

The Manic Thoughts of a Cab Driver

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My thoughts are going around and around and around a constant, unrelenting noise in my head. They are convoluted, about both serious and mundane things, and each demands my full attention. They clash with each other, mix together, and then separate in different directions. It's a constant rush of thoughts that keeps coming and coming. These are called "Racing Thoughts."- I have them them during a manic episode, and I'm having them right now. Sometimes I follow these racing thoughts. They take curious paths, mostly based on associations, branch off once, and then again and again. In the end, I feel lost and confused, and have forgotten what and where it all began. From time to time, I feel that I've had enough, and try to manage them sternly, to gain control over my own consciousness with all of its thoughts and to think of nothing, so I raise a barrier in my mind. I concentrate and for a short time all is quiet in my head, but then I can't keep it up anymore, and like a stormy, muddy river rushing through a dam wall that has been ripped open, the roaring, racing thoughts inundate my mind once again.

The thoughts are worst at night, when I am tired, lying in bed, trying to get some sleep, which is next to impossible when I am manic. I think to myself, I haven't slept more than six or seven hours for the last three days. Every time that I am about to drift away, I wake up again. If I ever sleep, it is in the morning, but for no more than two hours between 8 a.m. and 12 p.m. And it's not real sleep, but a sort of semi-conscious state in which I have weird, vivid dreams.

All the time that I'm dreaming, I am not fully asleep, and may wake up suddenly with a jolt. I guess waking up like that, with a sort of strange anxiety, as I imagine it would be just after someone injected you with adrenaline, is one of the signs of mania. Lying in bed, craving sleep that never comes, with your thoughts racing through your head—this is the finely crafted torture of mania. The sleeplessness and racing thoughts will disappear with an increased dose of antipsychotic, but it might take a week before the medication kills it, according to my psychiatrist. It is two days short of a week since I spoke to her.

Instead of tossing and turning in bed, craving sleep, I prefer going out to drive the cab. The late evening and night until 3:30 a.m. are pretty busy on Thursday nights in Binghamton, when all the students go to the bars and come back home, often drunk. Jerry, a cheerful guy with a big belly and a face with glossy skin that for some reason, looks wooden and waxed to me – makes me think of Pinocchio, is the owner of the cab company I work for. He likes me, and when I asked him for a car for the night, he gave me the red Volvo. It's the worst car he has, probably twenty years old, which somehow managed to pass the state inspection. I like it though. The car is a little heavy, but the driver's seat is comfortable and heated, the interior is roomy, and it has a good radio, which makes it perfect for me.

Back to the present. I am driving down Pennsylvania Avenue towards an address. A petite, blonde woman in her early twenties is sitting in the back seat. I think that once I liked a petite blonde girl like her. I guess you can say she was my "type," or at least I thought so, but as often happens with age, my "type" changed to include more diverse kinds of women. My current girlfriend, Jessica, is a tall, black woman.

I look in the rearview mirror from time to time. The woman suddenly intrigues me deeply. I want to know more about her. What is she doing, is she happy, has she overcome the obstacles and troubles life has put in the way of her happiness? I wonder about that slim, blonde girl in the back seat, I wonder

how she can withstand the hardships of life, how she can carry all the burdens fate drops on her frail shoulders without having her back broken. I know that if I ask her any of these questions I will scare her, so I shake my head to get rid of the uninvited thoughts. Anyway, I am sure she is doing fine—petite, frail women must be able to cope with their problems as well as the rest of us are.

She hasn't said much. Fares usually don't at this hour, with the exception of the drunk students—they tend to say too much. The alcohol makes them rowdy and talkative. I prefer the silence. Usually when I am manic I like to talk, to express myself, to share my inner world with people. But sometimes, I prefer the silence, driving and letting my thoughts swirl around in my head, without having to concentrate and talk to the people who climb in my cab. When I am like that, I usually keep the radio on, so it is not so quiet in the car that the passenger feels awkward and pressured to start a conversation.

I stop at the address; the woman pays me, and gets out of the cab. Strange, the address is just on the opposite side of the street to the General Hospital. I was a patient there twice—both times for about a week and a half, both times in the psych unit. I remember when the doctors were making their initial evaluations of my mental status and trying to figure out how messed up I was. Sometimes I check myself to figure it out too. I always ask these three questions: Who am I? Robert Ratman, 32 years old. What date is this? It's Friday, March, 20th, 2015, about 3:30 a.m. Where am I? I'm in my cab, on Pennsylvania Avenue, opposite the General Hospital in Binghamton, New York.

