Message in the Sand

by Paul Illidge (April 2023)

Subway, Lily Furedi, 1934

I was trimming the weeping mulberry tree in front of my house after dinner one warm July evening in 2007, when a short, paunchy man with a brown handlebar moustache wearing a blue ball cap marked POLICE jumped from a black SUV and charged across my lawn with his Glock pistol pointed at my head.

"*Step away from the tree! Drop the garden shears and put your*

hands where I can see them!!”

I dropped the shears as ordered and threw my hands in the air. My 18-year-old son, Nicky, who’d been vacuuming the inside of his beaten-up Plymouth Voyager van in the driveway, shot to attention, a look of terror on his face when he saw what was happening.

Above the garage, his older brother, Carson, was strumming Neil Young’s “Like a Hurricane” on his guitar, window open, amp at medium volume, unaware of what was going on down below. My 15-year-old daughter, Hannah, was at her friend Holly’s house a few blocks away.

Within seconds a half dozen more SUVs had squealed to a stop along the sidewalk. A dozen officers poured out and, led by a female officer in a blue jumpsuit, a blue ball cap and black army boots, hustled up the driveway, handcuffed Nicky and I, then rushed us inside behind two officers with their guns out who were racing upstairs to get Carson.

He was brought to the living room, made to sit on the couch with Nicky and me, the three of us scared, confused and wary. The way the cops were carrying on, shouting to each other over the racket they were making upstairs and down, searching the house for “cash, drugs and guns” as the arresting officer had ordered, one wrong move in all the pandemonium could easily have resulted in a gun or two going off.

We spent a night in the local police station jail, charged with marijuana trafficking. We did have some in our house, eight plants and a garden tray of baby plants, growing in a hydroponic unit in the corner of my writing office in the basement. For recreational and medicinal use only, I hasten to add. Our handful of plants was hardly the trafficking mother-lode the cops were making it out to be.

A condition of our bail, which we were granted late the next afternoon, was that we weren’t allowed to live in our house

till our court case concluded, six months down the road at least, though more likely a year.

My three children moved in with my ex-wife, while I stayed with friends or lived out of my car.

With no place to work, mortgage, taxes and monthly bills to pay, I was broke within a few months. I put my house up for sale, but stood to lose my share of the proceeds since, even though the court case was still on, banks wouldn't finance houses that the police had identified as grow-ops. I had no choice but to accept a low-ball settlement. I sold my car, stored the few possessions I had left with friends, and applied for welfare: five-hundred dollars a month to pay rent and live on.

Like many people, I'd had my bouts with depression over the years. It was something that I felt I knew more about than most because my mother and her mother, my grandmother, had suffered from it most of their adult lives. They would refer to it as "coming down with the Bleaks," moods so dark, feelings about themselves so low that they didn't know how they could go on living.

That was pretty much the way I was feeling at the time, or so I told my doctor when I went to see him about my worsening state of mind. The drug bust, the police abuse, expensive criminal lawyers, the judgement and condemnation of relatives, friends and neighbours for what the police accused me of: using my sons to deal my drugs for me—operating an organized crime gang, like the Hell's Angels or the Mafia, which was what the police were alleging because there were three of us, the minimum for organized crime charges. All this because we had eight, twelve-inch high marijuana plants growing in a hydroponic unit I purchased at a gardening store. And a psychotic, busy-body neighbour.

Our lives had been thrown out of control by a neighbour's

malicious whim. According to our lawyers, the boys would be fine, but the cops would lie their way to a guilty verdict for me, portraying me as Fagin from *Oliver Twist* using my sons to do the dealing then turning the profits over to me. Five years for me in penitentiary was virtually a slam dunk.

I told my doctor I felt I'd come down with a bad case of the Bleaks. I explained the term to him; explained that my mother and grandmother had each been institutionalized for it.

He said he remembered me mentioning the Bleaks at an appointment years ago. More and more studies were showing that these things were often inter-generational. He felt it was a good start that I was aware of hereditary mental health issues since most people weren't, preferring the skeleton-in-the-closet approach instead. He suggested that I consider one of the many antidepressants now available. "They've come a long way from Prozac," he assured me.

