

Crazy Ex

tags: mental illness, schizophrenia, parkinsonian, mexico

As Clara and I leave the dirt road and enter the small garden at the rear of Las Coyas restaurant, she points out a shrub covered in butterflies.

"Oh, that's it!" I say. She'd told me to look out for it a few days earlier.

"I thought you'd seen it?"

"There's obviously a couple of them. The one I found is just over there," I say pointing, the child in me wanting to add, *and my one was better.*

She tells me how she'd shown it to Dimitri the day before. "Isn't it pretty," she'd said, indicating to a butterfly.

"It is not pretty. It is moth," had been Dimitri's monotonic reply.

"But don't you like the colours?" she'd asked imploringly.

"What colour? It is moth," he'd said.

"So Russian!" Clara remarks, rolling her eyes. We didn't know at that point that Dimitri was colour blind.

Having enjoyed La Ventana beach all morning—paddle boarding, kite surfing, and sunbathing—we avoid the balcony and midday Mexican sun, finding a table inside instead. We order a portion of 'Ceviche con nachos' to share and two glasses of wine.

In conversation Clara mentions her divorce. We'd spoken plenty about relationships, but it was the first time she'd alluded to having been married, and I point this out.

"Well, it was kind of traumatic," she says.

"I'm all ears."

Her husband was the nicest person. Sensitive, sweet; the definition of goodness. 'Pan' her Italian mother used to call him, like the soft centre in a fresh loaf of bread.

"He'd never get angry," Clara tells me.

"What... ever?" I ask, incredulous.

"No," she assures me. "He was almost too nice for this world...". She looks down, past our table; into space; silent and pensive. "After what happened. I do think the world was just... too much for him."

"And what 'happened' (trusting she'd get to that part), happened suddenly?"

"No. It was all quite insidious."

"What does that mean?" I ask, my vocabulary not being the most *replete* (thank you Thesaurus).

"Slow to build up—like it sneaks up on you."

The wine arrives and Clara continues with her story:

"It began when he got a new job. We'd been married a year. First it was "no one likes me", then "they're out to get me", and next "there's a plot to sack me". He started coming home really worked up and would crash pans and dishes about in the kitchen and that was so unusual; so not like him. Of course, I was concerned, but thought it was just him not coping well with the pressure of the new job. I'd been in cut-throat work environments myself, so could understand if everyone was stepping on each other to get ahead.

One time he came home really agitated and saying something really bad had happened. He didn't want to say what at first, but eventually I teased it out of him. They'd *sent him a very clear message*. This of course sounded odd, but again I thought it was metaphorical and work colleagues were just vying for his position.

When he came home from work a week later, kitchen cookware again bearing the brunt of his frustration, saying some guy had turned up in a T-shirt with a slogan on it that was meant for him, I was really confused. I thought I was mishearing, or that maybe the shirt said something like 'fuck you all'—something vague and general—but really I had no idea. I was just trying to be rational and had no experience of this type of behaviour before. But when he then said the message was "in code" something clicked: I knew something wasn't right.

I assumed he was having a nervous breakdown and called a Doctor friend who suggested we make an appointment to see someone. I arranged this for one evening later that week, but when I returned home from work that day, Dave had packed up and gone." Not a word, and no way to trace him.

The food arrives and there's no delay in my tucking into it. Clara doesn't follow suit; she seems happy to keep talking. Like she *needs* to keep talking. The Ceviche isn't anywhere as good as the one we'd had served to us on a beach a day earlier by a father-son duo who'd taken us swimming with sea lions and whalesharks, but it's tasty, and it sure beats the cheese empanadas (cheese empanadas were the speciality, or only dish, at several restaurants and bars in La Ventana).

"After a fraught week of hopeless searching, I eventually discovered he'd been arrested and sectioned. I drove to his family home in South California, but they were in denial. They assumed it was something I had done, and wouldn't tell me where he was. I was distraught, Sam. All I wanted to do was find my husband and find out what had happened. What the hell was happening.

I set about calling every mental institute in Southern California. Being a librarian at the time helped; I had access to the necessary directories—nothing was online in those days. I knew the town where his family lived, and worked out geographically from that point; two of my work colleagues were on hand to help."

"But being his wife, couldn't the authorities just tell you where he was?" I ask, partly to prove I was paying as much attention to her as I was on devouring nachos.

"Well, no; that's just what I was going to say—under state law you've no right as a spouse to the medical info of your partner. It's the patients privacy they care about. America is really hot on personal privacy."

I had to chuckle at that, and did lightly counter her last point by reminding her of the Snowden revelations (still fresh in the news at that time). Perhaps I wanted a distraction. I was getting hot and uneasy listening to her story; it seemed too close to home, somehow.

Memories of past paranoid experiences, perhaps. That time I spun out in Calgary, even. An irrational fear I might also be schizophrenic was creeping over me. I almost panicked at one point, thinking her tale of descent into mental illness might throw me into my own psychotic state: that her describing the path to insanity would give the self-destructive part of me the map it needed to get me there. I maintain my composure, however, apologise for my aside, and ask her to continue.

