

Interlude I - Part 3 – The First Crisis: Dallas; Early August

Two Days after the Zoo Party in San Diego.

It might be difficult for readers to understand how it felt to so abruptly feel you were about to become the man you always wanted to be; in my case, perhaps the man I felt I had been destined to be had my life path not been completely diverted by whatever it was that had caused such a change in me prior to joining secondary school. I saw the specter of depression fleeing for the distant horizon, and, flush with self-confidence, I began to develop the dangerous idea that I could turn my hand to anything and succeed. Of course I wasn't to know, and wouldn't discover for weeks, that it was a growing mania – a key symptom of which is grandiosity – that was governing my behavior.

If you begin to suspect that you don't know who you really are, because the real you has been suppressed for most of your life, it's exciting to gradually realize that the real you is somebody intoxicatingly dynamic. Vistas of possibilities were instantly opening; things that I thought I'd never have the sense-of-self to accomplish seemed easily within my grasp. It was around now that I first started to dream up the idea of opening a gay super-club despite having no money, not to mention prior experience in business or entertainment.

For the moment, however, I had to content myself with slumming as a senior consultant for a large software company. I was now on one of those projects which is deathly important to your customer, but a little bit embarrassing to your ego: helping an insurance company, based in Dallas, push out unwanted direct-mail. I was “stream-lead

for data-quality”, and reported to Devon, our tech-lead, an obese (but then almost without exception consultants are overweight), bespectacled black guy around my age.

As we approached the build stage of the project, I started to discover that the bits and pieces of shrink-wrap software that had been cobbled together and presented to our customer as a “solution”, did not actually want to talk to one another. But I wasn’t in the mood to believe that there was something I couldn’t do, so I worked sixteen-hour days, mustering every ounce of ingenuity I could to bring these pieces together.

In the final week before I was supposed to fly to Dallas to participate in Final Integration Testing (this was the week before going to San Diego Gay Pride for the weekend), although I was becoming increasingly certain that we were not going to be ready in time, I was also working with absolute confidence, born of mania, in my own abilities to both deal with the mounting pressure, and the increasingly overwhelming work-load and complexity.

Towards the end of the week, I did, in fact, get the whole ill-conceived bag of tricks working. The only problem was that it had taken me five days to run it from end-to-end, and it required lots of user-intervention. I knew that it was pointless going onsite the next week to somehow hope that everything would work smoothly; we had to tell our customer what was going on. But Devon, although he didn’t say so, was clearly too scared to admit to the customer what was, in any case, going to become blindingly obvious to them once we got there: that we weren’t ready. I tore into Devon in a group conference-call, and then took the initiative to tell the people I was working with on the customer’s team that our software wasn’t currently well-integrated.

There was alarm and indignation of course, but reality hit home in several heads, and I was given every resource I needed from both sides to try to resolve the problems. I almost wrung myself dry doing so, but by the end of the week, I had to admit that I was at an impasse. We had, though, made enough progress to conceivably get things working the following week in Dallas, even if it meant junking the original reason for the trip – final integration testing.

During that last week, I'd had a session with my therapist, and had asked him why nobody else stuck their necks out like I'd done. And he said that most people in life elect to go with the flow, but that in his opinion, I was a born leader. That statement of his was to gradually sink in and have a powerful (and perhaps unfortunate) effect in the next few weeks.

On Saturday morning, Ben and I flew to San Diego for the gay pride event during which I kept telling Ben, to his consternation that I was going to be a superstar. Then, feeling dangerously like a combination of Captain Kirk and Brad Pitt, I flew straight to Dallas on Monday afternoon, and turned up at the customer's site on Tuesday morning wearing a short-sleeved, G-Star shirt which I'd had tailored to tightly fit my torso and biceps: probably – no definitely – business-inappropriate.

Unlike the superstar I was hoping to be, I've never been good in the spotlight. In fact, my head tends to shake when I start speaking in public, even if it's just to introduce myself in a small class of peers. But now I walked into a star-chamber – a meeting, where I was asked to sit in a chair in the middle of three long tables arranged in a “U” shape to be grilled about my incendiary statements of the week before. And I was preternaturally

calm; sure that I was in the right; not in the least bit worried about others' perceptions of my abilities and competence.

All of the customer's people were strangers to me, although I tried to match voices to the disembodied ones I'd heard in phone-conferences. But one guy in particular, a lean, white-haired guy, who was obviously both in a position of authority and bad-tempered, was completely new to me. I learned later that the project was in such bad straits that they'd called him, a former high-level executive, out of retirement to try to rescue it. And not only was he apparently apoplectic, he was also out to blame the messenger – that is, me – about the incompatibility problems in our software. I could care less, since I knew I wasn't to blame; our tech-lead Devon was the real culprit: he'd known about the problems and had ludicrously ducked his head in the sand, hoping nobody would notice. He reminded me of a creature from the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, that was so mind-bogglingly stupid it thought that if it couldn't see you, you couldn't see it.

