

Proper Grammar

by Adam Strong

Dysthymia is what the doctor said I had. Said I would feel this way until I went on medication. Said that some people never know they even have it, they just think that life is extremely difficult. Said that Dysthymia is a mild form of depression.

It's not bad all the time. I have good days. I have bad days. I have days where I want to lock myself in a room and not see anybody. Some days the grey sky ceiling of Vancouver is a mind state I can't get out of. Sometimes my thoughts are the clouds keeping the sun from coming in. Sometimes my Dysthymia is too much too deal with, other times I know I'll be okay.

Another thing about Dysthymia is how I get locked into a thought, a needle in a record of a song I can't get out of my head, a song that drives me crazy until I hear it again, until I play it just the amount of times to where my brain is satisfied. I have no control over it.

Sometimes these thoughts last a day, sometimes a week. Days and days where the cloud cover switches between big and pillowy to walls of grey.

My family is too pre-occupied in their own issues to really notice. When Dad found out what I had, he said I was pampered too much.

"What you need is discipline." He said, "We've been chasing after you with a diaper ever since you were born, and now look 'atcha." Dad runs those last two words together to show he's a real people person, salt of the earth.

Dad went to college. He knows what depression is. But the guys he works with on the job-site, they make him not speak correctly, not like the way I was raised.

"Proper grammar and punctuation," Mom says, "that's what people judge you by."

There's something about Dad and not belonging. Not being comfortable with being in charge, of the job-site, of anything where he has to show people what he knows. So he pretends.

Dad tries on a personality that just doesn't fit but he wears it everyday, regardless. My Dad and his fancy engineering degree can't seem to figure out the balance most people do. Dad the people person. My Dad, who drinks beers with his co-workers at the bar down the street from the job-site after work when he is a wine drinker. The same Dad who pushes his classical record collection back in favor of the rock and roll he hasn't listened to since High School, when he was a loner studying physics.

Mom and all the sunlight she used to have gets covered up by the cloud cover, by my Dysthymia and the dull-grim ache of reality. But she wasn't always like that. Before she came home every day with grey looking skin after spending eight hours under two massive fluorescent lights, before the endless depressing phone calls, she was bright. This was before six years of social work sapped all of that warm out of her.

Sometimes I get stuck on what she used to be like, my Dysthymia plays these memories back to me on a steady loop, an afternoon of my eighth birthday repeated on a forty-five record. Mom with long hair lighting candles on cupcakes, Dad playing ukulele. Mom with her flowery skirt and smiles.

Dysthymia does that, makes you focus clear and hard on something. And these days, the grey and the questions of who my parents are turning into and how I fit in are all I can ask, over and over.

What's the word Mom always uses? Exacerbate. I looked it up. It's a verb. It means to make a problem or a bad situation, or negative feeling worse. Exacerbate, as is Dysthymia exacerbates depression. Dysthymia. Depression. Exacerbate. Proper grammar and punctuation, that's what people judge you by.

I know all this and still I don't go on medication. My friend Tommy went on medication. Prozac, lithium, MAOI inhibitors, they all do the same thing, life without ups and downs. You lose the lows but you lose the highs too.

I'm at the dinner table waiting for a dinner that will not come, with Mom still under those twin fluorescent boxes and Dad making

fake catcalls to women walking by his job-site. Drinking beer when only wine will do.

I've seen the therapist. I've got the prescription in my hand. Norpramine. An anti-depressant. Maybe a prescription is currency. Maybe I'll do something else with it. A forged signature, a healthy dose of Vitamin C. A little bit of what Mom used to have. Sunshine. A big shot of it in my arm right under my shoulder. Maybe that's what I need. A little inward sun.

My doctor's handwriting is illegible. How would they even know if it was altered? They still don't use computers down at the Pharmacy down the street from my house. I could walk down to the store on the corner with the prescription in my hand. I could write it out for inner sun. Use the essential vitamins god gave us to make us better people. Lose the lows, but lose the highs too.

Maybe we're all working hard to be someone we are not. My trying-too-hard-to-be-a-man-of-the-people Dad, my well-meaning social worker mom trying to keep in her inward sun and losing after a hard day of crack addicts and homeless people. I see the way her brow gets more embedded into her head, the wrinkles, cracks and fissures from all she sees throughout her day. Maybe a little inward sun would do her some good too. Dad could use enough sun to make him shelve the rock and roll, quit the construction business and go back to being his normal engineer self.

Inward Sun, Norpramine.

That morning on the way to the pharmacy the way the sun hits my chin is like the first day of Summer, wall to wall blue sky. Inner sun and warmth on my face. The little bell that goes off when I walk into the pharmacy. The lady with glasses and the long white coat, almost smiling. I hand her the prescription with my doctors real signature right next to my imitation. She drops two sets of pills into two little bottles. Take four times a day, with water.

Inward sun is the big letter N emblazoned on the pill. Nopramine. You lose the lows but you lose the highs too.

Maybe not. Maybe this is my inward sun. Vitamin C, Norpramine. You take the good with the bad. I walk home with both of them in the bag from the pharmacy.

These days my thoughts leave me alone now. I'm cut off, but I'm not suffering. The sentences still go 45 rpm, in my head, but they are just words now, one exchangeable for the other. And the clouds are flattened out into an always grey with occasional sun breaks.

Dysthymia. Depression. Norpramine and Vitamin C. Inward sun. Exacerbate. Proper grammar and punctuation, that's what people judge you by.