I told him that while I appreciated the suggestion, I had serious reservations about the drugs Big Pharma produced. I'd had friends who had been messed up using anti-depressants, two of whom had committed suicide.

He repeated his point about advances that had been made since the days of Prozac. He promised that the drugs were so much better now. The pros far exceeded the cons. Side-effects had been considerably minimized. Feeling as low as I'd indicated, his concerns were for potential further deterioration in my condition. He said all things considered he felt it was worth giving antidepressants a try.

While I thought things over he made his final pitch, explaining the differences between *serotonin reuptake inhibitors* and *monoamine oxidase inhibitors* and how each affected the brain. Much of what he said was lost on me. But his concern for my health seemed to be so genuine that he elicited my tepid agreement to try Wellbutrin. The sale made,

so to speak, he added that Wellbutrin was one of the most popular and effective antidepressants out there. “Popular and effective,” I kidded him. “Sounds like you’re prescribing a diarrhea cure.” With a wry chuckle, he wrote out a prescription …

The following I wrote on November 25th, three days after taking my first pill:

A Trip to Wellbutrin Land

It’s 5:45 a.m., November 22nd and I’ve just taken my first 100 mg dose of the antidepressant Wellbutrin that my doctor prescribed, a round orange tablet I washed down with cranberry juice immediately after I woke up.

It’s been seven days since I bought the pills. I’m due back at the doctor’s next week, at which time he will want a report on how the Wellbutrin is working out so he can make what he called *adjustments* if necessary. I decided it was now or never, overcame some last-minute reservations and popped the pill.

Nothing happening yet, as far as I can tell, I’ve made myself a cup of coffee and a toasted English muffin with peanut butter and banana slices on it and, though it’s the last thing I should be doing with my fear of what might be in store for me once the drug kicks in.

I’m sitting on my bed looking over the medical information that I printed out on the antidepressant Wellbutrin from the manufacturer’s and the U.S. Food & Drug Administration’s websites.

The words ‘Caution,’ ‘Alert,’ ‘Warning,’ and ‘Danger’ appear frequently in both the government and manufacturer’s texts, and in both documents ‘Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors’ is

given significantly more prominence in Bold font than any of the other side effects and possible contra-indications. The side effects include arthalgia, myalgia, fever, seizures, extreme thirst, dry mouth, dizziness, dermatitis, worsening depression, manic episodes, severe high blood pressure, third degree heart block, complete suicide, hyperglycemia, hepatitis, esophagitis, aggression, coma, delusions, hallucinations and psychosis.

Both sites emphasize that in the event of adverse reactions, patients should contact their physician, but under no circumstances should they discontinue medication.

The information on Wellbutrin as a treatment for depression is provided in the manufacturer's document, one sentence explaining that its efficacy in treating major depressive episodes was clinically established in two four-week controlled inpatient, and one six-week controlled outpatient trial.

A cold shiver runs through me. What a fool. Why did I wait to read the warnings until *after* I'd taken the bloody pill?

Fourteen weeks, three and a half months of testing on a medication that's been designed to treat "major depression disorders"? Sounds like a completely insufficient research and development study to me, yet here it's used every day by millions, generating billions in revenue for its manufacturer.

Like most people, I had always assumed pharmaceutical companies were required to put proposed new drug treatments through years of research and development and rigorous human testing before they were allowed to release the medication for public use.

But from what I'm reading about the accelerated development of Wellbutrin, apparently this isn't so.

I don't know if I'm officially a "major depressive" at this

point or not (come to think of it, I've never heard of a 'minor' one), but an asterisk warning alerts me that if I am, the possible repercussions for those suffering from bipolar (manic) depression and using Wellbutrin are reported by both the FDA and the manufacturer to be the most potentially dangerous of all.

