

I.

SEVEN YEARS AGO I nearly died in a northern New Mexico river.

A blue June morning, sunshine shimmering on thick, calm water, canyon walls rising on either side. The river at its highest point in years, the raft overloaded, and as we entered the first of three sets of violent rapids it happened in an instant, like closing your eyes—the river emptied our raft and I went through the rapids in the water.

You don't forget drowning. The heavy brown water in your stomach, not being able to catch a breath, and even in the midst of more water than you've ever seen, feeling tears in your eyes.

This winter I am drowning again. It's slower this time, but just as real. Still, if I name it too soon you won't think it's serious, because I wouldn't have either. It's come three times in 35 years. The first time, I thought I was dying. Last night, when I felt the headaches, the unsteadiness, I told myself what it "merely" was, but still felt as though I was dying. I'd like to think there's some value, some reason for these times of confusion and fear. But usually I just wish the feeling would go away and never come back.

What I want is to share with you what it's like. What I want most is to have you say Oh, I've had that and you'll be fine. I want assurance I'm not losing my mind.

Paul Bogard

I grew up with water, in Minnesota, land of ten thousand lakes. Summers I spent swimming, splashing, holding my breath in silent, clear water. In autumn I'd cup my hands and drink, hoping lake water would run through my veins until spring. So when the raft flipped, I didn't panic. Water wasn't anything to be afraid of.

But this was different water than any I'd known. Dirty, angry, rushing round me with indifference. The rapids a monster trying to suck me into its belly. Time and again waves plunged me beneath the surface. I remember looking up through brown sunlit water, suspended, hoping I would rise again, telling myself to kick, and realizing I was at the river's mercy. That I was no match for its power. That what happened to me, it would decide.

My inhalations became gasps. I tried to time them. To get oxygen. But it was like each time I popped above the surface someone threw a bucket of water in my face, and I couldn't keep from swallowing.

I thought of my body position—reminding myself to sit as the guides had instructed us to—feet facing downstream, toes above the surface. But try doing this while being pummeled by waves. It's not easy.

I FELT IT first at 22. The summer before senior year, on a street in Nairobi I suddenly had the awful sense of having been removed from my skin. This is my malady's worst manifestation, the feeling of unreality.

It's a kind of fog. You still function, but nothing makes sense. You're hyperaware of your existence, of your every action, and worse, aware of your being aware. Something must be physically wrong—your blood invaded, your muscles under attack, your mind suffering siege.

Back at school that fall and winter I visited the ER three times, feeling wrong enough to seek medical help. I remember crying in the waiting room, so dreading what I'd soon find out.

"I think you're just really stressed," the ER doc said.

"Stress?" I was the mellowest person I knew. She looked more stressed than I could ever be. I remember other doctors' impatience. One on the phone saying if it was something "serious" it would have "gotten worse by now," and an exasperated nurse hastily handing me a box of Tylenol sample packs and moving on to more important tasks.

You might think the fact that doctors found nothing would have ended my worries. And maybe it did for an hour; I certainly remember the gratitude I felt walking out of hospitals, that 'there but for the grace of God go I' feeling combined with a pure sense of 'let's get the hell out of here.' But at

the first signs of the symptoms' return, the assurances faded. The doctors' inability to find anything wrong simply meant they'd missed something, something so bad that it lay hidden in my blood or brain or bones, only to reveal itself once it was too late.

The idea that "stress" helped explain what I felt seemed ridiculous. I remember a *Time* magazine with "Stress" as the cover story and thinking it had nothing to do with my lucky life of a blessed childhood, two loving parents, college, and a sweet girlfriend.

THAT SWEET girlfriend bought the tickets for the whitewater trip. I've never felt a need to seek danger, to risk my life for excitement; I went because she wanted to. But it was my choice.

Before the rafts launched, the guides gave a brief safety talk.

