

Disorder

Lily Idle

Word Count: 4,630

Dr. Ashley Hammond – Practice Notes – April 16th

My theory sounds like something one of my patients at the peak of their psychosis might say. They might declare it in the same breath as their firm belief that they were one of the fairies who built the Space Needle. It might come from one of the many who believe themselves to literally be an important deceased historical figure. I treated a Lincoln and a Joan of Arc this week at Harborview. One ward alone has three second comings of Christ.

But still, it seems to me to be the only explanation for everything that's happened the past few months. And for how the situation continues to worsen. The number of seventy two hour involuntary holds has more than quadrupled since the start of February. Court cases claiming "not guilty on account of insanity" have become more common than any other kind. The suicide rate has increased by over sixty percent country-wide and continues to climb leaving families reeling from lost loved ones who had never before exhibited signs of clinical depression.

It has to be the case. It is the only answer. I have to publish, no matter the risk of professional public humiliation. My colleagues and peers may and probably will laugh but then I challenge them to come up with a better explanation than the conclusion I've drawn. Bipolar I disorder seems to have somehow, through some mysterious and illogical means, become contagious. Or, more likely, a virus exhibiting near identical symptoms has spread.

Whichever the case, I hope they don't take my medical license away for this.

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“I wish you hadn’t called it Neuro-Deficiency Bipolaravirus,” Sasha said.

She sat, one bare tattooed leg crossed over the other. The vibrant pink flowers that covered her black shorts perfectly matched the color of her straight shoulder length hair. The greyscale roses engraved across her chest wrapped up her neck, stopping at varying heights just below her chin. Her low cut white tank top revealed their woven Celtic knot-inspired stems halfway down her sternum.

“What would you rather it be called?” Ashley asked.

Her sole mid-arm tattoo lay masked beneath a long sleeved, light blue blouse. A drunken mistake, relic of her early 20s, she had told Sasha. Most of her patients did not know of its existence. Sasha suspected Ashley had shown her to score cool points.

“I dunno,” Sasha said, running a strand of her shockingly pink hair between her fingers so close to her face she could smell the mint from yesterday’s shower. “Not that.”

The soft velvet of the grey couch felt nice against Sasha’s skin. The air conditioning in the office fought back against the balmy summer day and almost won.

“Why does it bother you so?” Ashley asked, shifting the clipboard on her lap.

Sasha appreciated that unlike most practitioners, even some twice Ashley’s age, Ashley used a simple legal pad to take notes. None of that judgmental clicking away at the keyboard, just the smooth soft sound of gel pen on paper.

“I dunno,” Sasha said again. “I guess it just makes it seem like it’s our fault, you know? Like those of us that have been bipolar all along are somehow to blame.”

Sasha’s chest constricted at the injustice. Color began to rush for her cheeks. She

fought to calm herself but not in time.

“It makes you angry. That people would think that,” Ashley said.

“Well, yes. As if we don’t, I mean, as if / don’t have enough stressors already.”

“Do you think a different name would have stopped the symptom comparisons?”

“Stupid people make stupid assumptions,” Sasha said, lowering her tattooed hands from her hair. “Best not to help them with it.”

Sasha looked at Ashley. As she had thought many times before, Ashley was far too beautiful to be a psychiatrist. Her face belonged on magazines or billboards advertising her newest movie. Her large plush lips matched her large blue eyes, her nose joining them together in a straight, delicate line. Her wavy dark brown hair reached the small of her back. She couldn’t be older than thirty five though Sasha had never asked.

“How is your mother doing?” Ashley said.

“Better. They’ve got her on the right meds they think. For now at least. The lithium beat back her mania and she wasn’t up for so long that the low was too bad. Some prozac helped with that in any case. We talk frequently. It’s strange,” Sasha smiled slightly, “having her ask me for bipolar advice. It feels bizarre that she suddenly knows what it’s like after all these years of more or less ignoring mine.”

“Do you find these talks rewarding to you?” Ashley asked.

Sasha could sense another reminder coming that her time was her own, that she didn’t have to council *all* the friends and family suddenly turning to her as the expert. Sasha considered the question, running her lips over each other. Her dark purple lipstick helped them slide smoothly back and forth. She had lingering resentments, sure, but she reserved most of those for her dad who had been loud while her mom mostly silent. The air

conditioning hummed softly through the silence.

“Yeah,” Sasha said finally. “It’s nice to be able to be open with her. Besides, without her insistence that we listen to the doctor, my dad would have had me off my meds from age thirteen, day one, and I probably wouldn’t have even made it to legal adulthood.”