A shiver of fear shoots through my body. I'm familiar enough with the kind of side-effects and adverse reactions that can occur with pharmaceutical medications to know that even though symptoms vary from person to person, in the coming hours it's likely I'll be experiencing at least a few of the reactions on the FDA list. The question is, which ones?

It's coming up to 6:30, forty-five minutes since I've taken my pill.

Definitely experiencing a feeling of light-headedness now, dryness in my mouth and throat, a slight blur in my eyes, my heartbeat accelerating. The Wellbutrin is definitely kicking in.

One of the alerts on the bottle warns me "not to operate a motor vehicle or heavy machinery while using this medication," so rather than take my car downtown to the Direct Energy Centre at Exhibition Place, where I've promised to help an old friend set up his booth selling cutting boards at the "One Of A Kind" craft show, I walk the two blocks to the nearest bus stop. I feel the Wellbutrin begin working as I wait: a hissing in my ears like air escaping from a tire, both wrists and the top of both my hands itchy, my forehead perspiring, hot flushes in my cheeks.

Dying of thirst, I watch a teenage girl waiting with me unscrew the lid on a small bottle of spring water and take a sip. She sees me staring, frowns and looks away.

A ten-minute ride to the subway station, when I get up from my seat I seem to keep rising, overcome by a floating sensation

like I’m lighter than air—yet when I look down my feet are still on the ground. I lift my head, my eyes suddenly unable to look anywhere but straight ahead, the hissing in my ears strengthening to a hollow airy sound like I’m holding conch shells up to my ears—

All of this transpiring in no more than a minute, I make my way toward the rear doors of the bus, feeling that I mustn’t do anything except stay close to the man who’s getting off the bus in front of me. I have no choice in the matter. I’m just supposed to follow him. That’s all I know. I hurry to keep up as we proceed along the crowded platform, aware, when I glance down, that not only is the man wearing the same clothes and shoes as me, the same curly hair—then as if he knows I’m watching him, he turns around glancing back over his shoulder to reveal his face: it’s my own, the same features, the same curly hair. “All you have to do,” he says, “is stick with me and everything will be all right.” As scared as I’ve ever been, I fall in behind him as he leads the way downstairs to the trains.

In a few minutes, I don’t know how many, five maybe, no more than ten, a distant rumbling can be heard down the tunnel. It grows quickly louder, a wind whistles far off in the tunnel, grows even louder and stronger—until the train bursts into the station and roars past the platform maybe three feet in front of my face before in a racket of brakes and steel wheels it slows, grinds to a stop and, after the warning chime sounds, opens its doors.

I step in.

In front of me the Other Me (for in my drugged, disoriented and by now frightened state I consider him so), points out an open seat across the way. I follow him over, the doors close, the train starts moving. In time with the swaying of the car I take the aisle seat while the Other Me takes the window. Just in time. My dizziness has worsened, my mouth and throat are

desert-dry, my pulse races, my heart drums in my ears as a feeling of broken-hearted sorrow overcomes me and I want badly to cry, but for some reason can't.

The car is about half-full, people on their way to work, averting their eyes, dozing, rocking with the motion of the train, no sound except the clattering wheels beneath us as we accelerate through the black tunnel—the overhead lights blinking off momentarily as we switch tracks, blinking back on just before we enter the next station where I'm alone on the seat. The Other Me has disappeared.

We stop and a young man in worn blue jeans, a jean jacket and silver-tipped cowboy boots carrying a violin case sits down beside me.

The doors close, the train moves out. I sit with my hands on my thighs staring straight ahead, no idea where I've been, no idea where I'm going, feeling wretched about myself, fighting off tears, overwhelmed with a sadness approaching grief: "*—No*," I say to myself. "*No* …"

At the fourth stop, a tall, gangly man in a blue and white hockey toque literally dives into the car the moment the doors open. He picks himself up off the floor, checks around with a frantic look on his face then races to take the triple seat across from the young man and me, which has become empty. Squirming, restless, jumpy, he yanks off the toque, squeezes it into the yellow plastic grocery bag he has on his lap, which looks to be stuffed with newspapers. Cracking a smile, he flings his right arm over the back of the seat, crosses a long thin leg over the other and surveys his fellow passengers.

