

Being a Father With Mental Health Problems Is Terrifying

**I wrestle with two opposing desires: to hold my family close,
and to protect them by pushing them away**

Sometimes my writing predicts the future. Not grand sweeping societal changes or new technologies or the winner of the 3:15 at Newmarket. Little things in my own life.

For example, in 2011 I put out my first poetry collection, *Pub Stuntman*. The title poem is about a crass, idiotic drunk who downs alcohol for attention. I genuinely believed I had written it about some of the characters I knew back home.

In 2012, four weeks after I got married, I quit drinking. I told people I was taking a break, but in my heart I was pretty sure I'd never drink again. Since then I haven't had a drink, and I haven't really felt the inclination. It's like something had been building in me for years, beneath conscious awareness, and suddenly it broke the surface.

I had been a binge drinker since my late teens. As a teenager I felt weird, isolated, ugly, nervous, and unlovable. Not unusual feelings for an adolescent, but very real and very painful nonetheless. I was badly bullied in a way that made me terrified to leave the house, and I blamed myself for being stupid, clumsy, and hateable. I felt that if only I had been more cautious, more reserved, and more streetwise, I wouldn't have drawn attention to myself.

Drinking dimmed all the blinking alarms, muffled the klaxons.

I was a nerd at a time when being a nerd openly was very resolutely Not Okay. I had no internet to find communities of people like me, who liked (okay, loved) Super Mario, Choose Your Own Adventure books, science fiction, and horror. I got roasted for reading at all.

Booze was a way to circumvent that constant feeling of hyper-vigilant worthlessness. Of casting around for threats while being petrified of making eye contact with someone who might decide to start yelling insults—or worse. Around age 10 I was on my way home when I was mugged at knifepoint and beaten up. I got regularly heckled in the street, and the only place I really felt safe was in my bedroom, playing on the computer or reading.

Drinking dimmed all the blinking alarms, muffled the klaxons. While drunk, I felt safe. I experienced optimism. Of course I was often loud, obnoxious, foolish, entitled, and more, and the morning after I felt that great backwash of shame, regret, and anxiety. But drunkenness was both sanctuary and superpower. I got to feel confident, spontaneous, and even attractive.

But I wasn't dealing with the underlying issues. Not even slightly. And I think the poem was my brain's way of sneaking them out, of saying, "Hey, over here! Help!"

My first published novel, *The Honours*, is about a 13-year-old girl called Delphine, who lives in 1935 England with an artist

father who is very poorly. He suffers from paranoid delusions, acute anxiety, intrusive thoughts, disordered thinking, and auditory and visual hallucinations. Delphine dotes on him, even as the symptoms of his condition cause her (and her mother) to suffer.

When I started writing *The Honours*, I wasn't a dad. I wasn't even married. Halfway through writing the sequel, *The Ice House*, I became a father to a wonderful, spirited, funny, kind daughter called Suki.

The hardest thing about writing both *The Honours* and *The Ice House* was managing Delphine's relationship with her father. She adores him and craves his approval and affection. He is irritable and distant, with occasional bouts of florid psychosis.

I remember lying on the floor screaming in the midst of a panic attack. On the other side of the door my wife turned up a compilation of nursery rhymes on YouTube.

I wanted to show the destructive effect on Delphine's welfare, but without depicting him as a monster. Her father is clearly unwell, he often has sufficient insight to know he's unwell, and he's torn between showering his family with affection and keeping them at bay so his illness doesn't take them down. He's not (to me, at least) a monster, but his actions create suffering.

I remember, with deep shame, lying on the floor screaming in the midst of a panic attack. On the other side of the door my

wife turned up a compilation of nursery rhymes on YouTube to drown me out, so our daughter wouldn't hear me tearing my throat, shrieking with terror. I couldn't keep it in, even to prevent scaring a little girl too young to understand.

