

Church of Holy Pharmaceuticals

Laura Bernstein-Machlay

—*For the desperate ones*

Mirrors

For Kimber, with her chime-bright voice and shiniest hair, how it sighs against my cheek when she bestows the perfunctory hug. Blue eyes to my blue, light to dark, lake to well water. Hers half-squinted from the South Carolina sun and always concerned, so I want to trust her with my secrets.

Same Kimber who's outed me by full name to Facebook's 2.2 billion users as a big-time downer, a taker of antidepressants, surely in need of new-age healing—

*Laura Bernstein-Machlay, Pitch The Pharmaceuticals!
Cure Your Depression With Bikram Yoga!*

—which isn't so terrible, I guess, the little pronouncement romping through the blogosphere on its puppy feet. What came later was worse.

Kimber wants to help, you see. Ever since I married her brother two decades ago and affixed myself like a limpet to her family. Kimber believes she can save me.

In this way, families crack like mirrors through the center.

Sister to Sister

I am completely against using antidepressants to treat garden-variety depression. You people are always ready to take the easy way out. It is ALWAYS easier to take a pill than do the hard work of cleaning up your diet and engaging in a wellness regime. Easier to give meds than eat clean and participate in some kind of sport/exercise. We have become a nation of immediate gratification people too lazy to make healthy changes.

Garden-variety depression

As opposed to what? The hothouse versions, the rare and unusual breeds? The voodoo lilies of depression, say—exceptionally phallic and stinky.

“Who gets to choose, anyway,” I grump to my

husband after we've mulled over the post for a few days, “whose cracked brain is esoteric enough to deserve meds?”

Steven rolls his eyes and spreads his hands, which I read as, ‘Ya got me.’ Despite his cheerful disposition, he's wrung out for now, from his recent, futile phone conversation with Kimber, which, despite his hopes, produced no apologies or understanding, not even a sandy patch of middle ground.

Mind you, I was probably hopeless from the beginning.

Well

“Do you think I'm going to hell?” I once asked Kimber to fill an uncomfortable well of silence. This was in the days before Bikram Yoga, back when Old-School Jesus still shined bright through all her pores, and Kimber dreamed of saving the world. She would have liked to have saved me, too, but Jesus and I—estranged relatives about eight hundred times removed—already had an understanding: live and let live, you can't always get what you want, etc.

Of course, I regretted my question instantly, but once the dog escapes his leash, what's to do but give chase and try to cut him off before he hits the wet cement or the really busy street?

So I said, “Never mind, it doesn't matter.”

Even as Kimber said, “I guess I don't like to think about that.”

I didn't want to, either, but I usually say the wrong thing when I'm here, at the family cottage at the tippy-top of Michigan's mitten, where Steven and I come every summer to vacation with his siblings and step-siblings and half-siblings. Where I—an only child, lapsed Jewish and generally bookish, always leaning toward the shadows—am a little lost among the compulsory cheer.

But this is my family, if only by marriage. So I return year after year to the well-treed resort with its

fake totem poles and tanned, lithe clans who've passed down their own cottages for generations, and I cling to Kimber who bothers to notice me.

Then

Kimber and I fidgeted for long moments in the wake of my unfortunate *hell* question. We hefted our vats of chardonnay, took healthy gulps. She shifted leg to leg and patted her corn silk hair. Around us, the kin, their spouses and at-the-time squeezes, gabbed effortlessly in the after-dinner glow. They clinked wineglasses—or non-alcoholic beer bottle in Steven's case—and reveled in each other's presence, as they should. Somewhere outside the cottage, a child shrieked in what could've been a happy way.

"It's not for me to know," Kimber finally spoke, deflecting from her fire and brimstone certainty, from Satan and his gorgeous malevolence.

"But I'm related to Jesus," I might have said. "He's my great great great great uncle." The troublemaking uncle at that—the rabble-rouser, never content to put up his feet and veg in front of the TV. But all families have their crosses to bear—Cousin Saul, say, who gets wasted at every Bar Mitzvah party and concludes the night by snoozing on the dance floor while the band rocks out to Hava Nagila. Or Great Aunt Ruthie, who bursts into tears about the stingy cheese platter or flower arrangements, the roses that remind her of the cheating ex. So we all have to stop what we're doing and comfort her.

Here's what I also didn't say to Kimber during that long-ago gathering, because I knew she wouldn't smile at my joke:

"Maybe I'll get a special dispensation. Like a 'related to Jesus' discount, only mine will be a 'get into Heaven free' pass."

What I really said:

"Hey, it's all good," because truthfully, Kimber looked worried sick. Her mouth did that twisty thing and she seemed ready to run for it.