“Has your father returned?”

“Nope,” Sasha said, uncrossing and recrossing her legs. She put her hands behind her head and took a deep breath that smelled faintly of the lavender aromatherapy diffuser blowing in from the waiting room. “He was high off his head when he took off, convinced angels were whispering messages from God in his ear.” She stretched her arms over her head briefly, cracked her neck side to side with a few popping sounds, and then lowered her arms back down beside her. “He’ll turn up in some institution somewhere. Or some ditch. I honestly don’t care which. Mom’s better off without him anyway. He’ll probably try to get her off her meds too, tell her to *will* her mental illness away, like he’s always suggested I do.”

“You’re not worried about him?”

“What he might do to hurt someone else, sure, but trust me when I say death would improve the man,” Sasha said.

Sasha’s eyes found the clock on the opposite wall that hung above the play area which contained a large wooden toy that resembled a roller coaster. Ashley treated patients of all ages though NBPV seemed to only affect teens and adults. Five minutes remained in their forty five minute session. Sasha suspected Ashley was one of the only psychiatrists in the world still willing to provide talk therapy along with medication management.

Sasha watched Ashley’s eyes wander to the clock above Sasha’s head.

“Well I hope you will be able to find some reconciliation when your father does turn up,”

Ashley said.

“Not gonna happen. Last thing he said to me before he vanished was ‘you did this.’ Like I said, stupid people, stupid assumptions. But thank you,” Sasha said, abruptly shifting her tone from the irritated strain she always adopted when she spoke of Don Stafford’s many shortcomings. “Thank you for hoping for the best for me.”

Ashley smiled revealing her perfectly straight, movie star-white teeth.

“Let’s talk meds,” she said, tapping her hands on her clipboard. She put the clipboard down beside her and reached for the laptop on the ground next to her chair. “You need refills on all of them, I believe. And how are you feeling on the new medication?”

“Pretty good,” Sasha said. “Feeling fewer side effects than on the other one.”

“Excellent. Since you’re tolerating it well, let’s increase your dose by ten milligrams to move you toward that therapeutic level. So take a pill and a half now and in two weeks, if you’re still doing well, I’ll send off a prescription for the forty milligram pill.”

“Sounds good,” Sasha said and reached for her small silver backpack on the plush carpet beside her. She slung it around herself as she stood.

“Oh and don’t forget. Next week I have that conference in Cincinnati,” Ashley said standing as well.

“My star psychiatrist,” Sasha said shooting a smile over her shoulder. “I dunno why you even bother with patients anymore.”

“How could I leave my lovelies high and dry?” Ashley said and patted Sasha on the shoulder. “Take care of yourself, Sasha. Call or text me anytime.”

“Safe travels,” Sasha said as she closed the door. “There are a lot more crazies out there now.”

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Dr Ashley Hammond – Practice Notes – June 7th

The conference presented interesting findings many suspected to be true. In short, Bipolar I disorder did not become contagious. The virus, which transmits much like mononucleosis through saliva, has symptoms that strongly resemble - if not entirely mimic - those of Bipolar I.

Several colleagues tested a large sample of couples who share a household, one partner diagnosed with Bipolar I disorder for a minimum of five years. They found that when the couple isolated safely, the non-diagnosed partner did not become infected. The study is still ongoing but it has been a month and the initial results seem rather conclusive.

I hope this study goes a long way toward silencing those ignorants who claim loudly and proudly that we must blame those already living with Bipolar I disorder. Sasha was right. I should not have proposed the name Neuro-Deficiency Bipolaravirus.

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“They found my dad,” Sasha said. She sat, long legs crossed, fiddling with her black crystal pendant. “Well caught him more like.”

“You sound disappointed,” Ashley said.

Sasha smiled slyly, like a child caught doing something forbidden. Ashley knew the expression well enough to know Sasha would explain without further encouragement.

“I guess I am a bit disappointed and I’m honestly not sure how I feel about that. Two stand-up citizens saw him yesterday on the shoulder of the freeway, one leg over the side of the I5 bridge. They pulled over and dragged him back from the edge, quite literally. Cops took him to Harborview and you’ll never guess what ward he’s landed in.”

Sasha gripped her necklace firmly, knuckles whitening. She shook her head slowly, a mirthless grin on her face.

“The same one you were in?”

Sasha smiled wider. Ashley saw a vast array of emotions battling for control of Sasha’s face. Relief mingled with disappointment and a hint of anger tried to sneak its way in.

“Same room, I hope,” she said.

