



Ponder Review

CREATIVE NONFICTION

ROB ROGERS

MORNING COFFEE

The blurred amber-white cross hatches of a curtain backlit by a rising sun appear before his crusted eyelids as he greets a new morning. In that hazy delusion between slumber and routine, he forgets for the moment that he has awoken far from home. Instinctively, he reaches beside the bed for the coffee sweetened each morning by a rotating menu of cookie and candy bar flavored creamers. As his hand returns empty, he realizes she is not there.

He'll just have to wake up on his own this morning.

Rather than Colombian roast, he is greeted by the scent of hewn maple with a hint of wet hiking boots and his own morning breath. He finds his glasses on the frame of the wall beside his bed, then raises his head and looks across his cabin at the empty wine glass beside his open Lenovo ThinkPad.

His home for the week is spartan but comfortable and contains everything a writer could need. A cozy bed with several quilts, an electric heater mounted to the far wall that kept him warm all night, a portable fan for white noise. A pair of well-washed glass sliding doors past the foot of the bed, a small window behind him with its shade folded up. A metal chair with a salvaged patio cushion and a folding table, light enough to position perfectly by the doors to gaze outside for inspiration. The tablecloth was a thoughtful touch, nice to add color to the room. A ceiling light and small lamp that he has yet to turn on.

He picks his cell phone off the floor and sees it's 8:00 a.m. He missed the sunrise again. Oh well. A fresh pot of coffee should be waiting across the hilltop in the pottery barn, past the shower house, and it's not going to walk itself to him. He has an hour left to write, and his last hour of morning sunshine should not be wasted. Time to get up.

His toes find his Tevas beside the bed and he rises, then pulls open the curtain and the sliding door to draw in the cold morning air. He forgets momentarily that he is only wearing boxers above the ankles. It's more than he would wear at home, but his neighbors in the other cabins could walk by. The raincoat flung over the chair and the shorts beside the bed that he wore hiking yesterday should do. It is, after all, already 50 degrees and he'll be carrying hot coffee on the way back from the barn.

But it can wait until after he stretches. A few more deep breaths. He doesn't wake up in the mountains very often.

His thoughts briefly skip home. She's probably been up for a while. Or maybe she's sleeping in. He hopes so. She deserves to sleep in for once.

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It has been only eighteen months since his wife began greeting him each morning with coffee. It's one of the few things that hasn't changed during that time. It's not a bad way to measure how far he has come.

Coffee has been with him all his life. Through high school debate and theater, pre-dawn AP exams, early morning college classes, all-nighters studying for law school finals, late nights and early mornings writing briefs and preparing for depositions. At airports during flight delays, waiting for trains at foreign vacation destinations, lounging with her at seaside breakfast tables, enjoying quiet mornings beside the bay at her parents' house. Coffee has always meant more with his wife.

Although she inherited a propensity toward maternal kindness that has always made even the most stressful days brighter, serving him coffee in bed has not been one of their morning routines until recently. He spent the first 17 years of their marriage getting his own coffee, often multiple cups before she woke up, and he occasionally even brought her a cup. Back then he drank his black as hell, and only for industrial purposes.

Then the nightmares returned. A decade of adolescent depression that had lain dormant for a quarter century returned in a cataclysmic eruption, and a crisis finally arrived a year and a half ago. His mind finally cracked, and crippling anxiety nearly destroyed his professional and personal relationships. Two different three-month sabbaticals from work in a year became necessary.

Of course, none of this surprised him, and he warned her long ago that it could happen again. He even included a codicil about it in his marriage proposal. Ever the lawyer, he had to include a disclaimer to avoid too much guilt if the disease she had never seen, but that he knew all too well, ever returned. It took a while, but the inevitable fall finally occurred.

Many of the symptoms this time around were different, as his illness had metastasized while in remission. But not all of them. Home again was the insomnia, with its pre-dawn convulsions of racing thoughts and pessimistic rumination that resist distraction by television. Being unable to sleep made everything else much harder to control.