I'd taken on more workload than any reasonable person should, and had prided myself on my ability to not only cope with the technical complexities, but also the innumerable ancillary tasks thrown at me, at the last minute, under conditions of extreme stress. But I reached my breaking point the next afternoon. We'd all learned that the executive and his team had become openly derisive of Devon, who then decided to take it out on me, criticizing me for my openness with the customer about our technical problems. Devon was now in our "war room", flagellating me for what he saw as my betrayal. I ripped into him, telling him that the stress, and particularly his intransigence was making my work impossible, and he needed to back off. I was in a white hot rage.

“Are you a big enough man,” I asked him, “to say that most of my actions, even if you didn't agreed with them at the time, have gotten us moving forward much more quickly?”

“I don't agree,” he said blankly, after a moment.

“You're a very small man,” I told him.

Without even really thinking about it – I knew I had no choice since I really thought I was on the verge of either punching him in the face, or having a heart-attack – I started to pack up my laptop.

Everybody in the room looked at me wordlessly, open-mouthed, unable to believe what I was doing. It was unheard of for somebody to walk off a customer site visit. But I was intensely worried about myself. I felt I was right on the edge of a spectacular explosion. My head was shaking with rage, and my heart felt like it was scarcely contained in my chest.

Devon persuaded me to stay long enough for an emergency conference call with our management, who, it seemed, took my side of the story and agreed that it made sense for me to take the rest of the day off. I felt very strange as I left the building and walked to my car, not really knowing what I'd done.

At the time, I didn't think anybody could have coped with half of what I'd put up with this week without either going crazy or resigning. (Of course, little though I knew it, I was actually going “crazy”. The first major episode of mania is frequently triggered by stress. It can also be triggered by anti-depressants, which was certainly a contributing cause in my case, given the Lexapro I'd started taking in April.)

Throughout my time in Dallas, it seemed that everything conspired to add to my stress level. I'd always been poor with directions, so I'd rented a navigation system in my rental car. I made the same trip two or three times that week; from my hotel to the gay neighborhood. And each time, I got terribly lost. A major road along the most obvious route was closed, and as soon as I left the route laid out by the navigation system, the system would get hopelessly confused. Every time I made that trip, I ended up enraged. I'd never known myself to have such anger.

And nothing infuriated me more than another recurring feature of that week in Dallas: that people seemed to find me very difficult to understand. I'd have to repeat myself several times to be understood. As usual, I'd returned from my recent trip to England with a touch of my North-Eastern "Geordie" accent. But this time, unlike after other trips home, the restored accent had not faded after a week or so, but seemed, if anything, even stronger. I'd read about "foreign accent syndrome" that summer when we were in London. A white woman had woken up one morning with a strong Jamaican accent. I wondered if a similar thing had happened to me. To make matters worse, both Ben and David, my therapist – who I'd talked to on the phone, were worried that I was becoming manic, so I was especially on the watch out for people thinking I was nuts. When people didn't understand me because of my accent, I'd mistake it for their thinking I was saying something crazy, which would just serve to elevate my frustration even more.

One of my best traits was getting me into trouble. Part of the reason that I'm good at my job as a software-developer is that when I see a problem I want to fix it. And I can't help but extend my problem-solving tendencies to the world around me; however small.

Like, for instance, the toilet paper in the men's room of my then office in Century City, Los Angeles. It had insufficient tensile strength when the roll was new: you tried to pull some toilet paper and all you got was one sheet. Every time it happened to me I'd think how many other people it must inconvenience. All those petty little frustrations could be avoided if somebody told the building manager that he was either using the wrong toilet paper for that particular holder, or that they ought to contact the manufacturer of the toilet-paper holder and tell them their design was flawed. Of course I never told them, because I knew they'd give me a funny little stare. Not everybody sees the world as I do.

This trait meant that while I was in Dallas, I could no longer accept people who, in my view, didn't take sensible steps, in areas of their responsibility, to make life easier for others. On the evening of the day I walked off the job, I tried to go to the beautiful gym at one end of the gay village. I had to call the manager several times in order to just get to the lobby of the gym (in my first call, for instance, he hadn't told me that it was impossible to see the gym from the street), and, when I finally arrived, I offered him, very charmingly, a suggestion for how to make directions easier for first-time visitors. But he became very defensive. Soon, by the time we made it into the actual gym, it had grown into a shouting match. I was blazingly mad and I left, shouting after him, "Go fuck yourself you pathetic cunt," while other gym members watched unbelievably. Now looking back at myself – at the man who behaved that way, it's one of the multitude of actions I took during that period that I'd be deeply ashamed of did I not now understand that they were the products of an undiagnosed mental illness.

