

The doctor is sick



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Name withheld by request

The doctor is sick.



Her feet are swollen, as if her heart is failing. But it is strong and beating faster than usual, as she runs her fingers through her hair. Her vision gets blurry sometimes, and she has to hold onto something when she stands up or she will fall down. The doctor is sick because she is taking medicine to make her well. Lithium, Seroquel, Depakote. Mood stabilizer, antipsychotic, mood stabilizer. Two pills, 4 pills, 3 pills. Plus a multivitamin because Depakote can cause her hair to fall out. Skinny and fat bottles, next to her bed so she won't forget. As if she would forget.

The doctor is sick because 3 weeks ago tomorrow she made a concrete plan to take her life. She wrote 5 letters, the longest to her sweet and supportive husband. She put some pills and some alcohol and the letters in her backpack and made it to the front stoop before she sat down, her heart breaking, and called her best friend.



The doctor is sick. Sicker now that she is home. As a patient in the psychiatric hospital, she was the doctor, and she held "office hours" (24 hours a day) to answer questions about GERD, schizophrenia, and stomachaches. This made her feel a lot less sick. Everyone said she was clever. She is only a medical student and offers a disclaimer with her advice (along with the suggestion to see a "real doctor"). But to most of the patients she is a doctor. And she feels the calling to be a doctor. Deep down inside herself she feels she was born to be a doctor.

In the psychiatric hospital, she felt alive when she gave advice. It made her feel she was helping people. She lives for people. And it distinguished her from the rest of them. They were her friends and she shared illness with them, but

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Clinical Point

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somehow she was different. Sometimes, this gave her comfort. Other times she held onto them as anchors in the madness they were swimming through together. Those times she found comfort in being the same as them. Exactly the same.

The doctor is sick. On the discharge sheet, 18 days after admission, her acceptance of this fact (“judgment and insight”) was judged “fair.” This is because the doctor does not believe in her diagnosis. She does not want to be sick. She wants to be the person she was before—minus those highs and lows. She would trade in the agitated anxious state that caused her to drop out of her pediatric rotation. She would trade in the days spent in bed in college, while everyone seemed to be having fun. She would trade in the Google searches of “suicide methods.” She would trade in the panic that caused her to stop her rotation, and therefore caused her to stop playing with the pediatric patients in the playroom at night, after her clinical duties were finished. In the playroom she was not a doctor or a medical student. She was just someone’s playmate. She held the little hand of her little patient and she felt like she was exactly where she was supposed to be. She knew she belonged when she helped her patients forget they were sick.



The doctor is sick. She is drinking hard lemonade, even though it makes the dizziness worse. The doctor has a swollen face and swollen fingers and her wedding ring does not fit anymore. She has gained 10, no, 15 lb because of the medicine, and she knows her husband has noticed. The doctor knows that she has enough pills beside her bed to end her life, but she also knows she is calm now. She is calm in a way she has not felt for as long as she can remember. She thinks back on college, on that 2-month period when she slept until 2 PM, and got out of bed only to smoke marijuana and change the CD on her stereo. She thinks back on the way she pulled the blanket over her head and she remembers that she wanted to be dead.

The doctor remembers writing her treatises later that year on the meaning of life, of the world, of peace and joy and love, on her

desktop computer. She wrote and wrote and wrote, as she often did, and sleep did not seem very necessary or desired. She felt she was more connected to the world than anyone else on the planet. She felt more intensely than anyone else on the planet. She ran 5 miles a day, 15 miles on Saturdays. Tears streamed down her face as she bicycled back from her volunteer work with the elderly. She felt so much love and she felt so different from everyone else. Tears came again when she read literature; she felt alive with politics and meaning and urgency. Her heart pounded and she felt words run through her mind that told her to keep working, harder, and that she was capable of more efficient, more emotive, more effective, more productive work than anyone else on the planet. She had more insight than anyone else on the planet. But all of this was directed to help other people, and so she was connected to the whole world.