With his long legs, wiry body, pronounced nose and wavy brown hair swept high on his forehead, you could mistake him for Kramer, Jerry's wacky friend on *Seinfeld*. He hasn't stopped fidgeting, squirming, shifting restlessly in his seat since he

sat down. Crossing and uncrossing his legs, he talks loudly to himself in a foreign language that I don't recognize—then begins yipping and yelping, coyote-loud, shooting hostile looks at the increasingly frightened passengers—chuckling to himself, growling, snarling, hollering *YELP!!* at the top of his voice for the minute or so it takes him to grab his newspaper-stuffed grocery bag, open it and pull out a paper.

Kramer, as I can't help calling him, quickly leafs through the paper, finds the section he wants, glances briefly at a few pages then with a look of frustration snaps the newspaper closed. Working quickly, he tears the paper in half, then into quarters, then into smaller strips, flinging them on top of a growing pile beside him on the seat.

He goes through the same routine with three more sections of the paper he pulls from the grocery bag. Continues tearing, jabbering in a loud accusing voice what sounds like: *"Standing-at-the-cupboard-with-a-big-nose up his bum! Standing-at-the-cupboard-with-a-big-nose-up-his-bum!"*

Everyone stares straight ahead. Kramer continues jabbering.

As we enter the next station, he grabs his toque, scrunches it cockeyed on his head and shoots to his feet. Leaving the mound of torn newspaper strips behind on the seat, he grabs his grocery bag of remaining newspapers before stepping over to the doors as the train comes to a stop. He waits for other passengers to exit, and continues to wait until the warning chime sounds and the doors begin to close. At which point he lets out a wild *Yelp!* before throwing himself out onto the platform.

Visibly relieved, the people around me relax as the train begins moving, accelerating—the Other Me appearing suddenly, running up to the window as we gain speed, cupping his hands around his mouth, hollering at the top of his voice over the sound of the train, "*DON'T WORRY! I'LL SEE YOU LATER!*" as the

car reaches the end of the platform and roars into the tunnel …

It’s only 9:30 but I’m feeling exhausted, nauseous, unhappy, irritated, ashamed and above all sunk with a sense of helplessness and impending doom as I walk lost through Union Station trying to locate the streetcar platform, the Exhibition Place car. I can’t make sense of the signs. I seem to have lost the ability to concentrate. It’s like I have Alzheimer’s: I think of something and the next second I can’t recall what it was or why I was thinking about it. My mouth is parched so that when I try to speak asking people for help with directions only a hoarse rasp comes out. Thirst a side-effect of the Wellbutrin, from what I remember. As is the worsening tremor in my hands, the constant licking of my lips, the feeling that my tongue is swollen, blocking my breathing, gasping for air …

After I don’t know how long, I make it onto the Lakeshore West streetcar and over to the Direct Energy Centre without incident. It’s booth set-up day for the 800 vendors at the Christmas “One of a Kind” Craft Show, held in two adjoining exhibition halls, hundred-foot ceilings, high windowless walls, vast as airport hangars.

Sounds magnifying because of the Wellbutrin, I can’t tell, as I enter Hall B, if the dull roar in my ears is being caused by the drug, or just the drone of busy activity as people construct their booths. Add to this the air-conditioning fans rumbling high above, though it feels like they’re thundering right over my head. Forklift engines are revving, back-up signals beeping, loaded dollies trundling by, hammers banging, drills whirring, vacuums whining—while it’s only a craft show, it seems to me the Greatest Show on Earth is getting underway. Where are the elephants? I want to know, and smile for the first time since I’ve taken the drug.

I link up with Don at the security desk. Laughs, hugs, slaps

on the back—it's been a while since we've seen each other. I calm down. We buy muffins and coffee at the snack bar while we wait for the shipping crate with the Larch Wood cutting boards and set-up materials to arrive at the booth space that will be our home for the next eleven days.