I did recognize that my temper was becoming dangerously hair-triggered, but I still believed that it was because of work stress. I also believed that I'd been in the right at

the gym. I didn't know it at the time, but this intense focus on seeing my rights validated was going to be the single character trait that would get me into serious trouble in the coming weeks.

On the night I'd had the blow-up at the gay gym, and after an almost epic story of trying to find both a Golds gym that was still open as well as a place to buy a bottle of wine to get me to sleep later on that night (I swear that I could fill four pages just expanding upon this phrase of the sentence, so complex had every seemingly simple act become), I finally ended up working out in my hotel's gym. Despite working long, extremely stressful hours all week, and going to the gym most nights, I'd also begun mulling the idea of writing a novel. Now that I was fully recovered from depression, I felt like I was really coming into my own as a person, and that person was somebody with almost unlimited potential. I'd thought of a way to construct what I thought was a gripping story around this idea. I didn't want it to be a standard memoir of how somebody recovered from a lifetime of chronic fatigue and depression to become a fully realized individual, nor did I want it to be a self-help book.

As I worked out, ideas began to flood my brain. Uncaring, I took my shirt off in the gym. I stared at myself in the mirror, my eyes blazing with excitement, and, in between sets, sent myself text messages on my cell phone with whole sentences from the opening chapter of the book I was dreaming up. Reading them now, they sound helplessly vainglorious.

This is not an ordinary story. For one thing, it's not about me. For another, my subject asked me not to reveal my identity, mainly, I think, because he hasn't told the story to anyone else. So please forget the usual conventions of irony, creative story telling or other fashionable notions

of narrative. You will not find out much about me, except in the conclusion, where I may indulge you with a clue or two. About me, that is.

Everything that follows is true, yet shaded to protect the innocent. It's a story that I've put together through numerous meetings with ... what name shall I give him? For now, let's just call him K, as a tribute to one of my own literary heroes, in Kafka's "The Trial".

His is a story about transformation. One thinks of Kafka again: his novella "The Metamorphosis"; yet in this case the protagonist becomes not a huge bug, but something much different...

That night, I drove back to the gay neighborhood to explore it further. There wasn't much going on, but I did get a nice sense of it. In the few interactions I had with people, I began to form a strong impression that, out of nowhere, I now had the power to charm anybody, knowing the precise words, intonation and body language to win them over. As I'd discovered in San Diego, I could speak to people from the position of not caring whether or not they responded; about twenty-five years too late, I'd discovered that I didn't need people to like me in order for me to feel good about myself. But I didn't need to worry about that, since everybody seemed drawn to me. They didn't know my history, nor that my limitless self-confidence was brand new.

I got back to my hotel around one, and wrote down more ideas for my novel. They were bubbling up almost too fast for me to write down, and I didn't have much to write on. I quickly used up the hotel notepads, the brochure that listed the hotel amenities, and even the dust-cover of one of the books about the Iraq war, "Fiasco", I was reading. It took three Xanax and half a bottle of wine to get me to sleep eventually.

My colleagues and I were supposed to spend the next day at our own office in Dallas. I was shocked, when I arrived, to find out that Devon hadn't been replaced.

Nonetheless, faced with his inevitable presence in the room, I played the good soldier, and worked with him professionally the rest of the day.

I hadn't even told Bill, a sympathetic friend of mine on the project team, about my other huge source of anxiety all week: figuring out when and what to tell Ben about the pressure-cooker I was in. Because of my behavior in San Diego, and, more importantly, because Ben's former boyfriend had been manic, I was aware that any extreme acts on my part would probably trigger Ben's worries. All week long I'd been caught between my need to share my burden with Ben, and my fear of scaring him, and this bind just made everything all the more stressful.

That night, once again, despite staying up very late clearing up a backlog of email and getting some work done, I couldn't sleep because of the writing. Whole sentences would form in my mind, begging to be written down.

I've had no fatigue nor depression nor fear of almost any kind in weeks. Is that just feeling high energy, or is it a sign of true change and a fulfillment of my emotional, professional and social potential?

I've been incredibly successful in bringing people to my point of view. Almost the whole team is on my side, and I've been told I'm a genius. Is that the case, or do I just talk a lot? I can juggle an almost infinite number of balls at the same time, and not get angry, stressed or hot under the collar unless pushed too far.