The doctor feels sick now as she recalls those events. Now she fears her past is part of this illness. Those thoughts and actions that were her proudest moments, the organizations that offered her awards and accolades, the papers that got high marks—those were just the consequence of neurotransmitters being sucked in and spat out in the wrong ratios. It is that simple. Something we can fix with around 10 pills a day, pills that will make the doctor better but will make the doctor sick. What about the doctor’s sense of humor? What about her energy? What about her wild dancing and her disinhibition? What about her ability to be the life of a party even when she is stone cold sober and everyone else has had 4 or 5 drinks? What about her accomplishments and her intensity? What about her ever-present belief that the world’s people are all connected, and she is to play a small but important, even vital, role in bringing them together? *Sick, sick, all sick.*

As a patient in the psychiatric hospital, the doctor would dance sometimes. She would be dancing, twirling, laughing, making others laugh. Then, on the same day, she would burst into tears and sit in her room, blanket



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over head, turning over the possibilities for a painless but sure death. She didn't have much time to think on it because soon it would be time to line up for medicine.

Next ... it's time for her office hours, to reassure other patients, to pretend she is a doctor. But soon enough ... the shrink beckons her for the daily session, and she is reminded of his infinite wisdom and her relative ignorance. She nods and agrees with some of what he says, believes it even when she is talking to him in his little room, but not later, when she is back in bed, nighttime, waiting for nightmares. The psychiatrist says that her frantic sleepless days before Christmas, the ones where her friends couldn't understand why she couldn't even sit down for lunch ("You're going to have a stroke!" a less tactful one declared), the ones where she feigned listening to someone talking while in her head she entertained a disorganized, discordant symphony of thoughts trying to hammer out a requiem, a death march ... those days were a "mixed state." Mumbo jumbo. Nonsense. She tells herself she is just moody. At least now there are moments of heady delicious delight, no matter if they are brief.



So the doctor is improving! And she has reason to doubt their boxes and their labels, as she reads on this illness in rare moments when her mind is still, and she finds there is controversy surrounding every diagnosis and delineation. And so that is fuel for her disapproving, disbelieving fire. All of this is just an expression of eccentricity, she tells herself, and these lousy doctors don't appreciate someone "as brilliant and beautiful as me." But later, watching the nurses as they fill out their assessments of the day, she wonders how sick they think she really is, and she hates herself and this lunatic frenzy and she is embarrassed and ashamed.

If she does not believe she is sick, then she has to blame herself, and that hurts. But she can handle that pain and that bleeding, for she alone can suffer pain and bleeding like no others, and that is part of what makes her beautiful. *But she is not sick* According to them, the doctor is sick every day and so she stays in the hospital. She retorts, "Of course

that is what they say. Isn't that their job, to call me crazy?" And then, "If I was not crazy, wouldn't that put them out of business?"

Nightmares have tormented the doctor since she was a child. But lately they are more twisted. They pull her out of the safety of the day such that she plunges, screaming, down, head-first, into black night, afraid. Some of her medicines exacerbate nightmares. In one awful dream, she is a patient, then a doctor, then a patient again, and she keeps waking up inside the dream to be transformed into doctor or patient, one then the other; it never stops. So first she is giving medicines, then she is being intubated, then she is finishing rounds, then she is enduring electroconvulsive therapy. Finally she drops out of the dream as if from the sky, and she is shivering and afraid.

Now, as she dozes, she awakens to every noise, and the shadows look like people, and she knows the nightmares wait for her again, so she fights sleep. Paxil made her hear voices (the psychiatrists proclaimed this "classic" for her illness; she shrugged her shoulders in response) and so now she listens carefully, holding her breath, in bed, trying to hear voices. She thought she heard something. Of course, now she is hypersensitive. Now it is hard not to describe everything as "classic" for the illness. If she thinks about it, from junior high school onwards she was "classic." What nonsense! Her vision is 20/20 in hindsight. Who wouldn't find madness in their past if they looked hard enough?