“Has your mother visited?”

“She’s there now and has been every minute they’ll allow her. They’re staggering visiting hours and you can only visit by appointment since they’re so overloaded with patients.”

Ashley hesitated for a moment, sliding her sandals across the carpet, but decided she had to broach the subject.

“And now the real question,” Ashley said. She watched Sasha shift on the couch and begin to fumble with her necklace again. “How does the idea of visiting him yourself make you feel?”

Sasha paused, chewing on her bottom lip. Ashley hadn’t seen her without lipstick in a long while. The new white noise machine Ashley had placed by the door to ensure her clients extra privacy competed with the central air conditioning for audio dominance.

“I guess I feel like I should visit, mainly to support my mom. But then I feel this earth shattering fury that I’m expected to visit when the asshole never so much as called the

whole three and a half weeks I was in. I even got my cell phone back the last week and not a single text.”

Sasha paused to take a deep breath. She released her necklace and pulled against her jean shorts which had begun to ride up her legs. They scratched softly against the couch. She then returned her hands to her pendant. Ashley stayed silent, suspecting Sasha had more to say.

“It’s just unfair, completely unjust that I’ll look like the bigger asshole for doing *exactly what he did* simply because he’s experiencing this all for the first time. Like I’m the jerk since he hasn’t struggled with this since he was thirteen. Like it’s my fault he didn’t have almost sixteen years of parents downplaying or straight up denying his disorder, forcing him to navigate high school with a broken brain entirely alone. I mean, I’m such an ass, right?”

“Sasha, no one could possibly fault you or blame you for not visiting your father. These feelings you’re feeling are entirely—”

“Normal, I know,” Sasha interrupted slumping back against the couch with a subtle thud.

“Well I was going to say justified. You know I avoid that word,” Ashley said with a smile. “My point is that it’s logical for you to feel this way. It would honestly be illogical and slightly alarming were you racing to his side. It is in no way an insult to your compassion or your empathy that you don’t want to support him.”

Sasha nodded.

“The thing you have to ask yourself,” Ashley continued, “is whether visiting or not visiting will affect *you* more negatively. However irrational the emotions may seem - guilt, sadness, regret, and so on - which course of action will magnify them most? Which will provide you the most satisfaction, the greatest resolution?”

Ashley crossed her ankles. The soft light material of her white linen pants brushed against her calves as she did so. She could still smell the detergent from last night's laundry which claimed to be the olfactory embodiment of "clean."

"It sounds petty," Sasha said after a slight pause. "But I think I want to be the bigger person in this scenario. I think that will make me feel best. And also allow me to rub it in his stupid face. Maybe that means I'm visiting for the wrong reasons, but that's where I'm at in any case."

"If it will allow you some peace, it's not for the wrong reason," Ashley said feeling great pride in Sasha's self honesty. She had come a long way since their first meeting.

When the session ended, Sasha stood and tucked the black crystal necklace beneath her striped white and light blue shirt.

"Can I ask you why you hide that necklace of yours?" Ashley said standing as well. "I haven't seen you without it for the last few months, but you always tuck it away before you leave."

A look much like panic flickered briefly across Sasha's face and gave Ashley the strangest feeling that she had caught Sasha committing some terrible crime. But Sasha's expression softened quickly and Ashley's odd feeling passed with it.

"It sounds dumb, but it feels like protection," Sasha said. "But I don't wanna seem like I'm into crystals or voodoo or something because I'm totally not."

Ashley watched Sasha feel for the crystal as she spoke and touch it through the fabric of her shirt.

"Not dumb at all," Ashley said. "See you next week, Sasha."

As the door closed behind Sasha with a muted, almost reluctant thud, Ashley shivered.

She watched as subtle goosebumps rose on her bare forearms but the buzzer signaling the arrival of her next patient sounded before she could investigate the sensation further.

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The ward smelled just as Sasha remembered, crisp and clean as though the word “clinical” had morphed into a cologne. She did not know she knew the scent but it blared into her nostrils with an unnerving familiarity even four years later. The lunch room, which doubled as craft space and classroom, had new drawings and coloring sheets pinned to the walls. They looked similar enough - colorful and chaotic - so as to make the room appear unchanged. The space smelled faintly of mac and cheese, subtle, a mere memory of a meal.

The faces had changed, specific features unfamiliar, but the expressions remained the same. Those stoic and stony and silent in their depression, those wild-eyed and restless in their mania, babbling every thought at racing speeds, and the occasional patient close to baseline visibly counting down the seconds to their release. They had converted the few single rooms into doubles, even the small one she had called home. She peeked into it as she passed by its open door, recognizing it fully even though the walls now stood bare whereas she had covered every inch with magazine clippings and her own drawings.

