

Sick, Brilliant and Bloody: A Winter's Tale of Illness

678 words

As I write this I am about to enter week two of sick bay. It all started with an annoying scratchy throat that I thought was the result of a night out with friends at a noisy restaurant, where we had to yell to talk. A day later the soreness intensified, and what happened next was akin to falling down the proverbial rabbit hole: life as I knew it ceased to exist and a new, strange reality opened up.

The illness began on a Sunday. By Monday I had a dry hacking cough, and by Monday night, a fever. By Tuesday my husband had a dry, hacking cough but still went to work, while I was so fatigued I married the sofa. By Wednesday morning my cough sounded like a blender chopping up ice. Meanwhile, fever was just announcing itself in my husband's body, and by that evening he had married the other sofa. The dogs, used to spending their days alone in the house, started to pace, as if our presence awakened in them a swirling boredom of which they had not previously been aware.

Mentally, we kept going. Or so we thought. We read our email, fiddled with our Kindles, and I even worked on my book, reading and re-reading the same few paragraphs without comprehension. All this ambitious yet pointless striving was like pedaling a bicycle in a low gear down a very steep hill: true, our minds were spinning, but our thoughts had no traction. By Thursday I had added an ordinary head cold to my list of woes, causing me to (mercifully) put away my manuscript. Soon after that, my Kindle crashed. Thankfully, the dog clippers were still working, and while I was unable to receive messages from foreign universes on them (at some point during my fever this seemed plausible) I did garner enough energy to give the old dog a good trim, after which I slept for ten hours.

By Friday I had spun a new theory of the universe. My husband and I had, pre-illness, been reading a comparison of *Infinite Jest* author David Foster Wallace's nihilistic view of writing (writing asks nothing of divine intervention, there is only the lonely writer pulling out his hair) and *Eat Pray Love* author Elizabeth Gilbert's view (writing is nothing BUT divine intervention, a writer happily reliant on a master plan). My feverish husband propped himself up with pillows.

"How do you believe something's meaningful if you don't believe it came from something larger?" he asked. I could see him struggling to stay in the game, pedaling harder, trying not to lose ground.

Sick but inspired, I responded with an elaborate gambling metaphor in which I patiently explained that there are two ways to win at gambling. One is to understand the tricks of the trade and to bet strategically, and the other is to trust Fortuna, or blind luck.

“The money you win in either case is money all the same,” I concluded, triumphantly, “It doesn’t matter if there is a master plan (i.e. something larger at work) or if it’s all random, what matters is what you then DO with it.” (Nihilistic, but with a meaningful twist.) As news of my brilliance made its way to my phlegm-soaked brain, I erupted in a fountain of emotion that was four parts hysterical laughter and one part sobbing. Then I slept for fifteen hours.

By Friday the two dogs I had not clipped were embroiled in a nasty battle whose origin and victor were unclear. There was, in the battle’s wake, one bloodied nose (Bella’s) and one bloodied finger (mine). This seemed apropos, given the week’s progression.

By Friday night my husband and I were eating milkshakes for dinner. Saturday, refrigerator empty, we dragged ourselves to the store. We returned home bearing a bag of asparagus and a carton of malted milk balls.

Did I mention we are heading into week two of illness? Please, if you haven’t heard from us by March, send more milk balls. *Dana’s website is danashavin.com.*