A return to therapy and psychotropic medication provided the blueprint for recovery, but they couldn't stop the early morning agony. Nothing helped, except the soothing, stabilizing pre-dawn conversations with the woman who loved him. And those conversations were always accompanied by coffee.

Initially he tried to white-knuckle it through those mornings without waking her until at least 6:30 a.m. His abnormal circadian rhythms had long

ago driven her to sleep in a separate bedroom, so when his pre-dawn explosions returned, he initially tried to survive until the sun rose by rewatching the movies on his iPad that had helped him fall asleep in hotel rooms. She was, after all, still working and supporting the family, and there was also the sixth grader who needed attention before school. But on several mornings, she awoke to delirious confrontations that were nearly impossible to avoid or disarm.

Having little other choice and not yet wanting to leave him, she began setting her alarm clock for 5:45 a.m., preparing to extinguish any blazes smoldering in his bedroom before workdays began. And so began their new routine.

Each morning at 5:55, his door would open, and she would appear with two cups. The last glimmers of starlight through his Venetian blinds would illuminate the covers she lifted before settling beside him. She would receive a report on his latest symptoms—how long he had been awake, if he was obsessing about the familiar subjects, what tactics suggested by his therapist had been deployed, and whether they were working.

On lucky mornings, he'd quickly become calm, and she'd be permitted to fall asleep beside him for a few minutes. On others, too many during those first few months, he would remain so agitated that she would have to step out and allow him to try to regain self-control before returning with two more cups for them to sip under duress. Sometimes the tears flowed in torrents, and she would hold him while he quivered in her arms and promised he would somehow, someday get better. She always tried her best to believe him.

But always, there was coffee.

Depression is comical in its contradictions. The stimulant that had fortified him through years of a stressful legal practice by shaking him to life and empowering his confidence now was a sedative used with medicinal compassion to calm him down. Little else seemed to work for a while.

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Eventually their mornings became more peaceful. Trazadone lengthened his sleep to four hours a night, and Prozac and Lamotrigine leveled his moods and increased his ability to slow his racing thoughts and ignore their destructive content.

As the amount of time he slept each night began to increase, she began setting her alarm clock later, first 6:00, then 6:15, then 6:30 a.m. Her knock on the door was more often greeted by a yawn and his kind-hearted lies about having managed to remain asleep before she arrived. Their discussions slowly became more focused on reflections of progress made. Mental notes were studied to identify milestones. He was also transformed by the discovery of a long undetected passion for writing and began writing

his memoir. He even felt ready to return to work three months into the first sabbatical.

Still the morning coffee routine continued. The script shifted from examining the current symptoms of his disease to forecasting work stresses that could induce panic attacks. They would anticipate the unpredictable and strategize how to overcome the unexpected. Their pre-dawn conversations became a prophylactic remedy.

But sadly, the initial hope of recovery didn't last. They still had more nightmares to endure.

He soon began to realize that his latest fight with depression had changed him, and he was forced to give up his job. Writing the book seemed to help. But the corner they thought they had turned was a mirage, and as they approached the release date for his book, it became clear that things were not getting better. He thought that confessing openly in his book about his illness would help him conquer it. But the stress of publicly disclosing his past left him trapped. Cognitive distortions that he did not yet understand, the voices in his head telling him that no one will ever like or accept him, took their revenge. Stripped of the armor of secrecy, those voices told him that the public revelation of his weaknesses would destroy him by drawing scorn that he could not bear.

The alarm clock was set back again, and their pre-dawn hours were now devoted to hypothesizing about what had gone wrong and how the next breakthroughs could be achieved. She could have been scared by the setback, could have given up hope. But through his second freefall, she remained strong and supportive, persevering through the bitter mist rising from their mugs each morning. She told him that she was proud of him for not giving up and that their marriage would be fortified by their pain. She climbed down into the hole with him to try to pull him back into the light, but the weight holding him down was too heavy for her to carry alone.