I can charm anybody, and mold their actions. Is that megalomania, or is it just high emotional intelligence? I can sound incredibly boastful and conceited. Or is that just supreme self-confidence, an awareness of my talents, and a desire to be understood? My mind is always running a million miles an hour. Is that organic insanity? Or is it just an abnormally fertile mind?

I'm in a war zone with no intermission. I feel normal limits don't apply to me and that I could quite literally do anything I put my mind to. I can communicate quickly, cogently, and with great facility, exactly to the point. Or do I just like the sound of my own voice?

I can cope with all and every social situation without fear. I can make new friends easily, and can flirt with the self confidence and bravado of a gigolo. Moreover, I can do all this, simultaneously, after little sleep, and along with stress that should be disabling.

Every few minutes while I'm writing these very lines, I'll stop writing and say, "I should really try to get some sleep." I'll take another huge swig of wine, conscious that it's 2.30 or so, and that I have to do some work in the morning before checking out of my hotel and flying home. Nonetheless, the very next second, I pick up my pen again, before the spilled wine even dries on my cheeks, and my writing becomes increasingly sleepy and feverish as the Xanax, Ambien and wine hit home.

Miraculously, I close my eyes. Will I ever shut up? But this is priceless, even if insane. Finally, I brush my teeth, recognizing suddenly that I haven't done so in three days. It's just my bad luck that I'm reading "Parallel Worlds" by Michio Kaku, a truly insane summing up of the most recent cosmological theories. If my own ideas aren't enough to keep my mind spinning, Kaku's imaginative multiverses wind me up.

I'm still writing, fading into oblivion. When, oh when, will the final word of the night arrive?

It's not so late. I can have a good night's sleep. Nothing seems of consequence: brushing my teeth, getting addicted to alcohol, Xanax, Ambien, dying, going to war; nothing, that is, except losing Ben, being dishonorable or vile, or losing my mind. I no longer need validation, least of all an open relationship. Nothing makes me tired. I am seemingly Superman, or am I completely off my rocker?

I've been aware all week that I've certainly been talking an awful lot. Everybody I met – and I mean everybody – looks at me with a mixture of respect, curiosity and ... wariness. But surely if I was insane, everyone would give me a wide berth. Nobody did. Is the fact I'm even having these types of thoughts an indication of genius, or of insanity? In fact, right now, I feel destined for huge things; I feel I can change people's lives permanently. Give back to everybody after forty years of neediness. But will they think I'm, crazy, self-serving, arrogant, and egotistical? I have no use for these vices, but as I write I'm clueless whether this is insanity talking or something else.

... It's the next morning. Is my brilliance still here? Were the scribbles of last night those of a maniac? Reading them now, I find I'm unable to decide. It doesn't matter any more if it makes sense. Because I realize I've red-shifted once more, overnight.

Unbelievably, after a week where I thought I'd already endured the worst crisis of my career, Friday was the worst day of all. I worked from my hotel, and was supposed to check out at noon to go to the airport. I got up at nine, and waded once more into the thick of things.

I hadn't showered since Tuesday, because I'd felt the choice was either sleep without showering, or have a heart attack and a nervous break-down. Or resign of course. My room was a complete mess – work, gym and play clothes left where I'd dropped them each night before crawling into bed. And I had a noon checkout; yet I couldn't seem to gain control over the flurry of emails, cell-phone calls, and insane requests from Devon. He'd begun to use a tone of, "Do it because I say so," with me, as if we were in the army, instead of helping a company push out direct-marketing to people who probably didn't want it in the first place. There was nothing that needed to happen this morning that my team-member George, sitting in his office in Chicago, couldn't take care of. I needed to shower, pack and check-out by noon, and it was already 12:15. I told Devon all this, pointing out that if George ran into trouble he could call my cell-phone.

I was getting increasingly angry at Devon's lack of judgment. I'd come to the conclusion that he'd come to resent what he probably saw as my contrariness (in other words that I was making him appear incompetent), and that now he was trying to use his authority as tech-lead to push me into doing something rash, which he could then use to get me into trouble. There didn't seem to be any other plausible explanation for his behavior.

But even up until this point, I was holding myself in check. I'd already called for a late check-out, but still I couldn't get off my laptop. It was now 1 p.m. I got an email from Devon asking me to load a license file up to the server. It was a trivially simple task which George was more than capable of doing. But even now, long past the time at which I should've just started saying no, I still didn't give up on rational persuasion. I emailed Devon that George could do the work and that I'd long since run out of time to check out

of my hotel. In my mind, I was thinking that his was an act of breathtaking insensitivity, foolishness, and lack of care for his team - shouldn't one of the hallmarks of a good manager be that he cares about his fellow workers? I'd already emailed Bill and George about what was going on this morning, and had told them that if I was pushed any further by Devon I'd threaten to resign. So I tried one last email to try to get Devon to see that his judgment was defective.