I turn around on the street and start driving back. In the cooler in front of the passenger seat, there are chilled cans of lemon-flavored seltzer water. Coca-Cola or Dr. Pepper would be better, but the sugar, and especially the caffeine in the soda, makes the mania worse, so... it's seltzer water. I take a can out of the cooler and take a sip. It tastes all right. Bubbly. While I drink from the can, the thought of how this manic episode started begins to go around in my head once again.

It's all thanks to the antidepressants...I was taking them for anxiety. Therefore, it's all because of the damn anxiety—a strange, new experience for me. At first, I hardly even noticed it—I thought, probably these are psychological problems—those times when I felt like screaming in a crowded room, or saying something offensive and inappropriate for no particular reason. Then it got worse. A month or so ago, I was walking on the bridge on Riverside Drive over Chenango River when I was overwhelmed by the strong feeling that I would jump over the rail. Even afterwards, I wasn't sure what had happened, so I tried to ignore it, but it started happening more often—fears and, it's hard to admit, but urges to jump in front of cars and other similar stuff. The worst was when I was driving the cab, and was afraid that I would swerve deliberately into the oncoming traffic or into a pole. I finally went to my psychiatrist and told her about it when I started having thoughts of hurting someone else—for example, that I would lose control and push a stranger under the bus; dinner with a friend became torture, with all the sharp objects lying around.

When I was sitting in my psychiatrist's dingy office—she's a very kind, sympathetic Indian woman—I was almost afraid what her reaction would be after I told her about my problem. I would have been terrified if she was really surprised, or worse, scared. It was she who surprised me. Instead of sending me straight to the psych unit, she just nodded and told me with a poker face and in a very relaxing voice that helped calm me down: "What you have is called Obsessive-Compulsive thoughts and they sometimes occur in patients with Bipolar Disorder, during depression or a mixed episode."

"Could it be dangerous and what is the course of action? How can we fix it?" I asked her, thinking that if the condition occurs in other patients with Bipolar Disorder, it could be cured.

“Well, it can be dangerous.” She must have said that many times before, as she sounded like she was a bit bored repeating it. “But you have to learn something—all of us, even ‘healthy’ people every day have different destructive thoughts; we just don’t act on them. You have great control over what you’re doing and you don’t have to do everything you think of...What is your religious background?”

“I was baptized Orthodox Christian—like the Russians and Greeks, but in practice, I’m somewhat of an agnostic, I guess, although at other times I tend to be more religious.”

“Alright. I think that what I am about to tell you can be incorporated both into your agnosticism and your religious beliefs”—that time she sounded more involved in what she was saying—“I believe that we are sent into this world to learn to control our own thoughts as much as we can. This is our task here—to learn to control what we are thinking,” she repeated.

Listening to her, I considered the possibility that her beliefs and understanding of the world could be to some extent a professional bias, but it didn’t really seem wrong to me. Neither conflicted with my own understanding of why we are in this world. It could be for that reason, if there is a reason at all, or even someone to create these reasons.

Sitting in her office—with bookshelves on the right, and her sitting behind the desk in front of me, a pot with a flower on the right side, the window behind her, covered with blinds, I couldn’t help but look at the pictures stuck with pushpins to a board on the left wall of the office. There were four or five pictures drawn with pencil, pen, or crayons, with a strange sense of naivety to them. The first time I saw the pictures, I thought that they must be children’s work, but later I figured that they could also have been drawn by really inexperienced artists—most likely my psychiatrist’s patients. I am not sure why, maybe because of the realization that they were drawn by mentally ill people, some of the paintings had made such a strong impression on me, as if they captured part of the illness, the peculiar vantage point of their creators. There was one drawing that affected me particularly. It was a picture of a creature with a head and body fused together, that were almost the same size, and the figure was squeezed a little where the neck would be. The thing was covered with fur and the head was surrounded by thick hair, but just a single huge eye filled the whole face. The front of the body was a clock dial with the clock hands pointing at 12:50. It seemed that the eye stared at me. I sometimes thought that it could be like a test—a person with a psychosis would undoubtedly exhibit some sort of a reaction to that painting. Because I never became paranoid under the gaze of that enormous eye, I always felt reassured that I was at least somewhat stable psychically.

