

Driving Under The Influence

Susan Lewis

It's time to give up our 20th Century ideals and admit the truth: there's nothing drugs can't do. I'm not talking about mind alteration but the good old-fashioned men-in-white-coats variety. They're Frankenstein's, neither *benevolent* nor *mal*—simply more powerful than their progenitors, those frail furless animals of which I am a typical example. Having wrought what we have wrought, what can we do but swallow and wait for them to trample or coo? I say pills share their secret of success with insects: both are small and plentiful and adept at taking advantage of accidents. The finest pharmacological discoveries, it seems, have arisen from side effects. Adaptability: that magical ability to see out of the corner of one's eye. To aim straight ahead yet be prepared for sudden swerves. She who insists on maintaining her course is dead.

Maybe I'm no Plato, but you can't argue with the facts. In my case it's nothing life threatening, only life degrading: migraines. I know what you're thinking: the modern woman's consumption, the plague of the 21st Century *bourgeoise*. Never having had consumption, I don't presume to pass judgment. I do know what it means to confront a white-hot glare of nausea on the verge of searing through your skull, so when my doctor offered me a black and white capsule that may or may not be intended for anxiety-ridden performers and hypothyroids whose obesity exerts an uncomfortable pressure on the walls of their arteries, I did not say no. Sure, I wondered if he wasn't commenting, *sub silentio*, on that bit of a roll beneath my navel, or the tendency of my voice to rise to an unappealing pitch in the heat of argument. But I concluded he was neither interested nor observant enough to notice either one. Besides, to the shock of this die-hard member of Skeptics Anonymous, the little darlings worked. My migraines became creatures of memory, like dental pain and orgasm, analogies that do not spring to mind strictly by accident. By unfortunate coincidence, this was just about the time I began seriously considering divorce.

Every time my marriage hits the rocks I think about my mother. This time what came to mind was the image of her, stretched like a limp Cleopatra on our living room couch with a wet facecloth draped across her forehead. In the Early Days memory file the couch is white, the marble coffee table kidney-shaped. A short, spherical sterling vase gleams around its bouquet of white cigarettes. Later the couch is forest green tapestry; the table sports a wooden box of fragrant cigarillos. Still later there are dried flowers in earth tones undulled by dust. In fact, for the eighteen years I lived Chez Mom I had absolutely no first hand experience of that substance, making my debut into domestic independence a shock indeed.

But to return to the point: my mother had to tough out her migraines alone. There were no such things, in those days, as blood-pressure dampeners or mood elevators with felicitous pain-relieving side effects.

Being the self-appointed family seismograph set to detect the early warning signs of my mother's mood swings, I was convinced from an early age of the correlation between the flare-ups in her temper and her temples. I was sure, for instance, that a more liberal dose of aspirin promptly administered could have preempted scores of my parents' gravest clashes. I would watch them—most often from the backseat of the car, where most of my childhood memories are set—their bodies broadcasting updates of their escalating tempers and inwardly scold them for succumbing to problems that were so obviously chemically induced. At the moment which (in my memory) always came after they had established by quasi-logical discourse the insoluble nature of their differences, when my mother rested the back of her hand on her closed eyes—my mother's equivalent of the boxer's time-out bell—my own levels of frustration and confusion would spike off the charts: the elderly reflex of I-told-you-so finger-wagging, meeting my infantile world-about-to-collapse terror in a vortex powerful enough to threaten even the most emotionally seaworthy with shipwreck.

It so happens that from the age of six I was a dedicated rationalist. Throughout their fights that is, throughout her tantrums of disappointed tears and his conciliation taunted into roaring fury, I repeated one inner refrain. *Why can't they?* Why can't he see that she doesn't really mean what she says? Why can't she admit she's not really upset about what she says she's upset about? Why can't they stop yelling and go back to being happy? Why can't I pretend to the innocence appropriate to my years and whine *why can't they?*

It was just at this moment so critical to my future mental health that a silence would fall over the warring parties. I would sit in my bystander's seat and try not to make a sound, holding my breath and waiting to find out if the heroine would be saved or crushed by the speeding train. Like any cliff-hanger habitue, I knew what would happen. Still, there was no breathing until it did. Since my mother's eyes would either close or turn away (pretending to be riveted by the oleanders lining those Los Angeles freeways), she always missed the first sign. My father's shoulders. They would suddenly lower by half an inch, as if the puppet-string had dropped from God's hand. At that glimpse of his neck I could almost feel my life resume its comfortable purr. At that moment I could almost breathe again.

