stay in my room and read, but I knew my pride would berate such craven behavior.

Guide book in hand, I walked to Chapultepec, the huge park which begins just at the edge of the business district, and started my self-imposed tourist-time in the world-renowned National Museum of Anthropology. As a distraction from my own mind; or perhaps in order to look less like the pathetically lonely individual I felt like, I was drawn into photographing both the striking building, as well as its exhibits as artistically as I could, and found a natural lift to my spirits by switching my focus from the internal to the external.

In the evening, I had dinner with a very charismatic friend of mine, Guillermo, whom I hadn't seen in over a decade. He is something of a free spirit, and, although he still earns his keep as a professor of city planning, his heart is in his new-found hobby of kilning ceramics. He urged me to not hold back from pursuing my own currently frustrated artistic dreams (at that time I was dabbling in interior design and screenwriting). It's ironic that this meeting could be said to mark the beginning of a huge

manic episode spurred in part by a sudden belief that nothing was beyond my growing reach.

That night, I had a couple of drinks in my room before walking to Mexico city's most chic gay club, which just happened to be right across the street from my hotel, where I quickly fell in with Javier, a rather heavy Mexican guy, who worked in San Diego, Amalie, a cute, vivacious – but oh so young – Mexican girl and – my main pursuit – Jorge, her best friend, a gorgeous bisexual male dancer. I danced with surprising abandon with the three of them, flirting rather pointlessly with Jorge, and being cruised equally pointlessly by Javier until 4 a.m., despite knowing that I'd be checking out of my hotel five hours later for a personal guided tour of Teotihuacán, the huge pyramid complex outside Mexico City,. All in all, I was beginning to feel I had successfully erased the bitter taste of my momentary attack of depressive helplessness the night before.

Although the pyramid tour that day, under a relentless sun, lasted five hours, I exhausted my enjoyable, heterosexual companion, Joseph, a charming, intellectual high-school teacher trying to make extra cash by acting on the weekends as a tour guide. I wondered if the Lexapro was kicking in already.

Back home in Los Angeles, I quickly returned to a state of flatness, which, my psychiatrist told me, was the normal for a Lexapro initiate. Although I was already seeing the effects of the drug on my sex life, robbing me of one area in my life that had always been relatively unvariant in its strength and vigor, I determined to stick out the month-long build-up my psychiatrist predicted, so that I could know for sure I'd done everything

possible to defeat the depression. I tried not to think about what my options would be if Lexapro didn't work.

During the next month, giving me some hope, I had a couple more brief episodes of extremely high energy and creativity. But then I was sent to Philadelphia to meet with the rest of my project team at a time when my spirits happened to be very low. I'd never met them before in person, and, observing their "we're all chums together" cheer, I encountered the familiar feeling of being an outsider. My stomach was roiling as I sat in my seat, staring panic in the face as my time came to present to a group that included my boss, and the director of our business group. Suddenly I was a child in school again, shivering with fear that I was going to have to stand up in front of the class. What if my depression caused my nerve to fail in front of them? What if I froze? I'd never had such a confrontation between my depression and my job before.

But as others presented, I realized I was much more on top of my material than anybody else. My presentation went very well, and, later in the week, I was the only one who had an actual project schedule put together rather than an assemblage of notes and guesses. I wondered how I could ever have, in the distortion of perspective that is a hallmark of depression, worried myself into believing that I was anything other than completely competent in my job: why the panic? .

Over the next few weeks, I noticed not only that my depression was much less severe, but also something complete new in my interactions with our friends, and my work mates: the unselfconscious ease with which I talked to our friends on the dance-floor was leaching into my daily life. For the first time in my life, it felt as if I never had to be a self-conscious observer of my own conversations. I felt that the effects of the

Lexapro, my growing acceptance of my body, an intellectual lesson learned in therapy that I was a likeable person, and this new ease of interaction with our large circle of friends, were converging on a more solid sense of self. The internals and the externals were getting integrated.

It's significant that the very last entry in the private journal on depression I'd been keeping since moving down to Los Angeles was made around this time.

The day after a mammoth weekend of partying. I realized on a very deep level that people really like me, and also that I've grown to really like myself. I had amazing, intimate conversations with Mike, Kean, Randy and James separately, and I felt I was able to offer them genuine care and wisdom.

I had an enormous amount of fun with so many people, and, although this would sound unbearably conceited to say anywhere but here, I think I'm seen as an unusually magnetic, bright, sexy, sweet guy.

For the first time in my life, I'm truly popular and valued by a large circle of people whom I like and esteem, and I feel privileged as all hell. I wonder if this is a building block to finally start dissolving my deep seated self impression of unworthiness.

At the beginning of July, Ben and I took our close friend Dean with us to London, where we stayed in my brother's flat on Harley Street. My brother, Neil, and his boyfriend, Simon, were away, so we had the place to ourselves. We went out clubbing several times, and bonded even more closely with Dean. I competed, with Dean, who's only a couple of inches shorter than me, for the attention of cute guys. As a joke, if

anybody fastened on Dean instead of me, I'd step over and loudly ask Dean where his (nonexistent) boyfriend was, or the person Dean was dancing with that he – Dean – had recently given me crabs. I'd never felt so young and gay (in the old-fashioned sense).

Ben and I took the train mid-week to visit my home town, South Shields, Manchester (where Ben had been asked to give a talk at the university) and Edinburgh. In South Shields, I showed Ben the house in which I'd grown up. I didn't forget to show him, of course, the life-size model of the world's first self-righting lifeboat, South Shields' one claim to fame. The weather was beautiful everywhere except in South Shields, where, in mid July, it was so cold that Ben had to buy a thick sweat-shirt.

On the night of our arrival in Manchester, the Pakistani taxi-driver barely spoke a word of English, and had no idea where the hotel was. It was clear, though, as we drove, that it was in the middle of nowhere. When we arrived at the hotel, it turned out that there was only one room, with a single bed (with literally room only for one person). My simmering anger blew up. It was the only part of the trip he'd organized, and the only part that had been screwed up. Not only that, but he obviously hadn't even told the professor who had arranged his accommodations that he was traveling with me. It was unusual for me to have such an explosive temper. By the time I departed, in a taxi, to find a hotel room in downtown Manchester, Ben was in tears. I remembered my dad's advice, given to me the first time he'd met Ben. He and my mother had made a pact to never go to bed angry with each other. So I overlooked my hurt and anger; let them drain away, exchanged a few soothing text messages with him, and we went to bed that night in separate hotels, our amity restored.

After our return from England, my mood inched upwards consistently, until I went one whole week with no depression at all; something I'd not experienced in a long while. I was working very long hours, at high stress but with great efficacy. What was most remarkable was that I could switch off the work stress almost instantly, and enjoy myself as though it had been nothing. And I almost never felt tired any more.