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Contents

1. The Clinic	I
2. Spirit Rock	20
3. Humpbacks	57
4. Refugees	89
5. Television	127
6. Christianity	164
7. Back to the Clinic	179
Afterword	199
Index	205

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1

The Clinic

I've spent a lifetime creating a 'front' to give the illusion that all is well. It wasn't, and it isn't.

– RW

Clinic

11 May 2022

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! This was the only sound I could hear each day while getting a treatment called Repetitive, Transcranial, Magnetic Stimulation. Some young guy wearing an apron like he's a butcher, not a doctor, put something like a bathing cap over my head and strapped it under my chin. Then something that looked like a 50s hairdryer was lowered over my head.

But it's not a hairdryer, it's way more than a hairdryer. It's a complex piece of machinery that stimulates the brain and causes 'neuroplasticity'. Picture 82 billion strands of spaghetti (they're neurons, in case someone out there is believing our heads are full of pasta) changing partners, making new connections (trillions of them) with every zap of the hammer. Like speed-dating but for neurons.

It feels like Woody Woodpecker and his cartoon pals are

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gang-banging my head. And it Bangs! Bangs! Bangs! fast and furious. You get eighteen pulses in one second and that happens fifty-five times in a session. I can't do the maths, but it's a lot of zaps. I am so desperate, I don't mind the bangs even though they're pretty violent. If you've had Botox, this is nothing.

He knows it's working when my face contorts. It suddenly twitches into a grotesque grimace and he tells me that's a sign it's doing its job. I always like to compete even with myself, so I tell him to up the intensity, which he does, and my face turns into a tight convulsive pucker – a gurn. I figure if the hammering is set higher, I won't have to do twenty. I'm wrong. You do have to do all twenty sessions.

Remember that scene when Dr Frankenstein is using the power of an electrical storm outside as voltage to wake up his monster and get him walking with the ridiculous 'goose steps and sleepwalker arms'? Of course you do. After the first treatment, I walk like that along madhouse hallways with the blue, frayed, badly stained industrial carpets. When was this place last decorated? Good question. There's a painting of Florence Nightingale on the wall, so my guess is she must have personally helped them with the decor and colour schemes.

If you would have told me that something like rTMS existed, I'd think you had watched too much sci-fi. rTMS, unlike ECT (electroconvulsive therapy), is the 'last saloon' treatment for those who don't respond to any medication. With ECT they knock you out, put a bit between your teeth so you don't bite off your tongue, and let the voltage rip. Electric currents bring on a small seizure which, fingers crossed, changes the brain chemistry. In other words, you're fried, and even worse, there's a good chance that there might be a tiny

THE CLINIC

bit of memory loss. Not good for any human who wants to remember their name or if they're from Planet Earth. rTMS uses magnets which have no serious side-effects but it's still a jump-start for the neurons to communicate better.

I don't answer my phone because I wouldn't know who I am, let alone who they are. Nothing is working except my eyes, which dart around the room. I notice they designed it to make sure there's nothing you could hang yourself from. There are no faucets in the sink, so water squirts from the wall. How do you hang yourself from a faucet? There are plastic hangers which can't even hang on a rail, so most of them are on the floor. I could think of a few ways if you wanted to end your life, as in butt your head into the television screen. But I'm not thinking about killing myself. I just wish my life would stop. It hurts so much.

There's a constant stream of nurses coming in to see me. Some take blood, some hand me little cups filled with multi-coloured pills, some come to check I'm still alive, some to bring me food which tastes like Styrofoam. The only thing identifiable is corn, otherwise it's all brown lumps. It's brought to me three times a day, wrapped in cellophane. The cellophane is the most delicious part.

Did I mention that the elevator doesn't work? It's been stuck between the second and third floor for about forty-five minutes today. The person who I would say is the most unstable of us all is in it. We can hear the screams throughout the building, but the nurses assure us it's just someone stuck in an elevator. It's not our imagination, which would be far worse.

In case you haven't realized by now, I'm writing this from a mental institution. My room has all the charm of the hotel room/prison I was isolated in at Heathrow Airport after

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entering the UK from South Africa during Covid times. There, at the Holiday Inn Exchange, I paid a mere £1,200 for the privilege of being incarcerated for twelve days in a box. The view was a roundabout at Terminal 4. I'd wait with excitement each day for a truck to loop around; sometimes it went around twice. The food was imaginative – think of eating chicken topped with fingernail clippings.

