There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over. (Hunter S. Thompson)

A week ago I woke up in a hospital bed with my wrists swollen and bruised from the handcuffs the police had used when bringing me in the night before. When I went to the bathroom to wash my face I noticed that I had blood under the fingernails of my right hand. My head was still weak from the overdose of anti-psychotics I had taken; not a suicide attempt, just ‘bloody-minded’ as my husband had commented to the police. As I washed my hands and face I tried not to recall the expression on my daughters’ faces when I had stood up, double-handedly pointing my invisible energy gun at their dad, shouting in no uncertain terms: ‘HANDS UP, IT’S THE TRUTH POLICE!’

I did my best to flush away the dried blood and the repeating flashback to the fight with the two police officers in my kitchen. Hence the handcuffs. And the blood. But hospital bathrooms don't tend to have nailbrushes, so I had to leave some of it under my right thumbnail. I didn’t know whose blood it was; only it didn’t seem to be mine, as I had no cuts.
What were those cuffs? I rubbed my wrists, which were puffy and pale, with the first signs of contusion around the edges of the swelling. I hadn't seen the cuffs as they were fastened behind my back. I didn’t know that handcuffs were designed to hurt so much. But why would I know that? I have spent most of my adult life working as an academic; specializing in the literary works of Jane Austen and living quietly in the West Country. Mother and wife. No criminal record. Respectable citizen. Until I developed schizophrenia.

It is so embarrassing to be thrown in the back of a police van in full view of all the neighbors, but that was as far as my thoughts went on that first morning in hospital. I was very woozy from the overdose. I looked at myself in the mirror trying not to flinch. At least it isn’t a psychiatric ward this time, or a prison cell, was my last coherent thought before crashing back into the stiff, cold hospital bed under a thin sheet. Sleep is the only remedy at times like this.

This episode of psychosis was shockingly rapid. Within a week I went from being mummy, pottering around the house and garden, enjoying a summer break from a new and busy year's training as a nurse, to what tends to be called 'florid' psychosis. I thought after my first episode, which came on gradually over the course of several years and took another 18 months to blow itself out, that it could never happen in the same way. When you have been in recovery from schizophrenia it seems as if it could never again creep up on you without warning. I had 'insight' into my illness; its triggers, the danger signs. But still it overcame me this time. It is not possible to be fully psychotic and maintain insight. A reality shift takes place that is total. There is no room for perspective.
Last time it happened (2010) I was sectioned and held under the Mental Health Act for 28 days for assessment on an acute psychiatric ward. I remained undiagnosed until 2011, by which time I was living alone, having lost contact with my family and cut myself off from all my friends. In the summer of 2011 I had taken myself back to the psychiatric ward as an informal patient, where I stayed for 3 months followed by another 3 months in a rehabilitation unit. I was discharged with a diagnosis of 'undifferentiated schizophrenia' and a lifetime of neuroleptic medication to look forward to.

I worked bloody hard on my recovery. Harder than I ever had in my academic career. Close to two years without sight or sound of my beautiful children nearly destroyed my will to survive, but with their patience and courage and the heroic support of my long-beleaguered husband, I found a path back home. That path was paved with broken glass and my feet by then were bare. I walked that path day by day until we had all had the time to build trust again. I had been living at home for two and a half years without further incident. I had 9 months of intensive psychotherapy behind me, and a regular medication that seemed to be working. I thought I could be one of the 20% who never have another episode of psychosis. It turns out I was wrong.

The problem with psychosis is that it is not apparent to the individual experiencing it. As one of my psychotic friends said recently: ‘When you’re paranoid no one believes you any more.’ I was, of course, fully aware that my behavior was changing: I was talking differently, dancing manically in the kitchen, hearing strange voices through the radio and television, throwing items out of the house that were ‘negatively charged’, noticing
satellites, and becoming suspicious of my husband again (last time I was psychotic he had been replaced by a very annoying clone.) I had started wearing the ‘No Fear’ cap that was a significant prop during the last few months of my time in hospital. I was chain-smoking after almost 3 years of smoke-free life. Yet for me the meaning of these actions was apparent. They had a context in a paracosm, which seems to emerge, fully formed, with my psychosis. From my perspective my actions were entirely consistent and appropriate in the vivid reality I was experiencing.