But not quite. There was one more set of moves in their dance, one more opportunity for my mother to sabotage everything I held dear.

It would happen minutes after that first neck sighting. Without a word my father would take his right hand from the steering wheel and glide it across the transmission, above the armrest dividing their bucket seats, onto her hand, which was usually in her lap, clutching a Kleenex. My father could be elegant; there was no doubt about it—he moved his hand as subtly as a wrangler reaching for the bridle of a rearing horse. He kept it low, so as not to startle her. Most of the time it didn't touch hers right away. It hovered there, beaming down its warmth,

alighting gradually yet inevitably, as it had always been there, as if it belonged, as if there was nothing about his hand resting on hers to question or dispute.

I always wondered what would happen if she pulled her hand away from his. These days I wonder if she should have. What if the force of his will simply outlasted her outbursts? What if he merely wore her down? What might she have done if I hadn't been there watching from front row center? It just so happens she never did pull her hand away. It just so happens she's married to my father to this day. I don't know if they fight as they once did. These days they carry on their lives without an audience. I imagine the temperature of their interaction has cooled, now that they're both past seventy and her migraines have accompanied her estrogen levels into the dustbin of history.

Its worn condition makes the saying no less true: *plus ça change, plus ça reste*...also: like mother, like you-know-who. One difference I've already dwelt on, *ad nauseum*: there's a black and white capsule dispersing in my blood stream, even as I drive. *Et voilà l'autre*: it's me driving, my husband sits on the passenger side, squirming to get the pressure off his bum right hip. Also, it's dark, and there's no one in the backseat except the dog. On other drives the empty space back there provokes discussion—but not tonight. Tonight, in fact, nothing can tease more than a monosyllable from my mouth. Don't think my husband isn't trying. Questions, probing insights, requests for probing insights, endearments—he's trying it all. And what am I doing? Let's just say I'm concentrating very hard on the lane in front of me and checking the rearview mirror with the assiduity of a driving student, wishing he would go back to sleep so I could listen to Beethoven in peace.

Not good, you say, and I'd have to agree. Still, I'll tell you something funny. It's another felicitous side effect—maybe even a side effect of the side effect of the wonder drug whose praises I sing. No more fear. That's right, and not only fear as I'm learning tonight, but its milder cousin, alarm. There's no doubt about it: the realization that my marriage is in its current state of decay would have made a wreck of me a year ago. I would be crying; I would be screaming; I would have pulled the car to the side of the road and banged my forehead against the windshield until something changed.

Nature is driven by an inexorable logic, it occurs to me as I drive (barely exerting myself to ignore my husband's latest attempt at conversation): pain is the body's way to warn itself of trouble. This drug shuts off pain, not to mention fear and alarm, those other warning signals. No warning signals: no advance notice. Finally, (it occurs to me) I am the innocent I always longed to be. Finally, I'm someone who doesn't know trouble until it happens. Ergo: I have no responsibility to avert it. Like the child I never was, I may simply accept whatever comes to pass.

Perhaps you can guess the rest of the story. By now my husband and I are past the point of bothering to fight. I've lost the will, perhaps also the interest. Even my memory is empty: somewhere along the way I've misplaced the thread

that binds me to the person sitting beside me. I can no longer answer the question, why him? The fact is, I can't even keep him in my mind. No, it's my mother who keeps showing up; my mother with her headaches, which I no longer have.

And here it is, the grand coincidence: now is when he chooses to shift his left hand away from his body, and glides it past the gearshift knob, to the steering wheel, toward my right hand.

And here, all of a sudden, is the moment I've wondered about. The thing is, there's no headache bringing tears to my eyes. No fear. No sense of alarm. Just this drug, which has miraculously, terrifyingly, wiped my brain clean.

Oh, not entirely. I do think, for a moment, about the dog. But then I look straight ahead at the long black road and see that endless string of headlights like an extravagant rope of diamonds winding its way to the dark horizon, and I jerk my hand away from his and take the steering wheel with me and watch where it will take us.