I haven't taken a shower because of the missing shower head that they removed in case I try to hang myself if the faucet doesn't work on the sink. Water just squirts out from the ceiling in every direction but not on me, so I've stopped taking showers.

At night the only thing that gives me any joy, as the sleeping pills work their magic, is cramming chocolate digestive biscuits into my mouth while watching all the seasons of *Friends* back to back. I like the colours in the apartment where Rachel and Monica are living. One of their walls is purple. That's my favourite colour. I can't really understand the plots so I must be far gone. I'm on the Chocolate Digestive Biscuit Diet. I woke up this morning with chocolate smeared all over my face.

The nurses are from agencies, so they don't really specialize in mental illness – or anything else as far as I can tell. Today someone dressed as half nurse, half cleaning woman came into my room and told me that if I gave myself depression, I should be able to get myself out of it. It was her expert opinion that I should put on my trousers, get out of bed and back out to where I came from. So I went screaming down the hallway to the nurses' station, 'What are we in, some born-again Christian cult?' Anyway, she came in later to apologize: 'Sorry, I just heard you're a mental health advocate.' (She says the word 'advocate' as if it's unfamiliar territory. Clearly, it's the first time

THE CLINIC

she's used it; she probably thinks it means avocado.) She continues, 'Please tell me how to deal with somebody with mental illness. What are the steps?' You'd think getting a professional mental health worker might be included in the price of a room.

Checking in here wasn't exactly on my agenda. Writing about it, even less so, yet here we are. I come from a long line of ancestors with various flavours of mental illness, so genetically it seems to be a no-brainer that I'd be the next in line. But, after twelve years of no depression, I have to admit it took me by surprise. I had stayed clean. I mean, there were little spurts of darkness prior to this but I always managed to put out the fires by recognizing the signs early and doing something to ward it off. This time I hadn't noticed the speed picking up or that toxic fog rolling into my brain or the sense of sinking in quicksand.

The Big Dip snuck up on me and when it did, it struck hard. Depression is the black hole of diseases, where you sit helpless as your mind hammers you with accusations. Your thoughts attack like little demons biting chunks out of your brain. It's hard to stay alive and listen. But I can write, because by some miracle my hands can type without the use of my mind. It's as if they have a life of their own. *I type, therefore I am.*

My too short orange curtains are permanently closed because the sunlight burns my eyes as if I am a vampire. My mind is a cacophony of shrieks from Hell. I can't even hear my own thoughts because it's so loud in there.

If I peek out, I see a main street with normal life going on. Everyone outside seems to know where they're going, whether it's appointments, jobs, or lunches with friends. It seems unimaginable that I once knew where I was going too.

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They're so lucky: they still believe they live in some kind of reality, whereas I'm not too sure there is one. I can't tell if something is taking a few minutes or hours, my mind is white noise.

12 May 2022

Today I have to do a corporate gig where I talk to a business over Zoom. This gig was booked two months earlier and I didn't want to cancel, even though Ed tells me it's insane to do a talk to 700 people online when I'm insane. Do I listen to him? Never. Before it starts, I try to put makeup on but my hand is shaking too much. When I check, I see there is mascara on my lower lip.

I try to adjust the camera so no one can tell I'm in a mental clinic, but a large hospital bed might be a giveaway. Somebody online introduces me, and for a second I don't know who I am. Then I talk for an hour about stigma and why we should break it, while leaving out the elephant in the room. That's me, who has depression, and isn't mentioning it.

At one point during Q and A someone asks, 'How do you know when someone has depression?' I should have shoved my face in the camera and said, 'It looks like this,' but I didn't. Just as I think I might get away with it, the door flies open and a nurse enters holding my drugs on her tray and announces it's time for my medication. I get up and literally shove her out the door. After the experience was over, and I was covered in sweat and panting, I decided maybe Ed was right about not doing any more online talks while I'm here.

Ed visits. Ed has become my own personal sherpa. Usually as soon as he makes a delivery, I hand him a new list and he doesn't complain. This time I've asked him to bring me

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pyjamas, raisins, bran flakes and writing paper. He's always smiling and perky. Today this pisses me off. Why is he so happy? What chemicals has he got in his veins that I don't have? Why do I have to be medicated and drugged to get where he is naturally?