While doctor M—this is what her patients call her—was telling me that I could learn to control my thoughts, I was looking at the picture and thinking about it. I had thought about it before. It must be something that the patient drew, unconsciously projecting his or her disease and nightmares onto the paper. I thought the figure was like a peek into a sick mind. What did it mean to say—“observing the observer,” or “time is watching you, it is up, you are 50 minutes past midnight”? Or was 12:50 the time you go mad, the hour of insanity? At that time, as I was looking at it, I realized something different—maybe the person who drew it knew very well what he was drawing. It was a nightmare, a hallucination, a feeling. That time I reached the conclusion that the path to recovery from a mental illness is coming to terms with your disease, recognizing that there is something wrong with your brain, and being able to communicate it to your doctor or your relatives. When a mentally ill person doesn’t realize that he is sick, that’s when he’s in trouble. So after all, I thought, maybe the story behind that picture is not that tragic; maybe it could be viewed more optimistically.

At the end of my visit, Doctor M gave me some options regarding the medications that could help me with the obsessive-compulsive thoughts. According to her, antidepressants would work the best, but

they could cause mania and I had to watch for that. She said that the newest antidepressants, the SSRIs, had fewer side effects, and were less likely to cause mania and those were the ones that I wanted. She prescribed Lexapro for me—which is actually what caused my current manic episode a week and a half after I started taking it. When I was at the door, leaving her office, Dr M told me in parting: “By the way, one of the possible side effects of the antidepressants is one or another forms of sexual dysfunction, but don’t worry, if it happens to you, I will give you something for it.” I waved nonchalantly; I was pretty sure that I am strong enough in that sense and that nothing like that would happen to me.

A week later, while I was lying next to Jessica, confused, completely impotent, and a little embarrassed, I thought that I should have asked for that “something,” just in case. Jessica was really nice and didn’t put me down, but accepted it as something normal, given the circumstances. I had already told her about my mental illness and she was all right with that as well.

Jessica is a tall woman with a slender body and a beautiful face. She has long, curly hair that I love to touch, to pass through my fingers, to smell. I love Jessica’s hair and I love Jessica even more. She didn’t make me feel embarrassed or humiliated because I was unable to “perform.” Actually, that “incident” drew us even closer. We were lying on our backs in bed, very close, almost touching each other, looking at the ceiling lit up and the frost that made the windows glitter in the headlights of the cars passing on the street below. The talk between us had always been easy, but we had the best conversation so far that night. We talked for a couple of hours and probably would have talked until morning if Rita, Jessica’s six-year-old daughter, hadn’t come into the room. Crying, she climbed into bed on Jessica’s side and cuddled with her, sobbing. Between the sobs, Rita said that she was afraid to sleep alone, because there was a monster in her closet. Rita has beautiful eyes and her mom’s curly hair. I wanted so much to go to the other side of the bed, and hug her, and tell her that there are no monsters in the world—only some of us people. But I thought I shouldn’t tell her that, because she is too little to know about it. I didn’t go and hug her either. I felt it would have been inappropriate. I had known her for only two weeks and her mother for a month and a half, and I didn’t yet feel I was a part of their family. Instead, I got out of bed, dressed, and went out in the cold.

Now, I drove a couple of blocks down Pennsylvania Avenue, and then turned right on Vestal Avenue and passed the pharmacy where I usually pick up my psych meds. I have a prescription for a sleeping medication—Klonopin. My psychiatrist told me it would help me sleep, but I forgot to pick it up earlier and now it’s too late—the pharmacy is closed. I kept on driving another couple of blocks and then turned right on Washington street and after another block, turned right on Vestal Parkway, making a large zigzag. Then, I drove slowly around the big turn on Vestal Parkway before the bridge, because of the icy road.

I think that I should probably stop somewhere and wait for the dispatcher to call me for the next fare, but I enjoy driving. I feel like I am one with the old Volvo. It’s so responsive tonight, almost like a sports car. It is easier to drive when you haven’t slept for awhile. Your inhibitions decrease and you connect with the car on a more primitive, instinctive level; you anticipate the turns, the g-forces as you go through the corners, and sometimes it feels as you have just driven past the same place you are driving now. Something about mania or sleep deprivation, or maybe both, gives the perception that only a really short time has passed, of existence in the now, in the moment. When you are doing something, the mechanical part of you forgets about all of it, and concentrates on perceiving the moment more clearly than when you are in your normal state.