"I was desperate and probably sounded it; balling my eyes out on almost every phone call. I was desperate to my husband but not having any luck. I was so worn out I was probably hysterical by that point. I'd say things like, 'I know I don't have any right to the information about where my husband is, but do you know how many places I've called, and...'. That type of thing. Luckily, I got through to one receptionist—the right one—, who felt sympathy for me. 'I can't tell you if he is here or not,' the lady said, 'but take down this number and ring it.'

'What is it?' I asked.

'I can't tell you that; just ring it,' she said.

The number was for a ward. It was a phone where patients can call out from, because although they're locked up it's not a prison. Some crazy guy answered with 'hello', but not a normal hello, more like 'whoaaa hello'."

Clara's impression was hilarious. She didn't seem to mind me laughing.

"I asked for Dave and heard the guy on the phone scream out his name a few times.

Miraculously, a minute later, someone else said 'hello'; someone I immediately recognised as my husband.

'Dave,' I said, astonished, 'it's me!'

He responded with an 'oh, hey', like it was just any old day of the week, and I was just any old person. I tried to ask him where he was, but he just started speaking gibberish and trailed off. 'I've got to go,' he finally said, and hung up. Well, he didn't hang up as such, he just let the phone drop."

I imagine Clara hearing his footsteps on some cold, polished and unfamiliar corridor as he walked away, lost to her, lost to himself. I help myself to another spoonful of Ceviche.

"At least now I knew where the hospital was they were keeping him in. I jumped into my car and drove like a bat out of hell—right through the night, desperate to see my husband, but also thinking I had to get there quickly in case they moved him.

It took a really long time for me to be able to speak to the on-duty Doctor. He took me into a stuffy little room and I could tell he was being careful with me; looking at me like I was most definitely a person on the edge."

No doubt he knew the signs well, I think.

"First I wanted to know if he was able to leave. He wasn't. He'd been arrested under 5150. That meant he had to stay 30 days, at which point there would be a review."

5150 is a section of the California Welfare and Institutions Code which allows a qualified officer or clinician to 'involuntarily confine a person deemed to have a mental disorder that makes him or her a danger to self, a danger to others'.

"None of it made any sense. I was crying, and remember asking the doctor through my sobs, 'but Doctor, what is this?'"

'Mrs Brown', he replied coolly, looking at me like it was something I clearly should have known, "it's schizophrenia."

I take a breath. And another nacho, indicating to Clara she should do the same.

"Do you know what he did to get arrested?" I ask.

"It was something about him thinking he was a nun," she says, finally tucking into the nachos; what's left of them. "He got up one morning, shaved his chest, took off his wedding ring, threw it out the window, then walked out onto the street and started disrobing—all symbolic of giving up his worldly possessions, I guess."

"A nun, and not a priest?"

"A nun."

Clara was escorted into a dimly lit room, and there she saw her childhood sweetheart curled up on a bed in the foetal position, crying.

"To see my husband like this cut my heart like a knife. I said his name and when he looked up and saw me he started balling like a baby.

'You found me!' he cried, lifting himself off the bed and coming to me, arms raised and wide, awkward and childlike. He buried his face in my neck and bosom and held on so tight. I held him for a long, long time.

'Take me home,' he kept saying. I knew that wasn't possible, however much I wanted to. I explained it to him like I might to a child. I said I had to leave him there 'a little while longer', that he 'wasn't well', and the Doctors 'just needed to do a few more tests'. I too was trying to take comfort in it, Sam, because I missed my husband terribly—all those weeks of crying myself to sleep each night, hoping I'd be able to find him, hardly sleeping."

Reluctantly she pried herself away from his grip and left the room with the Doctor. From the corridor she could see Dave's face pressed up tight against the wire-reinforced window, mouthing, "take me with you," over and over, the blade in her heart twisting a little more with each mute plea.

"I tried to have him transferred to a hospital nearer to our home in northern California. But being incarcerated under state law meant he would have to be transferred by ambulance and that would have cost me \$10,000. I considered it, but my mother reminded me they were two weeks in, with only two weeks to go, and willed me to be strong."

Fourteen days later he was allowed to return home.

"We tried to resume as normal a life as possible, but he wasn't the same man; he was more like a child to me now. He was on several anti-psychotic drugs that were so strong he couldn't take them all the time. This meant he'd have another psychotic episode every few months. He'd exhibit the same angry, paranoid behaviour. He'd see things; throw things; smash things. He was never violent before so it was really scary. Luckily he never

laid a hand on me, or anyone for that matter. Each time he'd disappear and I'd have to go and find him again, worried out of my mind."

He was affected physically by the drugs he was taking, getting Parkinsonian from one, a nervous system disorder similar to Parkinson's disease. He couldn't go to bathroom himself, and at bedtime Clara would have to sit on his knees in bed in order to help him straighten his legs.

"Everyday I'd come home and look for signs. Touch his hand, look in his eyes, ask how his day had been, watching, listening for something that sounded strange—too sharp an intake of breath, for example—or too raspy, too laboured; eyes flicking about, agitated—I knew all the signs. Oh Sam, always alert, it was exhausting!"