And so he cracked again during another furious, sleepless night one month before his book was released. Darker temptations he had not felt for more than twenty years tortured him through that night. By the time she arrived with coffee the next morning, he could not drink it. They both feared they may never share coffee again.

Again, she helped him survive. They escaped to the ocean for the day and planned their next steps. A second sabbatical was deemed necessary, and this time they would also try hospitalization. They needed, once and for all, to finally locate and dig out the tumor, no matter how long it took or how much more pain it caused.

They found an outpatient program close to home where he could focus on his disease during the day, but still spend the sleepless nights and mornings at home with her. Once again, she met him before dawn each

morning to brace for another day confronting his demons and trying to conquer them.

The two months he spent in treatment were often painful, but he finally began to learn what was wrong and how to cope. And he shared it all with her, while having coffee in bed before the sun rose. They reviewed what he was learning about post-traumatic stress and cognitive distortions. They studied feelings wheels and anger icebergs and urge surfing. They talked about avoidance and projection and catastrophizing, and she helped him reframe his understanding of the past. They practiced tactics like box breathing to arrest panic attacks and reminisced about Lamaze classes, except this time she was the coach holding his hand.

Slowly, they began to reframe the self-destructive core values that had been holding him hostage since he was a little boy. By working together, they retrained his mind to leave the past behind and rebuild a new life. As more nights turned into sunlit mornings, they both began to heal.

He eventually began sleeping six hours each night, and by the time he finished treatment and was ready to return to work for good, she had unplugged her alarm clock. Finally, she could spend mornings exercising again. The time for self-care that had been stolen from her by his illness was recovered. She could now treat the wounds inflicted on her by his disease. She began posting inspirational videos on Facebook of the sun rising above their neighborhood during morning walks. More and more often, he remained asleep when she returned.

But still, even now, she greets him each morning bearing a cup of coffee as he lies in bed, her arms now moist with sweat, a hint of freshly applied Secret accenting the aroma of the Taster's Choice. Now he usually asks her to set the cup beside the bed before she leaves to shower. Sometimes he falls back to sleep, and the coffee is often cold by the time he drinks it. But she doesn't mind. It's nice to see how much things have changed.

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But this morning, he is not with her. For the first time since the nightmares returned, he has left her to spend a week writing in the Adirondack Mountains.

She doesn't worry about him being beyond her care. He's been back at work for five months now. The sleepless nights are distant memories. There are still occasional panic attacks, but they are more easily arrested and never last that long. Fewer mornings are spent analyzing progress. Contentment has become his default mood. Her own needs are once again an equal priority.

The long-feared release of his book arrived without the apocalypse he expected. The others did not judge him after all. Friends he had held at arm's length expressed heartfelt sympathy, asked to learn more, told him they

were proud of him and wished they had known before. Many cheered for him at book signings. Their support was sincere and made him feel loved.

The initial comfort he found confessing his pain to the world drove him to write more. He began penning essays about his cognitive distortions and how the two of them were learning to cope with them. Several pieces were published in literary magazines, and one won an award. He discovered a new identity and began calling himself a writer to strangers. He became proud of the new person he was becoming.

And so he decided to come here, to the mountains far from her, to spend a week at a writing residency with other authors, living out his new fantasy. He has shared coffee with strangers while confessing his struggles, and they are kind, encouraging. He has enjoyed philosophical meals prepared with locally grown delicacies in the shadow of peaks lit by the setting sun, the spring flowers blooming in the valley below. During starlit evening retreats, he has read the confessions he types on his laptop to other artists while sitting on a cozy loveseat and nibbling on chocolate. Their compassion warms him like a new cloak. The clouds in the night sky have rolled away and the divine is within reach. He is inspired.

But still, he wishes she were here. He stares at her photo on his phone and presses it gently to his lips. The scent of hazelnut and her lavender shampoo rises from the screen. He can feel the caress of her fingers through his hair and the embrace of her arm around his shoulder. He'll be home soon, and she is never far away.