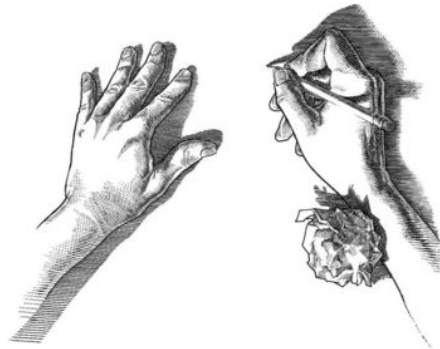


Cycle

A story in four parts about bipolar disorder



By Michele-Jessica Fievre

I.

You're looking at the teacher's carefully manicured hands as she clutches the Expo marker to trace the Venn diagram on the board. You're aware of her shiny, high-heeled shoes, of her sculpted hairdo. She's wearing a green suit – she told the seventh grade students that green is her favorite color. Green and brown. Only she said *maroon* instead of brown. The teacher doesn't smile; she doesn't frown either. Sometimes she uses the smiley stamp on a satisfying assignment. A few minutes ago, Alex tried to get *something* out of her. First, he cracked a joke. The teacher only said, *ha*. Then he pulled out a *dirty* joke. The teacher raised her eyebrows. She said, "Alex." Her voice was flat, matter-of-fact. Alex cowered.

You've been watching the teacher for months now. She arrives an hour before clock-in time, plans detailed lessons, writes precise comments on essays, allows soft chatter during group activities. When the principal stops by, he nods, impressed by her professional posture, the cleanliness of her classroom.

From time to time, you lose track of the teacher – you hear her voice in the background, talking about parts of speech, while you focus on one student or another. You daydream about Guatemala, where Kristen is from. You wonder how you'd survive with a lisp in this cruel world that is middle school. You imagine Kristen's speech sessions with Ms. Pero, in the small office down the hall, where there are Oreos cookies and Life Savers. You will write short stories about Kristen's lisp. Last night, you dreamed you were having dinner at Bahama Breeze with your muse – coconut shrimps and piña coladas.

"Ms. Simon?" a student asks. "What does auto-pilot mean?"

The teacher's lips curve; the words stream out.

You want to relate to that woman in the green suit – but you feel so distant from her. All you can do is *watch*. Watch her manicured hands, which are also *your* manicured hands. Her shiny shoes – *your* shiny shoes. You wonder, *Is she really me? Am I really here?*

There's a knock on the door. A student you don't know comes in with an envelope. "Are you the teacher?" she asks you.

"Yes," you say. "I'm Ms. Simon."

She says she has a message for you. Then she says, "Nice suit."

You smile. "I love green. Green and maroon."

II.

Something simple happens. Maybe an invitation to a private party. A phone call from a long, lost friend. An innocent love letter or a picture from one of your students.

You feel *alive*. You matter. Ideas are fast – like shooting stars you follow until brighter ones appear. You volunteer to plan the soiree for your social group, make all the phone calls, frantically text message and email, pay for the VIP table out of your own pocket. Your social calendar is suddenly full – fashion show on Thursday, happy hour on Friday, baptism on Saturday – so you decide a shopping spree is in order.

On the Expressway, you hallucinate and see things – shadow people, colorful patterns, and spots. You can see tracers around moving objects.

At Sawgrass Mall, your sister points at the pair of shoes you're holding. "They're two hundred bucks, you know."

You giggle – not sure what's funny. Your sister asks if you're high.

"I'm naturally high," you say.

And you do a jig in the middle of the store. You don't care that people stare.

You're happy the whole week, cheer up your friends, mail an expensive gift to your Little Brother, leave an anonymous appreciation note on your department head's desk. Danny says, "There a positive aura, almost palpable around you." Jackie says, "You're so fun. We should hang out more often."

You've never been such a prolific writer – twenty pages a night, while others are losing their time, *sleeping*. You'll sleep when your dead, Goddamnit.

Your marrow is infused with unbelievable feelings of ease, power, well-being, omnipotence, euphoria. You can do anything.

You're superwoman – until the next crash.

III.

You haven't slept well for days.

You're too unfocused, too exhausted to write. You stare at the ceiling, eyes wide. Sleeping pills work – for an hour or two. Then, you're awake again, and sometimes you lose track of how many pills you've taken. It is a moonless night and the darkness is almost complete outside, except for some stray light washing over the artificial lake. The trees are shapeless masses. You peer into the blackness, wishing you had the senses of a night creature.

In May 2007 a British man named Tony Wright stayed awake for 266 hours, just a little more than eleven days. He kept his eyes open by drinking carrot juice and eating bananas, avocados, pineapple and nuts. You wonder how long you can live without sleep.

Overwhelming confusion replaces clarity. You're sitting in front of the laptop, trying to remember your hotmail password. That same password you've used for the past ten years. It seems as though your mind has slowed down and burned out to the point of being virtually useless. The headache starts, and the pain surprises you. Where is God? Is there a God? If not Sweet Jesus Himself, you want *someone* to save you.

You're so tired all the time.

At work, you almost start crying when Julie asks you if you've gained weight. People are just mean and frightening. You feel trapped, guilty and ashamed.

"Ashamed of what?" your sister asks, puzzled.

You say you have no idea. She hugs you, buys you lunch at J.P. Mulligan's, walks your dog, waters your desert roses. "It will get better," she says. "It always does."

At night, you're sweating. You can feel the rush of adrenaline, the surge of electricity shooting from your head to your feet. Your mouth is dry; your lips are tingling. *Maybe I'm dying.* A low keening starts in the back of your mouth; your throat is closing. *I am dying. Or going crazy.* You used to think it was all in your head, you weren't sure when your imagination ended and the cuckoo truly began. You want to stop *feeling* crazy. You remember the man from East Dallas who led the police on a high-speed chase through two counties, driving 90 mph, ignoring the sirens and lights nipping at his heels, later saying he was trying to get his dying cat to a vet. "What a guy," they said. "A hero." Before they found the thirty-seven dead cats inside an old freezer, right beside the man's strawberry sherbet and chicken drumsticks. In the psycho's freezer, each animal was wrapped in a small towel with a note scribbled on a 2-inch-wide piece of yellow paper: "Don't blame me. I voted for Kerry."

You *know* you're not a nut.

IV.

It does get better.

You've been weighed down for days by the cuckoo who lives inside you, who always seems separate from you, from the you that walks and sees and remembers and forgets. The cuckoo's pain shattered, crushed your belief system, your faith – but it didn't last.

It never lasts.

The teacher comes back, manicured hands, high-heeled shoes, and all.

You find the image staring back in the mirror completely captivating. You stand up and inch closer and closer to the stranger staring back at you, transfixed. You can look past the reflection, but somehow can't see anything beyond yourself. *Is that really me? Am I really here?* You want so desperately to make the woman in the mirror feel safe. But every time you reach, your hand only meets the glass she is stuck behind.

The teacher calls Danny, tells him she was drunk that night when she hit on him – she just doesn't mention that she was *naturally* drunk. The teacher talks to Julie. *Yes, I've gained weight. I didn't mean to call you an insensitive witch.*

The teacher talks calmly. She's matter-of-fact.

And you're there again, *watching*.

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