It was not a shared reality:

Maybe each human being lives in a unique world, a private world different from those inhabited and experienced by all other humans… If reality differs from person to person, can we speak of reality singular, or shouldn’t we really be talking about plural realities? And if there are plural realities, are some more true (more real) than others? What about the world of a schizophrenic? Maybe it’s as real as our world. Maybe we cannot say that we are in touch with reality and he is not, but should instead say, His reality is so different from ours that he can’t explain his to us, and we can’t explain ours to him. The problem, then, is that if subjective worlds are experienced too differently, there occurs a breakdown in communication … and there is the real illness.¹

There are two key problems with psychosis as far as I have experienced it:

¹ Philip K Dick, 'How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later' (1978) Available at: http://deoxy.org/pkd_how2build.htm
1) No one else experiences the immanent reality which provides context for what are otherwise irrational actions; perceived by others as incoherent, unpredictable, upsetting and sometimes downright frightening (at other times, as my children are very good at reminding me, entirely ludicrous.)

2) Some of the behaviors that manifest during my psychosis are high-risk. For example, during this brief episode I found myself:

• drinking a cup of Dettol
• walking through objects (including cars)
• pushing a pin into the palm of my hand
• walking on drawing pins
• drinking recently-boiled water as quickly as I could
• not eating anything but sweets for several days
• having a fight with two police officers in my kitchen

On my previous encounter with psychosis I had also managed to get myself arrested ‘to prevent a breach of the peace’. That time it was triggered by arguing - calmly I must say - with a police officer about the law of the land, with particular reference to whether I had the right to prevent my husband (who at that time had been replaced by a clone) from entering our jointly-owned house. That police officer wasn't in the mood for a theoretical discussion.

I thought I had reached a low point that day sitting in a police cell through a long Sunday afternoon. This time was much worse. This time I took against the female police officer’s boots. They were unnecessarily ugly. Several other things pissed me off. That thing the
police do when they turn up at your door expecting to be allowed in, and calling you by your first name as if they have a right to. The fake informality and the breach of privacy go hand in hand. And they were afraid of me before they had even met me. I could smell the fear. Fear is not a god quality in a police officer. Especially when you know it is fear of you. Or rather of your diagnosis. I have to say that I do not like the police. It’s probably not their fault. They have a terrible job and horrible uniforms. But she chose those boots…

I can’t recall what triggered the fight. I think it was something to do with me feeling cornered and wanting to move away, which they took as a sign of aggression. In the end they won. So I relaxed as they put the cuffs on and told me I was being arrested to prevent a breach of the peace. I remember saying, ‘oh not again!’ When I was sitting on the sofa waiting to see what would happen next I asked my husband to get the hair out of my eyes for me, which he did very gently. The female police officer helped to put my trainers on, as I couldn’t do it myself. My trainers are beautiful. I felt sorry for her then.

I soon found that sitting in a police cell wasn’t the lowest point in my life. One thing that this life has taught me is that there isn’t really a lowest point. You can always get lower. There is no glass floor beyond which you cannot pass. That’s what infinity means in practice.

A paramedic arrived then. It would have been helpful if he had arrived first. He said cheerfully, again using my first name as if that was the most natural thing in the world, in a
voice pitched at everyone remaining calm while he pulled on his latex gloves, that he was here to examine me. He smiled as he said it. I didn't smile back. He looked like a warped version of my dad. I watched his face without saying anything. He quickly changed his mind about the need for an examination and went to fill in some forms in the kitchen instead.

I was taken out to the police van. So they brought a van, I thought. It was dark and airless inside. Really dark. There was no seat belt so I jolted around unable to stop myself from jarring against the sides of the van as it stopped and started. The cuffs cut into my wrists. They had not bothered to tell me where we were going. Even when we got to the hospital they didn’t tell me where we were. This is what it feels like to be cattle on the way to the slaughterhouse, I thought. All forms of politeness discarded. I ended up in a waiting room on a hard seat still in handcuffs. I thought I was being deposited in hell.