Also, "So sorry. Let's change the subject." Because who wants to jabber about anguish and the colossal abyss when you could party with your family?

The colossal abyss

Garden-variety depression. The average and prosaic sort?

Mine feels anything but—so the words to describe it come harder than they should, and what I'm about to write will be wrong in so many ways.

Still, let's start with dust, viscous and gray, rising through the body, layering the bones and joints and vessels as it climbs. Then the shutting down—bolting the doors and boarding up the windows, because no one's home today. There's the shaking I can't quit, my muscles burning with it, and the whole bed shudders with me like it's perched on shifting sand.

So that Steven leaves work early day after day. He climbs the stairs and crosses the landing, the old wood creaking beneath his feet. I know he's close and this changes nothing. He comes in the room, curls on the bed and holds me so tight his own arms tremble, and it's still not tight enough. Because the black well in my brain is bottomless and I'm a shit swimmer. Because all of me is flying to dust now, and I fear nothing, not the most loving of arms, will be enough to ground me to solid earth.

Or there's this. Because Kimber loves animals.

Depression isn't just when the dog dies. It's when the dog is a puppy—round and perfect and damp, trembling with its joy—and you cry and cry because the puppy will surely run into traffic and die. Or you cry and shake so you can't stop, because the puppy will live for years and you'll come to love it more than there are words on this page. Because the puppy will become an elderly dog, and limp and groan a little with its tired bones. Then it will die.

Post-It notes

"Have you tried thinking happy thoughts?"

Decades ago, a young internist's response to my fears of recurring depression. Note the doctor's dewy skin. Note her little squeak of a voice.

What other people have said over the years:

You must enjoy feeling terrible.

You do this to yourself.

God could heal you.

You're so over-dramatic.

You just like the attention.

Little scandals, little bullets: each fills its own Post-It note in my broken brain, so I won't forget.

But this faceless depression remains stubborn—stupid, utterly resistant to the most bracing of sermons, and I continue popping the antidepressants. In this way, shame bleeds beneath my skin.

What friends say at lunch (with cocktails)

At Anita's Kitchen in Ferndale—trendy suburb abutting my reconstituting Detroit. We're lounging on the patio in sunglasses and pretty hats like the ladies of leisure we all admire. In front of us, hipsters stroll the sidewalk stroking their hipster beards and cooing at their hipster babies. Across the street, the sign for King Books winks in a friendly way, a promise for later.

Our waiter is muscly and cute as a kitten. He delivers our drinks and leaves. I talk—about Kimber, the Facebook posts, the Bikram, and so on.

I say, "I miss the Jesus days. She was nicer then."

"Forget nice," says Friend 1, a medievalist at a local university. "Is that even legal, telling everyone your personal business? I don't think so." She sips her mint-infused martini and moans in appreciation.

"I think you're reaching," I say. I sip my bourbon-infused iced tea and likewise moan.

"No way," says Friend 2, the ER doc. "She disclosed your name, your medical history. There's HIPPA laws right there." She slaps the table for emphasis, then sips her thyme-infused vodka concoction. The moan is implied.

"I should sue her, then? 'Cause that would solve everything."

"It'd serve her right," says Friend 1.

"Damn straight. Give her hell," says Friend 2. "Anyway, we're a litigious country. You'd finally fit in." Friend 1 nods in agreement. We all sip.

"Doubt it," I finally say. After all, there's no fitting in allowed for us depressed folks, us disappointments with our cracked brains. Never mind that my particular depression has been managed for years. Once a bummer, always a bummer.

Eight years ago

When the antidepressants I'd been taking since grad school up and quit.

Snap. Just like that—my brain chemicals going batty, then ink-dark. Back when I was between doctors, because I'd been doing just fine. But the *snap* comes when it will, the cold arriving on my doorstep like a ratty parcel with no sender, no return address. So the dust began etching through my veins, the black well yawning awake, and the shaking commenced.

What I know to be true about depression (while in the throes of it)

Like God, my depression is ceaseless, obtuse. Heavy as a planet.

All my dear ones slough away to their ghost selves. Their words appear and dissolve in an instant—glimmers that touch nothing, change nothing.

I'm selfish for filling this bubble of air.

Breath comes like knives. It wounds in a way that's of the body, and in a way that's not.

So after every exhale, I want to say, *Enough already—I quit.* Even as I inhale anyway, every time. I don't know why I do this.

How I'm caught like a dull trout between the hook and the current—to disappear, or go on breathing. To love my child and husband by setting them free of the burden of me. Or continue, because I also know they'd suffer with me gone. So the hook pulls this way and the current pulls that. So I weep for my Celia and Steven.