"You don't want to swim today," said Jack—cutoffs, sandals, sunglasses, shirtless. "This is not a good day to swim." When he said "swim" he meant go down the river in the water. It's a friendly euphemism for something that could kill you. "If you do find yourself in the water," Jack continued, "we'll throw you this rope." He lobbed some limp red spaghetti a few feet into the water. "Grab it and relax. We'll get you." I'm not sure, but I don't think I was the only one who didn't believe him.

When the raft flipped, the woman across from me clawed the glasses from my face. Jack yelled, "Hold on!" and then everyone else and every sound aside from the river disappeared. Good day to or not, I was "swimming," without clear sight or company.

IT'S NATURAL to want a name for what's wrong. Thirteen years ago they gave me two: Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Panic Disorder. Thirteen years later these words still leave me unsatisfied.

Anxiety? I think of a nervous student before an exam, not what I have. It's the same way the word "depression" doesn't do justice to what it supposedly describes. William Styron wished in *Darkness Visible* for a word to better paint that debilitating torment, and mourned the fact "brainstorm" had been assigned elsewhere. There is, as with depression, a frustration with attempting to explain anxiety to someone who hasn't experienced it. "Brainstorm" is good. If it hadn't already been used I'd push Styron out of the way and use it myself. For something that makes you feel as though you're losing your mind ought to have a more fearsome name, and if not

"brainstorm" then certainly something long and Germanic, perhaps *der bra-indisintegration*.

What's it like? Try imagining the universe. Picturing our planet's bluewhite marble surrounded by darkness is one thing, even envisioning eight or nine planets orbiting the sun. But ninety billion other solar systems, every one with billions of stars each? At some quick point it's too big to grasp. Where does it end? What's below the earth and how far down does it go? Usually there's a point where you just say "Ok, I accept. I can't comprehend it." If you refuse to accept, if you try to go further than your brain wants to or is capable of, there can be a feeling—your head can physically ache—that resembles the unreality of anxiety. Except that with anxiety you can't turn it off. You can't say, "Ok, sure, 100,000,000 suns, great. When's dinner?" You're faced continuously with trying to understand what can't be understood.

Or take that feeling we all get sometimes in the afternoon when you think about your morning and it seems a long, long time ago. Maybe it was even another day; you can't be sure. That's how you can feel in anxiety all the time. Except in anxiety, sometimes five minutes feels like forever ago.

Or take air travel, how ungraspable that can be, the disorientation you feel. Ok, you think as you're carried 35,000 feet above the earth at 500 miles an hour, this morning I was in Albuquerque and this afternoon I'll be in Boston. And if I wanted, tonight I could be in Paris, except that in Paris it would be tomorrow morning.

Maybe this doesn't faze other people. I've flown plenty without more than a nod toward that odd feeling of going from desert morning to ocean afternoon. Most of my life our modern society has been something I've negotiated. I've backpacked Europe for months at a time, hitchhiked in East Africa, driven rented cars through unknown streets, found my way to destinations alone. But in anxiety my soul feels very old, not built for the jet-age, better suited perhaps to a mountain valley in the 1700s when I wouldn't have ventured over either range. In anxiety the idea of negotiating solo travel becomes staggering. Even driving five miles on a route I've followed hundreds of times can be a major task. "You can do this," I tell myself. "You're going to be ok." There's a lot of that. Because frankly it doesn't feel as though I can do it or that I am going to be ok.

I REMEMBER in the river, thinking of rocks—would I hit one, when, where, how would it feel? At times my feet were straight down in the water, and

even though it took only seconds to shift my position that was time enough to be conscious of my bad position and wonder if the rock that would crush my back or trap me underwater was seconds away. It was that not knowing what lay immediately ahead that was the worst.

One prime feature of anxiety (and, especially, Panic Disorder) is a sense of imminent doom. For me it's a feeling that I'm about to faint. That any second I will fall to Earth. I remind myself that in all the time I've had anxiety, of all the moments I've felt as though the ground and I would soon meet, it's never happened. When that fails to appease my fear I ask myself how often have I seen or even heard or read of a young man collapsing? At this moment I can't think of a single example. People just don't collapse in the street—not very often, at least.