So after sleeping a while in the cold, stiff hospital bed on that first morning someone offered me some lunch from the trolley. I have always had a bit of a thing for hospital food. It is better on a psychiatric ward, where everyone puts on weight, but even the food on the Acute Medical Ward where I now found myself was interesting. I chose roast pork and potatoes with mashed swede. Eating was difficult. I kept losing consciousness from the massive overdose of anti-psychotics and my jaw was painful from the fight with the police. I ate as much as I could, sitting up in my bed. My legs were beginning to do that agitated
twitching thing that Aripirazole gives you. It is almost impossible to sit still for any length
of time, but the waves of strong medication made me too weak and woozy to walk around.
I considered crawling on the floor, but thought better of it.
As I rested in semi-consciousness I started to recall more details from the evening before.
The police van had deposited me in the waiting area of the hospital. It was like the waiting
room in Dr. Seuss’s ‘Oh the Places You Will Go,’ where nobody seems to know why they
are there. The young male police officer had waited with me for a while. He took the
handcuffs off, which was a great relief. I slumped on my hard chair rubbing my wrists and
he chatted to some of the staff as if he already knew them. I asked if I could lie down
somewhere but was told there were no spare beds. I tried to sit upright but my body hung
loose like an unstrung puppet, and my mind blanked by the rush of anti-psychotics.

I had drunk the best part of a bottle that usually lasts for a month. I wondered if this was
how I was going to die. I realized that I would rather die than have to sit on that chair for
any longer. I made myself stand up and find the bathroom. On the way through the waiting
room I saw things that made no sense. A woman with a child sitting silently in a corner
behind a half-drawn curtain. A young woman on a bed in the middle of the room wearing
nothing but a t-shirt with her legs wide open. Expressionless. I could hear someone
shouting in a language I couldn’t understand. I seemed to be the only person moving
around. ‘So this is purgatory?’ was the thought that came to mind as I sat down to pee.

When I made it back to my seat the young police officer was gone. I pulled another chair
over to put my feet up on. No one had asked me how I was doing yet. I was desperate to lie
down. Then I vomited. Nobody came to clear it up. A man, who had looked dead, suddenly
got up and walked off. I lay down on his bed. It was bliss. I was told to go back to my chair.
Suddenly, after what felt like days of coming in and out of consciousness I was told to get
into a wheeled chair and we sped down a long corridor half-running. I enjoyed the breeze
as we whipped past door after door and saw not another soul. Finally we reached a large
ward and I was shown to my bed. The person I had heard shouting seemed to be in the bed
opposite.

The ward hummed with the thoughts of broken spirits. Literally. That was not a metaphor.
When I am psychotic I can hear thoughts as noise.

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats’ feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar.²

² T. S. Eliot (1925) 'The Hollow Men'. Available at: http://allpoetry.com/The-Hollow-Men
A doctor woke me early the next morning. He had soft, warm hands as he examined me and when he finished he laid his hand gently on my arm and said something I didn’t catch before leaving my bedside. I wanted to cry then. The food trolley came round and I asked for toast with marmite and a cup of tea with 2 sugars. I couldn’t swallow the toast but I drank down the sweet tea. The sugar helped a bit but I couldn’t remain conscious for more than half an hour before sinking back into blank white space.

Overdosing on an anti-psychotic is a kind of bizarre thing to do, on reflection. I wasn’t trying to harm myself. At the moment I did it I was in full psychotic mode and in the middle of an argument I had triggered with my husband about whether I was becoming unwell again. I drank the whole bottle down in one gulp. I think I was making a point about whether I needed to up my medication or not. Aripiprazole is a strange drug. There is no black market for it, which tells you a lot. It causes agitation deep in the leg muscles that makes it difficult to sit still. ‘Restless leg syndrome’ they call it. That’s why you sometimes see mental patients pacing up and down. I love pacing up and down; a habit formed during my time on the acute ward. It draws too much attention in most contexts though. I miss that particular freedom.