A friend since childhood, Don has been living in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia for the past twenty years. His company makes end-grain cutting boards from Eastern Canadian larch trees, which are plentiful in the valleys of the Margaree River basin where he lives. Telephone poles, barn floors, roadside guardrail posts are made from larch, he informs me, though it's called tamarack in Ontario. "It's the only wood that doesn't rot, Illy," he says. Wellbutrin with a firm grip on my emotions, his use of my childhood nickname just then sends a rush of sentimental blood to my head, tears well up in my eyes and I have to turn to wipe them away.

Don fills me in on the schedule for the day: put the display booth together (walls, tables, racks and stands), erect the lighting grid, install the cushioned-rubber floor tiles, unpack the cutting boards, hang the drapes, the pictures of the different boards, the two Larchwood posters across the rear of the booth, set up the phone lines, and he goes on with what is a daunting list for someone in my condition. I panic. There's no way I can do any of this. It's just too much. My head is spinning. I feel I've lost all strength in my arms and legs. My hands are shaking. There's an ache developing behind my eyes. Worst of all, I'm just not thinking straight. *I'm not thinking at all!* I want to confess to Don that I'm going to be useless, I'm afraid I'll let him down, I'm sorry. I'm feeling completely overwhelmed by this situation.

Don will understand, I know he will, but it will leave him in a bind. We only have six hours for set up. There's no one he can call up on such short notice to help him out.

The drug seems to have pulled the plug on humour too. I manage

appropriate chuckles and the odd full-fledged laugh at Don's ongoing comic banter to keep the mood light while we work. But I drift in and out of understanding what it is I'm supposed to find funny in the jokes he's cracking, many of them old favourites I've heard before, comedy bits that Don and our other friends picked up when we were teenagers that we've been entertaining each other with ever since: Firesign Theatre, Monty Python, the Bonzo Dog Band. Today, though, my mind is muddled, cloudy, unable to retain a train of thought. I have real trouble recalling our old routines. I have an overwhelming urge to apologize to Don as we work. *A dog band …?*

It's so bad that sometimes when I try to force a laugh—because I notice Don's laugh—I can barely manage a weak smile. My cheek muscles seem to have stopped working, as if they've been given a strong sedative, or Botox, all the muscles in my cheeks clenched, my jaw immobile, my lips pressed together, my mind going blank every few seconds. Where am I? What am I doing in this place? No answer but the steady hum of the heating fans high above.

"Everything all right, Illy?"

"Right as rain, Donny," a phrase that pops into my head from I don't know where.

"Okay, b'y. *Let's do'er!*"

As is usually the case on the day before a show opens, there are mix-ups, hold-ups and screw-ups galore. A number are serious enough that Don has to head to show headquarters somewhere in the far reaches of the exhibition hall, leaving me sitting on the high-backed IKEA folding chair, watching, in my altered state, as vendors in the surrounding aisles work on assembling their booths, displaying their wares … their loud laughter-filled conversation in what could be Swahili for all I know.

I start coughing the air is so heavily tinged with exhaust fumes from the forklifts, my mouth so dry I have trouble swallowing. I begin choking, my eyes tearing up so I turn away. Overcome with a feeling that I'm losing my balance, I reach for the back of the chair, which I miss but on the second grab reach and hold on tight to, fixed to the spot, a sense that strong hands from above have rescued me and are holding on while I settle down.

My eyes drift over to the wildlife photographer's booth across the aisle: a large, framed close-up photograph of a bald eagle, piercing yellow eyes staring straight into mine, to the right a booth displaying colourful Inuit art, white walls, black shelves on chrome racks and track-spotlights trained on green, black and grey soapstone carvings, bears, birds, whales. To the left a booth that sells shortbread cookies in two dozen flavours. I can smell them all, sweet, spicy, savoury aromas overwhelmed by the scents permeating into our booth from the one behind us: soaps in a dozen fragrances, exotic oils, scented candles. Jams and jellies next to them. Handmade silver jewellery. Mohair scarves, funky hats, woollen gloves, barley-husk pillows: *"We don't sell pillows—we sell sleep!!"*

The fire-alarm begins sounding every few minutes, system testing according to a man's polite, very British voice. "*Please make your way to the nearest fire exit*," he intones.