“Just down here,” the nurse said, a new hire to help handle the increase in intake. She looked several years younger than Sasha, no more than twenty five, though haggard from overwork.

Sasha glanced into the day room and spied the very same ancient and worn down

exercise bike. They had updated the computer from the old grey box she had used but it was still by no stretch of the imagination new. Sasha followed her mom and the nurse around a curve in the hallway she knew led to the removable divider separating the 5 West A ward from its 5 West B counterpart – a complete circle cut in half to better organize the chaos.

“That last room on the right,” the nurse said pointing. “Make sure the door remains open during your visit. And feel free to take him on a walk around the ward if he’d like. A little movement would do him good.”

Sasha rolled her eyes as the nurse turned away, not entirely sure why she did so.

“Honey?” Lisa said as she entered the room with a timid knock on the already open door. It irritated Sasha. “We’ve come to visit you and we brought you your favorite meatball sub.”

Lisa finished in a sing-song voice and lifted the plastic take-out bag in her hand as she walked fully into the room. Her pale floral dress vanished around the door. Sasha took a deep breath and followed.

Don sat on his large hospital bed with his legs dangling off the side like a child on the edge of a pool. He wore his usual blue jeans and faded band shirt with his favorite black zip-up hoodie, all brought lovingly by Lisa. He looked extraordinarily out of place, save for the vacant look in his eyes as he stared out the window securely covered by a sturdy metal grate. You could see the whole of the Seattle harbor through it, the cranes south to the left, the Ferris wheel by the waterfront dead center, and the glistening water of the Puget Sound spreading away to the right. Sasha remembered the view well.

Don tore his eyes from the sights as though reluctantly. His eyes traveled across the room, passing over his mousy wife to land on Sasha. Emotion stirred behind his eyes like

dust blown off an old forgotten record.

“Hi dad,” Sasha said.

She half hoped her face looked blank, sympathetic even, but couldn't shake the feeling that the satisfaction she felt shone through.

“What is she doing here?” Don asked Lisa, eyes still on Sasha, his voice a low hoarse growl.

“Told you,” Sasha said to her mom and smiled in spite of herself.

“Honey, she's here to visit you. To make sure you're okay. To show you that you will be,” Lisa said, walking to her husband's side. She put her arms around him but he remained beside him on the bed. “She's here because she loves you.”

“Let's not get carried away, mom,” Sasha said.

She broke eye contact with her dad and walked to the window. She ran her hand up and down the sturdy metal mesh feeling its coolness against her warm skin.

“She did this to me,” her dad spat.

Sasha smiled and rolled her eyes again, unsure whether her dad could see the gesture, sort of hoping he could.

“Don't be absurd, honey,” Lisa said. “You really think a mental illness could just *become* contagious and that *Sasha* of all people made it so? Scientists have proven it's a virus.”

“They're wrong,” Don said. His resolve sounded surprisingly absolute for someone so depressed.

“Stupid people make stupid assumptions,” Sasha muttered softly.

“What did you say to me?” Don bellowed, jumping to his feet, shaking Lisa's arms off him.

“I said that stupid people like *you* make stupid assumptions, dad,” Sasha said, turning away from the window to face Don.

She slipped her right hand into the back pocket of her jean shorts where she had placed her canister of pepper foam. The feel of the smooth metal against her fingers reassured her. Don stood, panting heavily a few feet from her, between her and the exit.

“I don’t know how this virus came to be, dad, but I know that you of all people deserve it,” Sasha continued just as loudly as Don. She heard footsteps in the hallway growing louder.

Don panted heavily a few more times as Lisa mewed and pleaded beside him looking even smaller than she already was. Very suddenly, he slumped back down onto the bed, collapsing like a punctured life raft. The bed creaked beneath his bulk. He put his face in his hands.

“Donny!” Lisa said and sat down beside him.

Sasha knew full well the power of the word “deserve” to a depressed mind, but felt no sympathy.

“Everyone alright in here?” a tall muscular male nurse asked peering around the open doorway. Sasha removed her hand from her back pocket.

“Come on, dad. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps, you know, like you always told me to do,” Sasha said. “And once you’ve realized that’s physically impossible, why don’t you try and just *cheer up*.”