What my friends say

"What people don't get," says Friend 2, "is without the meds, you can't exercise and meditate and do yoga. You can't find Jesus of any sort, much less engage in a decent conversation with him. You can't get the hell out of bed."

"Or stop crying," says Friend 1.

"Or stop shaking," I say.

Then

To her credit, Kimber kept my confidence for years before posting it to the wide world—the almost-secret I'd whispered in her ear during yet another of those summer evenings at the family cottage, when we stood a little apart from the others, beside the long windows

facing the Mackinac Bridge. Back when I barely told anyone.

Above us, the thoroughly-antlered stag head stared into the distance; the stuffed goose that always sets Bella, another in-law's dog, to barking, likewise didn't bother to comment. And there was wine, because there's always wine in this place.

And too, I have no sisters—I have best friends and cousins I adore, but I would've liked a sister.

So I said to Kimber, "I shouldn't talk about this," though I'd already decided to tell.

"Of course you should," said Kimber, her hair reflecting the sun as it hung there in the low sky, psyching itself up to take that final plunge.

"We're family," Kimber said, like that means anything at all.

Then

I can't remember which face of Jesus Kimber wore at the time—Jesus-Jesus or some earlier incarnation. Definitely before the yoga—but as always I regretted the telling immediately. So, had it been possible, I'd have grabbed my runaway sentence by its spiky collar, yanked it into the house and nailed the door good and goddamned shut.

"This won't end well, I have a feeling," I said to Steven later that night, when he and I were tucked snug in our guestroom with its *Welcome To Our Cabin, Where Friends And Marshmallows Get Toasted* plaque above the bed.

"Blame the wine," said Steven. "You drink it to get through family reunions, then you tell the truth and it bites you in the butt. It's practically a Greek tragedy."

"Well, she didn't judge," I said. In fact, when I told Kimber about the depression, the meds, she'd only tipped her head and shrugged as if to ask, 'what else can you expect from this particular sister-in-law, strange as she is, unsaved as the dear dodo bird?'

"So it'll be okay, right?" I asked Steven.

"Probably," said Steven.

Subsequent Email

I am going to unfriend you and Steven on Facebook not to be mean, but only to be sensitive to posting something in the future that may be offensive on the newsfeed. I think in light

of all of this it might be a good idea in my opinion to avoid time together at (family reunion) because I very well could offend you by my desire to exercise and eat healthy while I am there. I also may mention holistic treatments and wellness in my conversations because this is the path I am pursuing for my family and I do not want to make you feel like my discussion of them is meant to target you. I cannot walk on eggshells on my vacation which I am really looking forward to. I hope you understand. Celia is welcome to join us!

Patience

"I just want you to know, I think nutrition is spiffy," I say to my Steven, the chef.

"Thank Jesus you told me that," he says. "I was getting worried."

"Exercise and wellness are okay, too," I add. "And God. In small doses."

But not yoga—there's my lack of bendiness and general tendency to cramp. And, what with my family's legacy of being shoved into hot cattle cars and transported to hot chambers where they were murdered, Bikram Yoga—practiced in rooms heated up to 108 degrees!—is wholly out of the question.

I do happen to meditate. Sometimes. When I feel like it. In a wide-open room with the cat and dog hovering nearby, often with a fan blowing directly on my face, so my hair flies in all directions and I have to stop to tuck it behind my ears.

This teaches me patience.

Secrets

More than fifty years ago, my Zaidy was hospitalized for what they named *nervous exhaustion*, but was really depression. Nobody much discussed this, not my mom, not her sisters or anyone.

Over three decades back, my Aunt Carol killed herself in a lonely, Paris flat—head in the oven à la Sylvia Plath. I don't know if any prayers were muttered by the neighbor who discovered her, don't know if my father's family bothered to gather, to remember Carol one last time.

Clearly, wrecked brains have dotted both sides of my family for generations. Among those of us remaining, I'm not the only one to choose the Church of Holy Pharmaceuticals. In my case, I found the doctor and he

found the combination of antidepressants that saved me.

I am not better than those who went unsaved.
Luckier, perhaps, but that's all.

And because secrets are precarious things, little flight risks demanding constant, sober attention, nowadays I practice telling out loud all the things I've written here. So what if my telling comes slow, in broken sentences, my voice crackling like wax paper.

I tell when the subject comes up in conversation, when I feel like it, when the words might bring comfort.

Yes, this is real. Yes, there is hope.

My hope comes in the shape of little, oblong tablets. These are my religion.