Devon, I've been perfectly reasonable. Nobody else would have put up with half of what you've put me through. If you push me one step further, I will resign. I have zero respect for you. If you forward this to Dave or anybody else I will also resign. Then you'd be stuck, the project would likely fail without me making up for your mistakes, and you'd be in deep doodoo. So think on this before you push me any further. I've told Bill and George too I'll resign, but nobody else, and I'm too much of a gentleman to tell our boss what I think of you.

I'd made an endless effort to make Devon see sense; but I now believed Devon was no longer in his right mind. For all I knew, Devon was a kind, family man; but he was a wholly inept leader. I was – to use a term from my native North-East “Geordie” – gob-smacked by Devon's response: "Just do it."

I was shaking with rage and stress. I didn't know what to do. In retrospect, of course, I can see that I'd bought a lot of this on myself. My growing mania was magnifying already strong beliefs: that I felt I could solve every problem, and juggle a large number of complicated tasks at the same time; and that I had the responsibility to take ownership in a leadership vacuum. I was effectively going crazy, trying to do the impossible, like a computer in an archetypal episode of Star Trek, pushed to self-implode by relentless logic chopping from Captain Kirk; I should've stopped much earlier.

By now, I'd already talked to David, my therapist, as well as my psychiatrist. Finally, in distress, and unable to call Ben for fear of making him worry about my potentially falling into mania, I called my best friend Dean back in Los Angeles, and he said the one thing that made sense.

In calm, kind words of care, he said, "Keith, I was once in a situation like this. I was lucky enough to talk to a friend. He told me to just switch everything off, and walk away."

Almost crying, I thought it through, grasping at the potential of escaping what seemed like an impossible position so easily.

"You can't win right now," Dean said, "And if you go any further you're going to do something very rash you'll regret. Has anybody else given you that advice?"

I let my breath out. "No," I told him.

Those sage words of advice from Dean probably saved my career. Dean was able to see what was blindingly obvious: nobody should put up with this, and I didn't have to. I followed his advice, not responding to Devon's email. I briefly emailed George asking him to load the license file, and let Devon know; told Bill and George I was signing off, then shut off my laptop and cell-phone. It was all so blindingly clear that I could have done this so much earlier, and hurt myself so much less.

Because my flight wasn't until late afternoon, I had time to go back to the gay village again and relax. It was one hundred degrees, but I just felt so relaxed that not even the heat bothered me. I bought a gift for Ben, and bought myself a beautiful, leather-bound writing book, and started writing in it over a late lunch at a gorgeous, expensive hotel at the end of the gay village.

Once I arrived at the airport, there was more “mind-confusion” (as I would come to learn, this is one of my symptoms of a manic state) whereby I ended up taking the wrong bus from the car-rental station. I had to return in a mad-dash, and take a different bus, and this made me late for my flight. But the people at the Admirals Club went out of their way to be helpful (once again I found that I could talk to people with the ease I’d sought all my life) and accommodated me in first-class on the next flight out. Moreover, the club even had a spa-like private bathroom with a shower, where I could change out of the clothes I’d been sweating in during all of my rushing around. I could finally completely relax and let everything drain away.

I spent my remaining time at the airport trying to decide what to tell Ben. Because Devon would be able to portray the morning as if I’d once again walked off the job, I really didn’t know whether I would have a job or not on Monday. Devon could, for example, forward my emailed threat of resignation to my boss. I was foolish to put such things in writing. I decided, finally, come what may, I’d just pretend to work at home next week until the dust cleared, and Ben wouldn’t need to know anything.

The borderline between a hyper-charged, magnetic, accomplished individual, and mania seemed broad. This week I’d become aware of strengths and abilities I’d never known I’d had. But on which side of the borderline was I? I’d always been high-functioning, impatient, multitasking, and good at solving problems. But everything this week had been electrically intensified; so was my behavior just the final inheritance of my birthright, made possible by the dissipation of depression, as I’d thought earlier in the week? Or had I entered the surging river of mania? I’d stood up, at great cost to myself,

for what I'd believed was right. But had I lost my ability to weigh the search for justice against common-sense?

On the flight home, I wrote on the first page of the leather book I'd bought in the gay village: "The Day", thinking that for years to come I'd know what that day was: the worst, the most intense day of my life. I had no inkling that much worse, much more dangerous days were in the immediate future.