I have managed a severe panic disorder for about a decade. Before I stopped drinking, I tended more toward depression, but since I became a teetotaler the depression has largely vanished, replaced with periods of intense anxiety. Often I had three or four major panic attacks a week, sometimes lasting up to two hours each. The attacks were so intense that I would be prostrate on the floor or pinned to the bed, screaming until I was hoarse. When I drank, I self-harmed to control my anxiety. When I finally broke my addiction to self-harm, the underlying panic was all-consuming.

Being a father with mental health problems is terrifying. I realize now that the character of Delphine's father is a projection of my worst fears. Today I am the proud father of a miraculous, willful, determined, fiercely compassionate girl, and I have to wrestle with two powerful opposing desires.

The desire to draw her close, to be present and emotionally available, to encourage and lift up and adore her. And the desire to flee, to hide, to keep her safe from the pain and the madness that swirl through me in my bleakest moments—for fear of passing them on.

Sometimes, when I am looking after her, I feel overwhelmed. When my anxiety is bad, I have a tendency to interpret advice as criticism, to feel attacked, humiliated, stupid, and inadequate. I worry about this bright, loving child going to school and getting bullied as I was. I still vividly remember

sitting with my eyes closed as four boys stood around me punching me in the head as hard as they could. In my young mind I absolutely deserved this. It was a sacrifice, and the universe would reward me by giving me the stickers I wanted. The thought of my daughter not only going through something similar but also thinking about herself in the same terms sickens and horrifies me.

I'm afraid of modeling self-loathing, self-criticism, self-cruelty. No matter how much genuine love I heap upon my daughter, I can't help but feel she will attend far more to how I act than to what I say. And if she detects that I habitually dislike myself, that I walk in terror of criticism, of hate, of the mob descending upon me with that rain of fists, she loves me enough that she will internalize some of that behavior.

I've often described *The Honours* and *The Ice House* as stories about monsters with no monsters. It's a cute description that pleases me but communicates very little except my penchant for self-congratulatory quiddities.

I don't believe, fundamentally, that anyone is a monster. People may act in ways that cause tremendous harm and they may harbor ignorant and destructive beliefs, but no behavior, pattern of behavior, or intrinsic propensity divests a person of their essential humanity. My stories sometimes have beings with wings or horns or fangs or compound eyes, but they are all people. They wish for happiness and they don't want to suffer.

Writing this ideology into fiction is an aspirational act. Asserting there is a common, inalienable value in all of us,

regardless of what we do, is at odds with what I've told myself when lost in severe depression and anxiety. Asserting the existence of hope and the value of striving when all seems so very bleak—when those we love grow old, sicken, and die—is my attempt at establishing a beachhead against the vast, shadowy army of hopelessness.

I write about guilt and cruelty and moral failure, emotional frailty and loss and death because these are the specters I long to break bread with. I write about hope, and the possibility of redemption, because I long for these things in my own life, and the reification of the novel as a form mistranslates and reinvigorates my own thinking so I can see it for the first time.

I once wrote a poem for a sculptor who worked with reclaimed iron railings. He was going through a divorce, and he wanted his daughters to know he still loved them, that he would always be there for them, even though he didn't live at home anymore. When I read him the poem—a very slapdash thing, mostly his own words jotted down in 15 minutes as part of a project I used to do called the Poetry Takeaway—he broke down crying, and we ended up holding each other as he sobbed.

There was no real art to it, but hearing his own words read back by a stranger turned in his heart like a glass key. Something unlocked, something changed, even as nothing changed at all.

I still manage chronic anxiety. Some days are good. Some days are hard. But the panic attacks are rare. Sometimes the anxiety is barely here at all. Nothing has changed, but perhaps in writing about my monsters, in spending time in

their company, something has been unlocked.

Recently I heard my daughter singing a song to herself: "I am wonderful. It's okay to be sad sometimes." She's right on both counts, of course.

Anxiety craves permanence. It takes the outstretched hand of friendship and tries to nail it to the table. Suki is teaching me a different way of being.

I can't predict the future, and that's all right. I am wonderful. It's okay to be sad sometimes.

(Source: Medium)