Is this for real or part of the test? Some drop what they're doing and head for the exits, though most continue to work, the hammer and power-tool cacophony resuming.

A vendor passing by stops beside the booth and, pointing up, draws my attention to five or six pigeons flapping their wings in some distress high overhead near the ceiling.

When the fire-alarm tests conclude, music resumes on the p. a. system: Christmas favourites that I know like the back of my

hand, but which today spark not the slightest hint of merry, holly or jolly . . . the Wellbutrin is seeing to that.

“—Earth to Illy,” Don quips when he returns from the administration office. “How ’bout dem fire alarms,” he kids, adding when I don’t answer: “Everything all right, b’y?”

I put on a smile, get down from the folding chair. “Everything’s all right,” I lie.

Once we have the rubber floor tiles down, the lights, tables and display counters assembled, we get to work lugging and unloading the hundred-pound boxes of cutting-boards from the shipping crate that’s been deposited at our booth, going over production information, features of how the unique boards are made, pricing, tax, processing debit and credit card payments, where to hide the money from cash purchases, and more. Don might as well be talking to himself with the little I can take in. About the only thing I remember is that while here in Ontario we call larch trees tamarack, in Newfoundland they call them hack-ma-tack or, more strangely, “snotty var.”

With the booth built and everything in place for tomorrow morning by four-thirty, we drive over to the Bank Note Pub at the corner of King and Bathurst in Don’s rental car: a neon blue Dodge Magnum. “With 450 cubic inches under the hood,” Don jokes at a stoplight. A woman about our age at the wheel of an extremely small Smart Car beside us casts a disapproving frown. “It was all they had,” says Don, revving the engine mightily so as to annoy Ms. Smart Car.

As we enter the pub, Don tells me I can stay with him in the hotel for the eleven days of the show if I want to take a break from living at our friend Peter’s, who is known for his at times over-controlling nature.

“That would be dandy,” I tell Don with as much enthusiasm as the Wellbutrin will allow me to muster.

The Note, as it’s called, is a large room on the main floor of what used to be a bank in the 1930s. The bank motif has been preserved with high ceilings, low-hanging 1930s-era lights, oak tables and chairs and dark oak booths divided by the original frosted-class teller’s cages.

The place is reasonably crowded, with wall-mounted TVs around the room broadcasting live sports, and rock music pumping on the sound system, a dozen or so other vendors from the craft show sitting down at a line of tables that have been pushed together beside the windows.

Don knows everyone from having worked at other craft shows across Canada and the U.S.. He makes introductions as we take our seats, Don across the table from me near the middle, to the right of me a hefty three-hundred-pound man by the name of Bob. With a wild mane of long grey hair, a bristling grey beard and silver-framed spectacles, he appears to have the Harry Potter wizard look down pat. Apparently he paints oil canvases, landscapes and wildlife mostly, on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia. He’s a man who, according to the smiling woman beside him, is beginning “to look more and more like Claude Monnay every year.” Someone sitting across the table politely corrects her: “It’s *Moan*-ay, isn’t it?” “*Moan*-ay, *Monn*-ay,” the woman comes back shrugging. Bob strokes his beard and, with a benign smile, pipes up: “Maybe that’s my problem, I need a name change.”

To the let of me is a thin, small-framed timid looking man with a voice so soft I can barely hear what he’s saying over the rock music and the sports broadcasters . . .named Graham I gather, a musician who makes CDs of children’s songs. . . who suggests that what Bob really *should do* … however his voice gets lost in the din of conversation … the people around me talking up a storm, voices raised, shouting over the music, everyone at the table laughing except me, for hard as I try, I can’t make the muscles in my face work. I can’t smile, no matter how hard I try.