The mania and sleep deprivation also give me a strange feeling of purpose. It is as if I am a part of

God's Grand Plan, like a cog in a huge machine, and my part is necessary in order for the whole mechanism to operate correctly. Even now, I feel I am doing something to advance the plan, but I don't know what. I know I have a place in that plan, everyone does, of course, I just have to discover mine. Random events and pure coincidences begin to look related, as part of some greater connectedness in the world. A feeling of wellbeing and confidence arises, the feeling that everything is going to be okay, that all of these coincidences will work out well, that although everything is very convoluted and doesn't make sense at the moment, it will somehow untangle itself and end well.

In order to understand what I mean, take as an example the other day at the grocery store, when I had that same sense of purpose while I was standing in front of the fruit stand. I picked up a lemon. It was yellow, round, and felt rough in my hand. My guess is that it probably smelled like a lemon too. As I was holding it I felt slightly dizzy, and then I had the overwhelming feeling again that my actions were a part of something greater. Like now, as I drive in a random direction, but one towards which I am pushed by the same feeling. It was as if everything that had happened in the history of the universe led to that moment when I picked up the lemon. There was a plan that led me to choose that particular lemon, and in order for the plan to continue, I had to put it in my shopping basket, buy it, and take it home. I thought for a moment what would happen if I didn't buy that lemon, if I had selected another one, or not bought one at all, not out of spite, but just out of curiosity? I didn't know the details of the plan, only God knew them, but I somehow had peeked past the fine veil that concealed the workings of the universe. Somehow, I had gotten my hands on the clockwork mechanism that moved everything around, and I could interfere with and change the ticking of the clock if I wanted. If I didn't buy the lemon, would the universe be thrown into chaos? Would time just stop, would up become down, would I become you? In the end, however, I thought that not buying the lemon in order to prove that my "feeling" was correct would mean that I had let my fantasies, my illness, control my life. Therefore, I dropped the lemon in my basket. God's plan could continue uninterrupted.

I continue to drive with a strange sense of purpose, as if there is somewhere that I have to go, something that I have to do. It is just the mania and the sleep deprivation, and yet I am searching...I have had the same feeling the whole night. Strange thoughts are passing through my head. The final point of my search is probably some special place in town where I can find something meaningful, something that will give me some insight about myself, about my role in the plan, even if this role is how to live my life, for sometimes I wonder about that. So, I keep on driving, hoping to see a sign, because I know that when I am at the right place, I will recognize it, for sure.

At Court Street, I turn right, go straight down the street, and then around the circle, and I end up driving in the opposite direction from where I came...Sometimes I imagine that the streets of the city are like its arteries and veins, and the cars are the blood cells. To make the fantasy even more complete, the two rivers merging into one represent its airways, and downtown is the heart. The city resembles an actual creature even more when you're driving at night. The darkness adds volume to it, you have the feeling of above and below, you can really imagine that you are inside the body of this giant, prehistoric beast, stretched since ancient times down between the hills in the valley of the two rivers, asleep for centuries, ready to awake, shake itself, and rise.

I like how deserted everything is downtown at this time of the night. The sidewalks are completely empty, and there isn't a single car on the broad street. The streetlights are like white stripes passing along the front window—coming and going, as if counting the mileage, and every streetlight must mark a mile; this is how long it feels between the time that one passes by and the next one appears. Three traffic lights follow one after another before the bridge that crosses the Chenango river, and all of them are blinking yellow and red in synchrony, repetitively, to help regulate nonexistent traffic,

reminding me somehow of a cardiogram. Except that this time, instead of the complex rhythm of a healthy, living heart, the beating is very simple—the quivering of one that is dead, so that just electrical discharges of dying cells cause the simple peaks and troughs. I drive slowly through each of these intersections, although the right of way is mine, as I enjoy passing through the downtown, once the beating heart of Binghamton, now dead.

That night I somehow identify with the dark city—I am the beast and I am driving within myself, looking for that place where my soul is located, because what else could be so important for me to search for, after all, if not my own soul? I have always tried to prove to myself that my soul exists, to find it somehow, and tonight I think that I will succeed finally, I will realize something that will give me the insight I need.