I've been told there is a library here, and that I'm allowed to bring books to my room. But I can't read anything. When I look at words, the letters aren't in the right order. All I can do is watch Anthony Bourdain on the television over and over. When I look under his smiling, eating exterior, I get the sense Bourdain doesn't feel at home anywhere either, and that's why he keeps moving to one location after another. I'm guessing he's not travelling the world for ambition's sake but just to be on the move.

Moving is my oxygen, too. Like a great white shark, I never stop gliding, always hunting. I'm always looking for something. I don't know what it is or even where it is. It doesn't matter what I've accomplished, I need to jump over the next hurdle, and the next. I know I've had success, yes, thank you, take a bow. But I never think about those things. I certainly don't feel them.

I reinvented myself, and I've prided myself on reinvention ever since. People go, 'Wow, that's so impressive.' Reinvention is such a positive word. But for me, each reinvention was just another form of escape. My biggest fear was grinding to a halt, unable to go anywhere: a paralysed lump in the custody of my parents. Reinvention was a survival tactic, grabbing for a life jacket that keeps slipping out of reach. Now I look back at all my reinventions and think, 'What the fuck was I thinking?'

The last film made about Bourdain is a biography called *Roadrunner*. It leads up to his death. When they interviewed

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all his friends, they seemed shocked. They say he was so full of life, and he had the greatest job on earth: going around the world, meeting people and eating. That does seem like a dream job, but as the thousands of seasons go on, I can see a weariness come into his eyes and it's the look I have in my eyes.

Towards the end of the film, all joy is gone. Travelling the world, meeting new people, even eating doesn't do it for him. They finally find him hanging by his belt. I think I saw it coming. He was running from one experience to the next, but nothing was registering. Nothing stuck.

Before I came to the clinic, I'd been on medication for several decades. The psychiatrist who'd prescribed the medication said it was time to rethink the recipe because it seemed not to be working. Duh! Then he said he was prepared to change my medication but that he also wanted me to talk to a therapist who specializes in trauma.

I always assumed trauma was an 'Oprah' word. I thought only people who fought in Iraq or Afghanistan had trauma, while I had inherited depression from my seriously demented family tree. I thought it was inevitable. I come from a long line of insane ancestors, probably beginning millions of years ago with a crazy single cell. And that's just on my mother's side. Many of the relatives on my father's side enjoyed a buffet of schizophrenia, bi-polar, and personality disorders. They didn't even have to wait for a war to kill them, they killed themselves first.

But the psychiatrist kept insisting I had trauma. He said while I was in the clinic, he wanted me to see a therapist who did EMDR. When I asked what that was, he said, 'eye movement desensitization and reprocessing'. This was pure gobbledegook to me; just more letters jumping around.

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THE CLINIC

He described it as a form of therapy where you follow a pendulum moving right to left and back again. Okay, I thought, now he's really taking the piss. But he insisted it worked for trauma. (Maybe it does if you have it, which I don't.) Anyway, I finally gave in. I said I would try this EMDR but only if he promised to change the meds.

13 May 2022

Shrink session

The shrink is a young-looking middle-aged woman with a kind, almost cute face, and sharp eyes behind brown-framed glasses. Her hair could be light blonde or white depending on the light. She sits at a desk with nothing on it but her notebook. Over her head there's an app that makes an online ball for the EMDR process that goes back and forth across the screen. I hope I don't go blind.

S: I want you to follow the ball on the screen and –

R: Is that ball going to keep going back and forth because I may get seasick.

S: Tell me where you picture yourself as a child growing up?

R: Okay, as a child where else would I be? I'm at my house in Evanston, Illinois. Land of Lincoln as seen on a penny. I'm in my bedroom, which is spooky. Everyone thought it was, not just me.

S: Are you in bed?

R: No, I'm sitting on the floor. I can't lie on the bed because my mother has made it up. She has the bedspread perfectly placed on

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top, all its creases are straightened, and the sheets pulled tight. I'm not allowed to lie on it until after she unmakes it at night.

S: What else do you see?

R: There is a chest of drawers. I'm forbidden to open the drawers in case everything in there gets rumpled. At night, she pulls all my clothes out of the drawers and then she refolds them back in.

S: How old are you in this image?

R: Four, five. Why are you asking me that? I never tell anyone my age.

S: Look around. What else do you see in your bedroom?

R: Everything's creepy, I told you. There's a bookshelf with a musical merry-go-round on it with little German fairytale figures.