I pass on alcohol and order ginger ale instead, taking in snippets of what people around me are talking about, answering the questions put to me with a nod or a shake of the head, it doesn't seem to matter one way or another since everyone is having such a good time . . . Don's friends as the drinks keep coming stopping by my chair to say hello, slapping me on the back, happy to shake my hand, telling me I'm going to enjoy doing the "One of a Kind" show for the first time, someone overhearing leaning in to shout that at eleven days, the "One of a Kind" can be a *real killer*, you have to *pace yourself!!*

… More drinks are called for as soon as the waitress finishes setting the fresh ones on our table, and then the food starts arriving and everyone digs in, the waitress plopping a plate with medium rare Angus steak on a shish-kebab skewer, rice and vegetables down in front of me, a dish I don't remember ordering and have no interest in eating . . .too anxious now, agitated, scared of I don't know what, or who and suddenly all I can hear over and over in my head is Kramer chanting: *"Standing at the cupboard with a big nose up her bum! Standing at the cupboard with a big nose up her bum!!"*

A young guy in his twenties who's making me paranoid with the looks he's been giving me from a nearby table, stands up suddenly, walks over, comes up beside me and, leaning down, puts his mouth close to my ear and yells over the noise that he's on his way out, but he wanted to say hello. He introduces himself as Brandon, telling me that I was his twelfth grade English teacher at Thornlea Secondary School. I think I remember him, but I'm not really sure. I make like I do, though, and ask him what he's doing now. He's single, in financial services, lives in a condo nearby …

I pick at the vegetables and rice after he's gone, thinking I haven't eaten all day except for the muffin I had with Don this morning—the floating sensation I had this morning comes on again as well, thoughts running in circles, the fork in my hand with a piece of Angus steak on it that I've decided to

have, shaking noticeably so I put it down before anyone else at the table can see just how badly.

Sure that I'm sweating profusely, when I put my hand to my cheeks and forehead they're dry and perfectly cool. I have to use two hands to hold the glass of ice water the waitress brings me. I down it in one long gulp.

A woman Don introduced me to as Heidi from Montreal when we came in, sitting on my side two seats over, on her third martini by the number of olives in her glass, leans in front of Graham and asks if I'm *feeling* all right. She just wants to make sure, this being my first show and all these drunk and crazy people carrying on the way they are. "Are you *feeling* all right, Paul?" she says. "I just want to make sure."

I want to say "I don't know, Heidi," but we've just met, she's a friend of Don's, so I tell her I'm "right as rain," the expression just popping into my head out of the blue, the same way it popped into my head when Don asked me how I was feeling earlier in the day.

But Heidi has never heard the phrase "right as rain." She starts shouting it around the table she likes it so much: *"Right as rain, Donny! Right as rain, Rodger!! Right as rain, everybody!!! s*he hollers and, hoisting her drink, tells the group to raise their glasses in a toast to us all having not just a *good* show this year, but a *great one!!*

… I'm far from right as rain, though. Things inside are out of control, my only thought one of complete claustrophobia. I'm convinced that I have to get out of the building as quickly as I can or something terrible is going to happen to me, my breathing accelerates, my throat tightens, my pulse beating in my ears … but once more the hands from above, as they did this morning, are holding me fast to my seat. I put both my hands on the edge of the table and force myself to stand up. The chair tips over behind me. I step behind Graham's chair, lean

across the table and tell Don I have to be leaving, thanking him for the dinner, telling him I'll see him tomorrow: "Take care, Illy!" he calls as I turn and make my way over to the door, gasping the frigid fresh air as I come out to the street, breath steaming, my heart racing, then the cold hits and I remember I've left my coat in the restaurant.

I run back to retrieve it. Say my goodbyes again.

Outside once more, I rush for the corner to make the yellow light at the intersection. I cross just as it turns red, desperate to catch the eastbound streetcar that I can see further along King Street heading my way.