I haven't yet made a strong enough case for the fear. Even as I wrote that last paragraph I felt a surge in my left temple, a shot not of pain, but ache, like a snake swallowing an egg. With every word I write I add a prayer that I'm not some fool thinking he only has anxiety—as frustrating, uncomfortable, and real as it is—while actually something far more serious sets up shop. Anxiety feels serious; I hope that's clear. It feels deathly serious, and ever present, a monster just outside the cabin door. Sometimes it breaks down that door and charges.

Panic attacks, especially at night, come over you quickly, like darkness across the country during an eclipse—in a second you go from sound asleep to wide awake as you realize the unreality, the weaviness, the headaches (choose your symptom of choice) haven't gone away. Desperately the voice of reason in your brain attempts to hold back the crowd of fear, but it's no use; the crowd surges forward as though rushing a 1929 bank to remove its savings. It's ok, you've survived this before, you're not dying—these words of patience have no answer to the frantic calls of "Yeah, but what if?" You're scared it's getting worse, not better; scared it will never go away; scared of what's to come. You fear going to the doctor for fear of having your worst fears confirmed, but you wish a doctor slept next to you to say it's nothing. All past problems seem tiny. You make promises to change your life, to learn your lesson. You look back to before it began and think, if only you could return to your beautiful past.

During the day the unreality is all around. You fear you'll soon need big signs around your room saying "Today is Tuesday," and "Your name is Paul." "Paul," you repeat, slowly, the earliest known case of Alzheimer's ever. Day after day you ask your diary, "When will this shit end?" Your diary doesn't know; no one knows. Leaning over the sink to brush your teeth

you weave unsteadily, water swirling down the drain. Making a telephone call takes all your courage, and leaving the house is nearly out of the question. But you have to function, you have to work. So you do the minimum, all the while keeping an eye on when you can get home to safety, so that if you collapse you'll do it without bothering anyone or embarrassing yourself.

And all the while you feel sadness. Sadness that you aren't who you know you are. You aren't who you can be, have been, and... and you're not able to add "will be;" a future where you no longer suffer feels no more likely than an attractive doctor sleeping by your side. You're not the friend or child or partner you want to be. You feel sad because you love these people, this world, so much—it's so clear—and you fear that you're being taken from them now. The train's pulling from the station and you're waving goodbye.

And you're alone. It's one of the worst qualities of mental illness. There's no bandage around your brain for others to see. After my friend Blake broke bones in both feet dancing, he found himself in a wheelchair. While certainly it made getting around difficult, it also engendered the sympathy of everyone he met. Beautiful women seemed particularly drawn to him, for example. I have no wish to be in a chair, and again make no comparison between my relatively light malady and those others have to bear. Only to say that for the most part those who suffer mental anguish do so unrecognized, a solitude many keep because we don't want to burden or frighten friends. Blake had to be in a chair, but he knew he'd be walking in six weeks. A cast comes off after the bones have healed. Anxiety has no such outlook. There's no way to know when it will pass, and it's difficult to describe, so talking about it usually leaves us feeling like all we've done is make our friends worried, confused, or sorry they asked.

Alone? Unless I tell someone, they won't know I'm in anxiety's grip. It amazes me that people, when I have symptoms, talk to me as though I'm fine. When I speak they don't gaze at me quizzically, not understanding the applesauce language coming from my mushy brain.

ALONE IS HOW I felt in the river that day. Above the surface I saw white water, brown water, flashing sunlight, dark canyon walls. But I didn't yell for help. I didn't utter a sound.

There was too much water. I was burping at the same time I was trying to inhale. My lungs were sponges soaking the river's weight, holding me down, keeping me from precious air.