But you are probably wondering what I experience when I am in full psychotic flow. A lot happens when I am psychotic. The world speeds up and my senses become hypersensitive. It is as if the filter is taken off my perception so I am taking in information from everywhere. If I am sitting down at a cafe drinking a coffee and having a conversation, my perception isn’t limited to the taste of the coffee and the content of the conversation.
Everything is communicating at once; from the shape of the cup to the background voices and the movement of people and cars through the window. Whereas I can usually focus on what is happening and pay attention to it, when I am psychotic I have no control over what speaks to me. The whole universe speaks through whatever means is available. The voice on the radio is directing its comments to me. The birds fly in symbolic patterns. Music is particularly powerful, it passes through me and my body and mind take on the shape of the music. Hence the manic dancing. Certain songs become hyper-significant. During my first, prolonged episode, I found one song by the Killers (Spaceman) particularly powerful, and when I listen to it now I still feel a little bit psychotic. During this recent episode I was compelled to dance whenever I heard Kasabian’s ‘Bumblebee' song.

I start to see things that I am aware that other people can’t see. Seeing itself takes over my consciousness and I cannot stop the visions from coming. I saw a swarm of iridescent green dragonflies in my small garden, a human figure silhouetted against the full moon that was dancing with me, cloud people trying to tell me something important. With my eyes closed I saw a vision of the snake from the Garden of Eden. Such beauty as I had never dared dream of: Arcadia, where the pure temple stands and the fountain of life still flows; white alabaster with garlands of flowers and the overflowing of living water. I saw the layers of ten thousand lifetimes flicker away until the true form was revealed:

Often, when I imagine you,
Your wholeness cascades into many shapes.
You run like a herd of luminous deer,
And I am dark;
I am forest.3

I see into other peoples’ minds; their thoughts take shape before me. This time I saw with my eyes open, God and a fleet of angels above my garden. With flaming sword and their robes were flecked with diamond light in the jet-black of the night sky.

So why do we talk of being ‘cursed by’ or ‘suffering’ mental illness. Why do we not see these unusual and vivid kinds of experience as a blessing? Probably because they jar against the ordinary and take the individual out of the circuit of day-to-day survival. When I am psychotic my own survival is both irrelevant and taken for granted at the same time.

On the second morning in the hospital the psychiatric liaison team came to speak to me. I recognized one of them. He had been a trainee doctor on the acute ward while I was there. He remembered me too. I had offered the consultant a game of pool in place of our usual meeting. He had agreed and brought his trainee with him. I won that game. Apparently, as the psychiatric liaison doctor now told me, the consultant had been a bit cross with him at the time. He had been so rubbish at pool that I had won too quickly so the consultant hadn't got as much information from me as he wanted. This made me laugh. On this occasion he had a woman with him. As we walked down the corridor towards the consulting room she shrunk before my eyes until she was hardly there. As the other doctor hadn’t seemed to notice, I thought it best not to mention it. She terminated the discussion because they had a

3 Rainer Maria Rilke (1903) ‘The Book of Hours: Love Poems to God’.
‘crisis’ to deal with. She didn’t seem to notice that she was shrinking; unless that was the crisis she was talking about.

My husband arrived on the first day with a bag of clean clothes, toiletries and my phone. He was a little wary when he arrived but the psychosis had receded so I was just pleased to see him. They let me go home after two nights and a long morning. I was still woozy and slept the afternoon away.

How do I proceed from here? One day at a time everything settles back into its usual place and I take up the role of mummy again. We worked as a family on my ‘crisis recovery plan’. I asked my GP for some Diazepam to help when things start to get out of control. He gives me sleeping tablets too to stop the wakeful nights, which are always an indicator that something is brewing.

I am left with memories of impossible happenings and I write to bring it into some kind of perspective alongside my precious ordinary life. I’m still not sure about those dragonflies though… maybe they were real and I was just fortunate enough to see them that day. Maybe not. I will never know.

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