The longest period he went without a psychotic episode was six months. Toward the end of that spell Clara was starting to breathe easier and feel some hope.

"We were joking again, laughing and smiling. I thought maybe they'd finally got the cocktail of drugs right. That maybe we could have a normal—well, not *normal*, but happy—life together. Then I came home one day and could tell right away from his heavy breathing something wasn't right. Every muscle in my body tensed."

It was his job to make dinner (she given him the household to manage so he didn't feel totally emasculated) and she knew he was getting agitated preparing it.

"Whats wrong, honey?" she asked.

"I don't want to talk about it" he replied, adding, "I had a bad day."

"Honey, tell me what happened," she asked, despite not really wanting to hear his answer; she already knew what his behaviour meant.

"I ran into that guy at the grocers. I've never liked him. Or his wife."

"Well what's wrong with his wife?" she asked, at which point he turned round sharply to face Clara, and with frightening intensity said, "She's a fucking cunt, that's what!".

Oh no, thought Clara. It's happening again. Will it ever stop?

She excused herself and went into the bathroom where she sat on the toilet, grabbed a towel and started sobbing uncontrollably into it—she didn't want him to hear her. When she looked up she didn't recognise the person staring wet-eyed back at her in the mirror. It was a miserable, terrified person. She knew she had to make a choice. *This is it*, she said to herself. *I need a life... my life*. She knew she couldn't do it anymore. It was clear and defined. It had been five years since his first episode. Five years! She couldn't believe the number of people who had told her to leave him in that time. What about 'through sickness and health', she'd thought. But everyone has their limit and she'd just reached hers.

"Where was his family in all this?" I ask.

"Oh, they were such horrible people. Even when he got home after hospital they wouldn't help, or admit anything was wrong. One time he stopped taking his medication and came to me saying he'd just been talking to the Holy Spirit. I tried to get him to take his medication but he refused, saying, 'No, they're just giving me drugs and there's nothing wrong with me,' or something like that.

Religious grandiosity is a common feature of schizophrenia; the apparent ability to communicate directly with religious deities—usually the one you're familiar with from your culture or upbringing." (read into that what you will ;).

"So, I called his family to try and get their support in getting him to a Doctor and back on his medication, but the mother said, 'well he seems fine to us'. Fine... "fine"!?! Can you believe it, Sam?! 'Mrs Rogers,' I said back, in disbelief, 'he just told me he spoke to the Holy Spirit'."

Clara pauses, takes a nacho and a muffled crunch fills the anticipatory silence.

"'Well, I think that's wonderful'—that's what his mother said. I couldn't believe what I was hearing!"

"No way," I say, incredulous, but highly amused. Till amusement whistles out of me like a punctured beach ball and I'm just sad, thinking: *Poor guy, he probably was*. Probably was

speaking to a “holy spirit” of some kind, that is. So little is understood about the mind, consciousness and reality...

“You know, in some tribal traditions, ‘mental illness’ or autism signals the birth of a healer or a shaman,” I say.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I read an article on it once. They view people with such conditions as sensitive, whereas Western culture views them as over-sensitive. As a result, sensitive people in those traditions don’t experience themselves as overly sensitive.”

Clara takes another nacho, saying nothing. So do I. The sound of our combined crunch brings to mind the image of a sadistic nurse slapping her palm with a leather restraining belt before a terrified new patient to the asylum. A few crumbs fall to the table, and a shiver runs down my spine.

Perhaps I am crazy, I think. Or could be. I decide to not smoke any more weed for a good, long while; just in case.

“It’s said, that it’s the frenetic pace of our Western culture that overwhelms sensitive people and wrecks them,” I say a few moments later. “It’s the bombardment of our delicate senses. Anyway, I’m sure we’re all so much closer to that ‘insanity’ that we like to think.”

“Oh, I’m sure of it,” Clara says.

Clara’s husband’s family were uber religious and as it turned out, had a history of mental illness. Two of his siblings were later diagnosed with schizophrenia and he now lived with one of them.

“Two drugged up insane people living in the same house, can you imagine?!” Clara says, laughing.

I’m glad she can laugh about it all now. It had been fifteen years since they’d separated; I guess that’s plenty of time to get over such a thing.

"Well, it certainly sounds like it was an intense time," I say. "Thank you for sharing."

"It's made me extremely tolerant of odd relationships," Clara says, her eyes a sparkle: wet with tears, perhaps.

"Is that why we get on?" I ask with a wry smile.

"Absolutely!"

We stop to admire the butterfly tree once more.

"I'm 'sensitive', like your ex," I say. "I would be worried about becoming schizophrenic myself... but luckily I'm not that 'nice'".

Clara laughs. "Oh, neither am I."

"A lesson for you though, Sam: if you're going to marry someone, check mental illness doesn't run in the family!"

I didn't know the medical history on my father's side: he didn't know who his father was. Perhaps he was a loon and I was right to be worried. No, I'm just a worrier, and I know exactly where that comes from: my mother.