It happens so fast, but at the same time slowly enough that you begin thinking, So this is how it's going to be. I'll be aware of not being able to get any more air, of not being able to rise to the surface. I'll be aware of being enclosed in darkness with my lungs and stomach full of water. I am drowning, you'll think. So this is what it's like. This is how I'll die.

II.

ANXIETY DISORDERS are the most common mental illness in the US. Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Panic Disorder are two of a group that also includes Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Social Anxiety Disorder, and studies indicate that at least 19 million Americans—over 13% of the population ages 18-54—suffer. But you can bet there are far more; the first two times I had anxiety no one counted me.

The anxiety experience varies widely; a specific diagnosis seems as murky as defining a person's ethnicity. The DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), the mental health professionals' bible, numbers its diagnosis (300.21 Panic Disorder With Agoraphobia, 293.89 Anxiety Disorder Due to a General Medical Condition, etc.), but neither my experience nor the anxiety experience of anyone I've met can be so easily, numerically, categorized.

So what do I have? I don't really know. Anxiety disorder is what professionals have told me, and so I must take their word. I must take their word when I fear I'm dying or losing my mind, when my head aches or existence feels unreal. I must take their word when I feel I'm on a ship rolling in ocean waves, when my steps remind me of walking on a trampoline, when the world is weavy, wavy, unstable.

Why does it start? You think about that constantly when you're in its grip. People ask, are there things that make you anxious? Of course there are, from no money in the bank and dubious job prospects, to finding someone to love and wondering if you'll be able to say what you want in your writing. But these are constant concerns which for years didn't cause anxiety or panic disorder.

I swam through the symptoms again at age 27. Then eight years passed before they resurfaced. During those years I left my home state, best friends, and family, and moved to New Mexico with a woman who later left for

Boston. A week after we said goodbye, my dog was poisoned to death. In the next few years two significant relationships came and went. A promising third ended on a rainy New Year's night with her Pathfinder in her old boyfriend's driveway. But they were also years of health and opportunity and love—and no anxiety—and my months in Minnesota last summer were two of my best ever. So why, when I returned to New Mexico in August, did anxiety return to me?

I don't know. Heredity has much to do with who gets it, and a stream of mental illness runs through my mother's side of the family. But anxiety seems to come when some powerful outside force shakes the balance of chemicals in the brain, like a lake's calm surface stirred by sudden violence deep inside Earth. It could be that a combination of things broke my balance.

First was developing ringing in my ears a week before I left the lake. It scared me—it can be one sign of a tumor—and has been with me nearly six months. There's nothing doctors can do. They don't know why it comes, they don't know why it leaves. And sometimes it doesn't.

Second was the fact I did leave. Minnesota. A summer spent by the lake, at peace in solitude, engaged with my work. And a summer spent closer to the natural world than ever before. The conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote, "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds." Two months in tune with the northern forest made me extra-sensitive to our unrelenting destruction of the world's wild areas, an assault which much of society seems at least unconcerned about if not unaware of, despite the art, science, history, philosophy, and religion teaching us that what we do to the natural world we do to ourselves.

And third was "simply" that time continues to go by and no matter what I do my parents and friends and dog and I all continue to age, our days together passing. Sometimes I feel as though I've almost got hold of it—time, that I've slowed life nearly into the moment. Then it bursts from my grasp like one of those party snakes exploding after you twist the lid from their can.

My guess is that these three weights—each by itself arguably cause enough for the crushing gauntlet of physical symptoms that clutch and punch and pull me down—combined to plunge me into anxiety.

But that's just a guess. I've been sensitive to these things my entire life without always experiencing anxiety. Why it comes when it does is something no one understands.

PEOPLE TELL you stories after you almost drown.

"I went on a river rafting trip," Blake told me, "and we walked around a set of rapids. The guide didn't tell us why, I remember that. He just told us we were going to get out and walk. So we did. The guide was quiet, and none of us spoke either. It wasn't until we got back in the raft that I asked why."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"That a week before, a raft flipped as it entered those rapids and one of the guests, a twenty-eight year old woman, was pulled underneath and pinned against rocks by the current. And that they didn't find her for two days."