The streets are empty and dark; the streetlights throw drab, yellow light, and even the headlights of the Volvo light up the road for only a few yards in front of me. The streets are so deserted and dark that if they are the arteries of the beast, of me, then I am dead, and the blood inside me is coagulated and black. I—the monster is dead, but I, the taxi driver—is alive, which is of course nonsense, you can't be dead and alive, nor can you be two entities at the same time, but that is how I imagine it. The city is a metaphor for me. I am the city, the beast that was ready to wake up, stand up strong, roar and reach for the sky, but something horrible happened to it, and now it is dead and I am driving inside its dead body, still looking for its soul, my soul, hiding somewhere, this elusive thing.

After I cross the bridge over the Chenango on Court Street, I get into the dense web of crisscrossing streets on the West Side. This is the best place to drive. I go straight, then left, zigzagging, and then in a circle.

Somehow driving and looking for this something reminds me of a dream that I often have when I am in that semi-awake state. In the dream, I start looking for something in my apartment without knowing exactly what it is. I know that I have to find it before the end of the day, before I go to sleep. I open drawers, look behind the furniture, in the kitchen cabinets, but I can't find it and it is driving me crazy because I want to know what it is. I am searching and when it feels like I am finally about to find it, something always diverts my attention from my goal—someone comes and I spend time with them, or I have to do a chore, or something else happens. I always think that in my dream that “thing” is a metaphor, a representation of something in my life that I have to recognize, something that I have to do during my time here, in this world, but I don't know what it is yet. I feel that my life is slipping away, like sand running through my fingers, and I never get to the important things I have to do, but instead, am losing myself in these other sidetracking, false, useless pursuits. It's almost like wandering through the streets of Binghamton at night, not able to find what I am looking for. The dream ends up with the end of the day when I am about to go to bed. I lie down and close my eyes and then I always wake up in the real world, suddenly, with a jolt.

Have you ever had a dream like that?

After I drive for another half an hour or so, I give up at last. I have reached my neighborhood and feel tired, and at that point I am pretty sure that I won't find anything, and just like that time in the store, I decide that I have let my illness affect my actions long enough. I call the dispatcher and tell him that I am done for the night. Then I park not far from my house in a spot clear of snow and head towards home.

After the cold and dark night outside, my apartment feels really warm, bright, and cozy...and very

cluttered...not really dirty though. This is how it looks sometimes when I am manic. It is just that there are so many other things to do—like rolling around in bed trying to steal half an hour of sleep or going on long walks, or talking to weird people in parks, streets, cafes, bars, hotels, restaurants, and sometimes in jail or in the hospital. No matter how much time I have, it is never enough when I am manic. The truth is that if I get organized and get to do it, I can make my apartment spotless in no time—I definitely have the energy and the drive, I just haven't set my mind to it. Well, this time it's messy. There are clothes lying around the living room and many letters—some opened, but mostly not—lying on the coffee table; some are piled on the lamp stands. I always seem to get more letters when I am manic. I don't know why, that is just the way it is, and most of them lay unopened, even though some might be important.

My bedroom floor is littered with clothes. After washing the clothes, I emptied the laundry bag onto the bed, but I didn't fold them, so I pushed them on the floor when I went to "sleep," with the idea of folding them later, but I never got to it. So now, I just pick clothes up off the floor when I need them and then toss them in the laundry bag when they get dirty. The laundry bag is getting full and soon clothes will need to be washed again, and I will never have had the chance to fold them and put them away in the first place. I guess you can say that I save some time that way, but it makes my bedroom look pretty chaotic.

The kitchen is the worst—cans of seltzer water lie on the table, on the floor, the recycling has not been taken out for two weeks, there are more cans in the sink, and a couple of unwashed dishes too.

For a second, a thought enters my head that I have found what I was looking for all night: my soul. It is in that bright, warm, cozy place, my refuge from the dead, dark town outside.

I go into the bathroom, which is connected to the kitchen. After I urinate, I sit on the chair in front of the kitchen table where my laptop is, and I decide to write it all down. What time is it? The clock on the wall is ticking, but it is never accurate. I should have thrown it out a long time ago, but again, I never got to it. Now it is showing 12:50, but the clock in the bottom right corner of the laptop screen says 4:45 a.m.

Before I start typing, I lean back on the chair and stretch, and then for a second, I try to "feel" this moment, the room, myself. It is bright in the kitchen, the fridge next to me is humming quietly, the toilet tank in the bathroom behind me is refilling with water, and the useless clock on the wall is ticking. I feel comfortable, warm, a little tired, and my thoughts are going around and around and around.