Sasha brushed past the nurse in the doorway ignoring the look of shock on his face. She traced the familiar path to the entrance door, weaving between patients and nurses in the hallway. The ward sounded louder than she remembered, voices echoing all around rather than solitary screams from the occasional meltdown. Sasha reached the front and signed

herself out on the visitors' clipboard. She waited, tapping her foot rapidly against the linoleum as a security guard opened the great electronic door to the outside hallway with a loud clunking.

Glee fueled Sasha's quick steps down the wide hallway lined with large windows. A great smile erupted across her face as she pushed the down button beside the bank of elevators. The grin still glowed as she exited Harborview's front doors onto the busy street, dialing a number on her phone.

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Dr Ashley Hammond – Practice Notes – August 3rd

I just got off the phone with Sasha. She stood up to her father for which I'm proud of her. She did ask a somewhat strange question though, or imply one rather. Essentially, she wanted my opinion on the moral responsibility one would have were they able to instantaneously cure everyone infected. In a lot of ways, I feel this virus has been hardest on those already diagnosed. Many seem to fear what might happen to them should we find a cure for others. Sasha included, so it would appear.

It's becoming difficult to keep track of who lived with a Bipolar I diagnosis all along. I suppose it no longer matters. We've discovered that NBPV functions much like that of HIV or other autoimmune diseases. Once you catch it, you have it. A life sentence, just as if you're diagnosed "normally." God I hate that word. It's possible that before too long, no one will be able to claim normalcy anymore. No one will cling to it like a gold star they've earned, wear it proudly like a badge.

Abnormal is earth's new normal.

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Sasha could have taken a ride share back to West Seattle but the day was beautiful and she was in no rush. She meandered down Pill Hill, as she called the area Harborview sat atop, to the waterfront where she bought a ferry ticket. When the great car ramp lifted and the boat pulled away from the pier, Sasha already stood near the bow, iced coffee in one hand. The wind smelled salty, that scent that reminded you the water below teemed with any number of sea life. She felt the breeze tease her hair and the long yellow tunic she had chosen to mask the pepper foam weapon in her back pocket.

Sasha reached her right hand down the front of her shirt and pulled out her long black crystal that hung from the fine silver chain around her neck. She sipped from her reusable metal straw relishing the bitterness as she turned the crystal in her hand. It should have glistened in the sunlight which bounced off the water and the white of the ferry deck near blinding even through her cat-eye sunglasses. Instead the crystal absorbed the sun's rays. It lay in her palm like a pocket-sized black hole.

She could end it right now. She could drop the crystal to the deck and crush it beneath the heel of her Doc Martins and the wards would drain like water from a bathtub. The world would right itself and everyone would agree there was just something in the water. She and everyone like her would get shoved back into the margins, mere footnotes. Stigma would shower down like the first flurries of winter snow and it wouldn't take long for it to stick once more.

Sasha never intended for it to pass beyond him. She'd had only one target. She could have tried to tinker with her spell but she had found it rather thrilling to watch the world experience its mental breakdown. To sit by as different became normal, as crazy became common. Before long, it might affect everyone and stigma could never survive that. It would evaporate, dry up like Death Valley in the height of summer.

Sasha sipped again at her coffee and rubbed her thumb across the crystal feeling its icy coolness, its smoothness against her sweaty skin. She chewed at her lip, thoughts swirling like the churning water below.

She could stop all the pain. She could very easily return the suicide rate to where it resided when it had just tormented her and those like her. But that didn't feel right either.

"Share, share, that's fair, right?" Sasha muttered to herself.

Sasha looked back up at the Emerald City retreating to her left. The downtown buildings crowding the edge of the waterfront glistened in the evening sun. The Ferris wheel spun merrily along, indifferent to the world mutating around it.

Sasha gripped the crystal and its chain tightly. She tugged firmly and felt the clasp against the back of her neck give way. The chain slipped down her chest until it dangled from her closed fist. Sasha looked to her left then right but her fellow passengers appeared preoccupied with the sights of the city and each other's company. She wondered which of them might be next. Brain cells already starting to shift, perhaps. Synapses preparing for civil war. Did they really deserve that turmoil?

Sasha took the last sip of her coffee, moving the straw around to loudly slurp up every remaining drop of liquid. She took a few steps back, making space to drop the crystal onto the deck.

If their pain ended, his would too.

Sasha felt her feet move back toward the edge of the deck. She watched herself extend her arm out over the metal railing. She slowly opened her fist, finger by finger, and smiled a grin that would make the Cheshire Cat proud as the cursed crystal dropped into the deep murky waters of the Puget Sound.

“We’re all mad here,” she whispered.

END