S: Tell me what you're feeling as you revisit your old bedroom.

R: I'm feeling like this isn't going anywhere. It's not like I can go back and redecorate my room.

S: It's only through recognizing the feelings you had at the time that you can let go of pain from the past.

R: Yeah, blah blah shrink stuff. (I think it but I don't say it.)

S: No matter how much you try to repress it, your past affects how you are.

R: I don't have trauma, just a shit background.

S: Can you describe the rest of the house to me?

R: It's like a haunted house. I don't mean like the cute one in Disneyland, but a deadly one where you never get out alive.

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THE CLINIC

S: *What about your mother? Where is she in the house?*

R: *She is walking around upstairs with wide, thundering strides. Sometimes the floor would shake. When I was little, I imagined a witch taking big strides like that, and I couldn't always tell whether she was my mother or a witch. The house was only quiet when she was in her bathroom. She sometimes stayed there for hours. For me that was a good day. I don't know what she was doing in her bathroom; making a brew maybe?*

S: *Where is your father in the house?*

R: *The living room. He listens to Wagner at full blast to drown out my mother's screams about what 'morons' we are.*

S: *Tell me about the house rules.*

R: *I was allowed to watch TV in our basement. The basement looked like a bierkeller/Nazi hangout.*

S: *What do you mean?*

R: *The walls were dark wood panelling; there were cuckoo clocks and stuffed dead animals on the walls. My parents also collected grotesque German corkscrews: warty wooden old men's heads with corkscrews for bodies. Only the Germans could think up that. I wasn't allowed to go into the attic. I would have been too scared anyway. I thought all the dead relatives left behind in Vienna were there cocooned in spiderwebs. And I couldn't sit on the porch. I don't remember why. I wasn't allowed in my parents' bedroom in case I touched anything. I once opened a drawer and found a finger. I'm joking, there was no finger.*

Actually, this is one of the few times I've spoken about my parents without trying to be funny. I usually tell stories about them in comedy speak. They've always given me my best material. I didn't

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I'M NOT AS WELL AS I THOUGHT I WAS

even have to edit what they said, every line went straight from their lips to my page.

S: Let's continue without the comedy. You mentioned a merry-go-round on the bookshelf in your bedroom. Go with that image, and notice what comes up.

R: When I was a teenager, and fighting with my mother, one of us would always end up throwing it across the room to smash it against the wall. Eventually it was just limbs hanging from metal stumps, or headless torsos in dirndls. But it never stopped going round and round with that plink plink kiddie music. I can still hear the sound it made.

I hadn't thought about any of this stuff for a long time. Talking about it brought back the feeling that I had as a child: that I was a freak, with freak parents, living a freakish life.

When I turned off the Zoom I thought, 'What am I doing following a ball going across a screen?' It was like I was playing a tiny tennis game.

*

Ed comes to deliver the raisins he forgot to deliver last time. I want to tip him and then I remember I'm married to him, and I don't have to. I remind him he also forgot my extra socks, pyjamas and underwear, because now I know I'm staying longer. He starts to write it all down.

I've watched all the seasons of *Anthony Bourdain* and *Friends* so there's nothing else to do. The hallway is where the action is, so I've started to bravely walk across my room and open my door a crack. A young pregnant girl does

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her Zombie walk, up and down the passageway, clutching her half-eaten teddy bear. I take another step and watch someone having an argument with the air. Who do they imagine they're shouting at? A boyfriend? A policeman? A ghost?

14 May 2022

Shrink session

I'm glad I know nothing about the shrink. This is the way it should be. Otherwise, I'd spend every session doing what I always do: comparing myself, judging her and envying her sanity. But this way she's just another brain trying to help me figure out mine. Which doesn't mean I won't try and guess what her life's like, but so far, I haven't got many clues.

S: When did you start turning your family experiences into comedy?

R: It was around thirty years ago. I was flying to Chicago to see my parents around six times a year. After I'd get back to Heathrow, I'd take a bus straight away to Alan Rickman's house in Shepherd's Bush.

S: The actor?

R: Yes. We became best friends when we were in the Royal Shakespeare Company together. We shared a house in Stratford-upon-Avon. We named it 'Shakespeare's Spa and Sauna' because some of the walls were covered in tin foil.

We also shared a tortoise called Betty. I once tried to get Betty a part in Antony and Cleopatra. I stopped Peter Brook, the director,