On the ride to the subway I sit hunched in my seat, head down wringing my hands, chewing my lips, throat parched … a sensation that I'm being held in my seat by an invisible force, only this time it comes from below—hands are gripping me by the ankles and won't let go. Bleakness deeper than I've ever felt envelops me, sadness, helplessness, hopelessness approach and I'm too weak to fight them off. All I want to do is lie down some- where soft and warm, darkness closing my eyes for me when there's a choking sob, tears come streaming down my cheeks yet when I use the back of my hand to wipe them away, nothing's there—which makes me sadder still these non-tears that are coursing down my cheeks … a hand clutches me by the throat suddenly and begins shaking me, a voice somewhere daring me to cry, to go ahead and cry harder—and that's all I want to do. "*Just let me cry!*" I hear myself pleading. "*Just let me cry!*"

"—University Avenue," the streetcar's automated conductor announces.

Wobbly going down stairs into the subway, I pay my fare and take the escalator down one more level to the train platform. I walk along past several people talking, my head lowered, eyes on the platform floor, holding in the sadness I feel,

fluorescent lights buzzing, the tunnel opening toward which I'm walking—when I spot, on the island between the two sets of tracks, the Other Me, leaning against an advertising billboard with a gloating smile on his face.

I stop and stare. He says nothing, but continues smiling, the moan of wind, a train approaching, green and red signal lights twinkling in the tunnel darkness, the Other Me with his eyes on me, nodding as I step closer to the edge of the platform as if saying to me: "That's the way …" And I think to myself: he's reading my mind because *it is*. To stop the sadness it's what I'll have to do. There's nothing else but that now. Nothing … my feet shuffle forward, the wind accelerating, the train fast approaching, I let my toes touch the yellow line at the edge of the platform, the Other Me smiling over, leaning against the billboard, arms crossed, lips slowly mouthing the words: "*Come* over *here and I'll* tell *you!*"

The wind surge mounting, the roar in the tunnel deepening till there's rumbling under my feet. "*Quick!*" the Other Me shouts: "*Come* over *here and I'll* tell *you!!*" My eyes planted below on the yellow line, my feet forward the final few inches, the shiny tracks, my hands in my coat pockets, the rushing wind into which I lean, end of the line, so long, my lips together as I lean out for a kiss before—the train explodes into the station, someone close by whistling defiantly as the train slows, stops, the doors open and I realize that it's *me* who's whistling, it's *me* …

No one is home when I arrive back at Peter's, so before taking my coat off I run to my room, grab the Wellbutrin bottle off the radiator where I left it, run to the bathroom and flush the pills down the toilet. I then wrap the bottle in a plastic grocery bag and tuck it under the pizza boxes, cans and pop bottles in the recycling bin at the side of the house.

I take a long hot shower, climb into sweatpants and a clean T-shirt then turn out the lights and get into bed. The Bleaks

still hover, but breathing slowly in the darkness, my arms relaxed at my side, listening to my breath come and go, come and go, sadness creeping into my thoughts but getting nowhere, the flames earlier are now just embers which if I blow on them will reignite, so I don't, I just lie there with my eyes closed and breathe, giggling when I remember the *New Yorker* cartoon on the bulletin board in my doctor's examining room that he drew my attention to after prescribing Wellbutrin.

In the cartoon a search plane is flying over a desert island beach in the middle of the ocean. Footprints have spelled **'ELP** in the sand. The co-pilot turns to the pilot, and the caption reads "***I expect at'll be 'im!***"

I chuckle thinking about it.

The pilot and 'is co-pilot 'ave spotted my message in the sand …

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Paul Illidge's most recent book is the true crime financial thriller *RSKY BZNS* (New English Review Press, 2022), a "fascinating story" (Frank Abagnale, Jr., author of *Catch Me if You Can*), a "gripping and intricate read" (Conrad Black). His book *THE BLEAKS* (ECW Press), was a *Globe & Mail* Best Book of 2014. Books in his *Shakespeare Novels* series *Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, Twelfth Night, Midsummer Night's Dream, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet*, are all available internationally at www.kobobooks.com

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