The doctor is sick. The night lasts forever. Somebody opens the door because, at this hospital, they check every 15 minutes, 24 hours per day, to make sure the doctor has not slit her wrists or hanged herself or found another way to end her sick life. For this reason, they have confiscated her shoelaces, and she has to floss at the nurses' station. She startles as they open the door, and screams out loud. They reassure her they are just checking on her, and now they are gone, and the doctor is left to imagine them walking down the corridor to the nurses' station, shaking their heads, saying, "That doctor sure is sick!"

continued

Clinical Point

Every now and then, there are flickers of wisdom and insight and she knows she will stay alive



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Yes, the doctor *is* sick. Who is she anyway? She is not even a doctor! She is just a third-year medical student who is fighting, fists up, her descent into madness. Has she won? She is trying to find a way to accept what she is. Does that mean she is a winner or a loser? It is chronic, but manageable, bipolar madness. There are lots of other people like her. But it is still overwhelming, and she is not even sure she wants to join anybody else. She never defined herself as part of any group before. Now she tries to get back to normal—but what can that mean now, after all this time, after release from a mental hospital, after taking a leave from school, after swallowing 10 pills a day (every day, for the rest of her life?), after finding out she is so sick? It is time for her meds. She hasn't told most of her classmates or her parents because she doesn't want them to find out that the doctor is sick. She doesn't want to know if the doctor is sick. She doesn't want to ponder if the doctor can ever get well.

The doctor misses seeing her patients. Tears are in her eyes and she swallows her sadness as best as she can. She aims to keep a brave face, but she is sad for what she has lost. She tries to shake that off, but it keeps returning. Like a virus, it sneaks up on her and she is shivering, feverish with grief. She hears stories from her friends as they continue to round, heal, cut and sew, take histories, stay up all night, get yelled at by senior physicians, and she wants so much to be there. She is in nowhere land. To some, a few, those who know the twisted tale of the last few months, she is sick. To those who know nothing of it, she is her usual slightly eccentric self, but well. But really she knows she is a liar and a fraud. Because somewhere in the middle she exists alone.

Well, no, she is not alone. Her husband stands by her and he is wonderful. He holds her and laughs with her and tells her she is beautiful and amazing. But she misses seeing lots of people; she thrives on people. Doesn't anyone understand that she needs people to be alive? Is that so wrong? Is that so sick? She feels sorry for herself, sorry for what she must give up, sorry that she must

graduate a year later, sorry that she cannot be with people, sorry that she feels so sorry so much of the time. And then she gets angry with herself for feeling so sorry and being so sick.



Every now and then, the doctor sees another side of things. She surfs the Internet and reads books and she finds out about lots of smart and creative and beautiful people who were sick like she is. These people have twisted, wonderful abilities but so many of them plunged to their death or swallowed pills or died so young. They wrote books or composed symphonies or made people laugh or created works of art but then they died. And so she is left feeling strong and beautiful sometimes, but also lonely and sad that all those souls have deserted her. She is sad that they have left her in this madness, and she must fight to stay alive all by herself. Then, every now and then, there are flickers of wisdom and insight and she knows she will stay alive and she will create beautiful things too, one day.



The doctor is sick. Getting sick stinks. She admits, "Nobody, especially not me, counted on the doctor getting sick. Please! Enough!"

She concedes: "I won't forget this. I promise. OK, I have learned my lesson now. Please, enough of this!"

She pleads: "I need the doctor to get well. I am afraid of being the doctor that is sick, so afraid."

She ponders: "Does this mean I will never be free? Does this mean I will never be well? Does this mean I will never be a mother? Oh, God, does this mean I will never be a doctor?"

Then there is silence because she asks these questions of herself, and she has no answers, and no office hours today.

Somebody better call a doctor.

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