With anxiety you write your own stories. Everything you can't say or explain. When day after day you feel the same fear you shy from telling friends again and again. When you wake at 2:30 am full of terror and don't want to wake your sleeping partner, or you live alone. When you feel guilty for not being able to get over it, scared because you're afraid of being really sick, and mad at yourself for not being able to stop thinking about it, you write it down.

My second time, I found solace in my diary from the first time. This year I've found solace in the diary from eight years ago. And now I document how I feel day after day, in part so the me of five or nine or twenty years from now (or of tomorrow) has someone who will say, "Look, I've felt the same way and survived. You will too."

No one has ever said to me, "Snap out of it, everyone gets the blues," or "It's all in your head," but I know people say these things. And if you've never suffered mental illness, then you can't empathize from personal experience. But like its cousin depression, anxiety is only all in your head as diabetes for my grandmother was all in her blood, or my mother's arthritis is all in her bones. Part of getting better is reassuring yourself you will, but that is only part.

The first two times, getting better was all I wanted. This time I wonder, do we live in a society that values personal struggle? Do we expect tough times on the road to our goals? In archetypal myths from any ancient culture the hero ventures into times or places of darkness and meets challenges, oftentimes in monster form, before returning home with wisdom. Religious leaders like Jesus and Buddha and Muhammad all were challenged by difficult times before emerging with their messages. And is the lesson simply, 'We made it!' or rather that dark times are vital to the hero's journey? André Gide writes, "One doesn't discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time."

When I'm submerged in anxiety I just want to survive, to breathe again, to "get better." But there are times when I hope getting better doesn't mean only that I return to the man I was before. If going through this experience is part of the hand I've been dealt, at least let it carve more deeply in me canyons of compassion, kindness, insight, and joy.

But that might be hoping for a lot.

THEN MY EYES rose back above the surface and ahead of me another raft waited in an eddy. A guide stood with his hands cupped around his mouth, his yells erased by waves. He was frantically pointing at me and then toward the shore, but it felt impossible to get there, and worse, suddenly I was passing by this raft, this last chance before I went through the rest of the rapids. I turned onto my stomach and tried to swim toward shore, but felt my arms and legs flailing me to nowhere. I remember passing this raft, turning to face the next set of rapids, and for the first time, tears in my eyes.

I'm learning to live in anxiety's grip. I've gotten help, I have written proof that I've survived most of these symptoms before. But still every day is a battle to convince myself it's nothing more than what it is and that eventually it will pass. It's pulled me under three times; it's released me twice.

Those first two times I made it through without medication. This time I fought the idea; taking medication felt like surrendering. But after a few months I decided surrender instead of obliteration. Medication reminds me of the life preserver I wore in the river: it didn't save me itself, but maybe it kept me alive until the danger ran its course.

And that's how it happened. The paddlers in the raft I'd passed pushed from the bank with everything they had, catching me just before the next rapids, bumping the back of my head, two pairs of hands grabbing my life preserver. The force of their yanking me from the river left my shorts at my ankles and I was aware as I crawled on the raft's rubber floor that I was half-naked and also that it didn't matter one bit. I emptied my guts, felt someone stroke my hair, and heard a voice say, "I know this might sound funny but do you want a drink of water?"

I want the anxiety to go away. It has before. I didn't wake up one day and find it gone. But it faded finally, a river's roar bending in the distance, and I went back to how life used to be.

Except that life has never been as it used to be. I've never forgotten how anxiety feels. It's like I've been scarred, swiped by claws, in the sense that I've survived something that has left its mark. I doubt I'll ever be

completely free, even when not experiencing the symptoms. I'll remember the symptoms, and know this river runs through me.

Anxiety Disorder. Panic Disorder. A better word is drowning.