The First Mosquito

by Mary Fairchild

Depression has been my lifelong familiar. It ate up a bit of my childhood, most of my young adult years, and a good part of my middle age. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, I found myself living in some semblance of wholeness and maturity, although my life remains to this day rather like squatting in a haunted house with a ghost who is not inimical, exactly, but is not particularly friendly and is surrounded by a droning cloud of hungry insects.

Many years ago, my husband and I took a road trip on his BMW motorcycle from our home in New York City to northern Ontario, ending up in the tiny town of Moosonee at the southernmost tip of James Bay, itself the southernmost reach of the vast and boundless Hudson Bay. Accessible only by rail, boat, or seaplane, Moosonee is south of the Arctic Circle by only a few degrees of latitude.

We stowed the bike in a lockup at the rail terminus and took the train and our camping gear north. There wasn't much to see in Moosonee, a microscopic hamlet in a limitless, unpeopled wilderness, nothing but permafrost and open water all the way to the horizon, and no way to leave because the train wasn't returning south until the next day. There were a few bars, a church, a Hudson's Bay Company store. And mosquitoes. Swarms, galaxies, nebulae of mosquitoes. They came at dusk in their billions, just as we were setting up camp, bandanas tied over our mouths so we wouldn't inhale any of the critters.

These were the days before DEET. We slathered ourselves with 6-12, an oily insect repellent that kept the mosquitoes at bay, but only just, and only for a little while. We could hear the whine of their tiny wings, a seething cloud of little "excruciators" a foot and a half from the skin. The 6-12 worked for an hour or so, and then they would begin to strike again. We could actually see them begin to perk up as the chemicals started to evaporate and lose their potency. The roiling cloud would become more agitated, then

one doughty little torturer would brave the toxic vapors, zipping in for a quick nip. A few of his sidekicks would join him, then a few dozen, until we couldn't swat fast enough and would have to reapply the greasy slick that was our only protection, inevitably squashing a few laggards into tiny, bloody smears on our skin. And they did not vanish with the dawn, those mosquitoes. Although their numbers ebbed at noonday, there were always a hardy few on watch, alert for the first call to muster, the first sign that the sunlight was waning. My husband and I went through an entire small bottle of toxic chemicals in a day and a half.

Depression keeps hold of me in much the same way. I might live free of despair for a few years, a decade even, but the smog of darkness and torment is always there, always fizzing around and above and below me, tugging at my attention, waiting for my vigilance to flag, waiting for the medications to wear off, waiting for the all-clear, when the first melancholy, like the first mosquito, can test the readiness of my soul to be feasted upon. The dark moments will start to drag into hours, days, and overnights, and all joy is lost to me as I founder once again in a darkling sea of sorrow.

I've been diagnosed with depression several times, and I'm here to tell you that I can remember, with a fair degree of exactitude, when I began to understand that the despair in which I was languishing might be permanent. It was in the eighth grade, in the commodious hallway outside the lunchroom at the Lawrence Road Junior High School. I was thirteen.

Depression is, as far as I can determine, idiopathic, which is to say, no one has been able to tell me its cause or origin. I didn't catch it from anyone, although the malign brain chemistry that gave it life may be hereditary. Back when there were walls in my home given over entirely to bookshelves, and I didn't rely on Dr. Google to address all my queries and complaints, I noted that there were, in *Roget's International Thesaurus*, nine two-column pages of synonyms for sadness. I derived some comfort from this; I was never alone in my misery, with all those synonyms for company. So many words meant so many people carrying the same burden.

Depression is substance abuse, panic, suicide. It is chronic hyperventilation. It is refusal to answer the phone or read the mail or open the door to visitors. It is both insomnia and narcolepsy.

Depression is auditory hallucination. It is the sound of children laughing with creepy good cheer in the darkness just outside my fifth-story window at three in the morning; it is a grunting, a cursing, a screaming in my head; it is a stationary siren wailing through the night. It is finally taking the Christmas tree out of the house in April and letting the dog urinate indoors. It is getting into serious trouble with the Internal Revenue Service because the very idea of filing my tax return sends me to bed for weeks. It is the inability to change the cat box or pay a bill.

It is knowing that I'll never get what I deserve and that I do deserve exactly what I've got. It is not knowing whom to trust, and trusting, therefore, madly, desperately, dangerously. It is the simultaneous inability to tolerate human company and wild rage at having been abandoned.

And it goes on for years.

It sees no beauty without weeping, feels no sorrow without contempt. Its brutal lamentation appalls with grief that has no object and therefore no cure. Its cruel insight heaps scorn upon the illusion that people can and do recover from this.

Toward the end of the Second Millennium, I made the acquaintance of a very smart, very patient doctor, a Hungarian, and together we found the right mix of medications. Depression is biochemical. It is a warping, a failure, a crash-and-burn not of the soul, but of the neurotransmitters. Well, thank goodness for that, right? You can imagine my relief when I found that out. The introduction of Prozac into the readily available pharmacopeia in 1986 had already rendered a change in my outlook on life, but it needed some help to eradicate the particular depression, the personal affliction at loose in my body. It took a while to get the right balance of pharmaceuticals, but I stuck with him, my educated, eloquent, well-bred, well-read physician, and together we found the right mix of Prozac and other, more antiquated remedies.

I realized, one afternoon, that I was feeling better. Just that. I was feeling better. I felt normalcy nibbling around the edges of my chronic heartbreak. I hardly dared to say it—in the same way you don't want to call a no-hitter—but I felt…happy. I felt content.

That's the way recovery happens. It slips in when you're not watching, looks around, brushes the dust off its feet, settles down, and waits for you to notice.

I stayed on this mix of medications for years, monitoring closely all the while the state of my mind and my soul and my emotions. I tapered off all of the drugs toward the middle of the aughts, taking some six months to titrate down to nothing. Nowadays, I strive for progress, not perfection. Do a little work, pray a little prayer, keep in touch with my community and my family as and when I can.

Sometimes I'll notice a weakening in the state of my spiritual health. Vigilance is vital. Waking or sleeping, laughing or weeping, I'm always, even at my most cheerful, alert for that first whisper of darkness, that first intruder. That first mosquito.

I asked my favorite Hungarian what people who had depression did before psychopharmaceuticals. They muddled through, he thought, leading their lives of quiet desperation. They could be suicides, martyrs, eccentrics, or saints, in ascending order, one supposes, of desirability.

My depression and its demons were both my enemies and my familiars; they were how I dealt with the world. My favorite physician's prescription, the selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors and their sidekicks, swept the little devils aside and gave me access to the true villain, the Dark Lord himself, and the strength to smite his ruin.

I am sometimes, even now, astonished to remember that I no longer live enfolded in a cloud of ravenous grief. I live a life of quiet contentment in a pretty spot out in the country. A good part of the property is wetland, where there is perforce an abundance of mosquitoes—just an ironic reminder that the darkness is still there, the first mosquito alert and at the ready. A gentle nudge deep in my heart, however, reminds me of the armamentarium I have at my disposal to slap the damned business down.

Mary Fairchild has spent a lifetime toiling in the vineyards and the canyons of the English language—writing, editing, reporting, reading, proofreading, designing, laying out, publishing, etc. She had a long career as a classical music radio announcer and now writes program notes for classical music concerts. She handled investor relations at a large international insurance broker, and she worked the police beat as a reporter at her local daily in New York's Hudson Valley and the equity research beat as an editor at Goldman, Sachs & Co.