

William Styron

DARKNESS VISIBLE

A Memoir of Madness

ALSO BY WILLIAM STYRON

The Long March

Lie Down in Darkness

Set This House on Fire

The Confessions of Nat Turner

Sophie's Choice

This Quiet Dust

A Tidewater Morning

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To Rose

In Paris on a chilly evening late in October of 1985 I first became fully aware that the struggle with the disorder in my mind – a struggle which had engaged me for several months – might have a fatal outcome. The moment of revelation came as the car in which I was riding moved down a rain-slick street not far from the Champs-Élysées and slid past a dully glowing neon sign that read HÔTEL WASHINGTON. I had not seen that hotel in nearly thirty-five years, since the spring of 1952, when for several nights it had become my initial Parisian roosting place. In the first few months of my *Wanderjahr*, I had come down to Paris by train from Copenhagen, and landed at the Hôtel Washington through the whimsical determination of a New York travel agent. In those days the hotel was one of the many damp, plain hostleries made for tourists, chiefly American, of very modest means who, if they were like me – colliding nervously for the first time with the French and their droll kinks – would always remember how the exotic bidet, positioned solidly in the drab bedroom, along with the toilet far down the ill-lit hallway, virtually defined the chasm between

Gallic and Anglo-Saxon cultures. But I stayed at the Washington for only a short time. Within days I had been urged out of the place by some newly found young American friends who got me installed in an even seedier but more colorful hotel in Montparnasse, hard by Le Dôme and other suitably literary hangouts. (In my mid-twenties, I had just published a first novel and was a celebrity, though one of very low rank since few of the Americans in Paris had heard of my book, let alone read it.) And over the years the Hôtel Washington gradually disappeared from my consciousness.

It reappeared, however, that October night when I passed the gray stone façade in a drizzle, and the recollection of my arrival so many years before started flooding back, causing me to feel that I had come fatally full circle. I recall saying to myself that when I left Paris for New York the next morning it would be a matter of forever. I was shaken by the certainty with which I accepted the idea that I would never see France again, just as I would never recapture a lucidity that was slipping away from me with terrifying speed.

Only days before I had concluded that I was suffering from a serious depressive illness, and was floundering helplessly in my efforts to deal with it. I wasn't cheered by the festive occasion that had

brought me to France. Of the many dreadful manifestations of the disease, both physical and psychological, a sense of self-hatred – or, put less categorically, a failure of self-esteem – is one of the most universally experienced symptoms, and I had suffered more and more from a general feeling of worthlessness as the malady had progressed. My dank joylessness was therefore all the more ironic because I had flown on a rushed four-day trip to Paris in order to accept an award which should have sparkingly restored my ego. Earlier that summer I received word that I had been chosen to receive the Prix Mondial Cino del Duca, given annually to an artist or scientist whose work reflects themes or principles of a certain “humanism.” The prize was established in memory of Cino del Duca, an immigrant from Italy who amassed a fortune just before and after World War II by printing and distributing cheap magazines, principally comic books, though later branching out into publications of quality; he became proprietor of the newspaper *Paris-Jour*. He also produced movies and was a prominent racehorse owner, enjoying the pleasure of having many winners in France and abroad. Aiming for noble cultural satisfactions, he evolved into a renowned philanthropist and along the way established a book-publishing firm that began to

produce works of literary merit (by chance, my first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, was one of del Duca's offerings, in a translation entitled *Un Lit de Ténèbres*); by the time of his death in 1967 this house, Éditions Mondiales, became an important entity of a multifold empire that was rich yet prestigious enough for there to be scant memory of its comic-book origins when del Duca's widow, Simone, created a foundation whose chief function was the annual bestowal of the eponymous award.

The Prix Mondial Cino del Duca has become greatly respected in France – a nation pleasantly besotted with cultural prizegiving – not only for its eclecticism and the distinction shown in the choice of its recipients but for the openhandedness of the prize itself, which that year amounted to approximately \$25,000. Among the winners during the past twenty years have been Konrad Lorenz, Alejo Carpentier, Jean Anouilh, Ignazio Silone, Andrei Sakharov, Jorge Luis Borges and one American, Lewis Mumford. (No women as yet, feminists take note.) As an American, I found it especially hard not to feel honored by inclusion in their company. While the giving and receiving of prizes usually induce from all sources an unhealthy uprising of false modesty, backbiting, self-torture and envy, my own view is that certain awards, though not necessary, can be very nice to

receive. The Prix del Duca was to me so straightforwardly nice that any extensive self-examination seemed silly, and so I accepted gratefully, writing in reply that I would honor the reasonable requirement that I be present for the ceremony. At that time I looked forward to a leisurely trip, not a hasty turnaround. Had I been able to foresee my state of mind as the date of the award approached, I would not have accepted at all.

Depression is a disorder of mood, so mysteriously painful and elusive in the way it becomes known to the self – to the mediating intellect – as to verge close to being beyond description. It thus remains nearly incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it in its extreme mode, although the gloom, “the blues” which people go through occasionally and associate with the general hassle of everyday existence are of such prevalence that they do give many individuals a hint of the illness in its catastrophic form. But at the time of which I write I had descended far past those familiar, manageable doldrums. In Paris, I am able to see now, I was at a critical stage in the development of the disease, situated at an ominous way station between its unfocused stirrings earlier that summer and the near-violent denouement of December, which sent me into the hospital. I will later attempt to describe the

evolution of this malady, from its earliest origins to my eventual hospitalization and recovery, but the Paris trip has retained a notable meaning for me.

On the day of the award ceremony, which was to take place at noon and be followed by a formal luncheon, I woke up at midmorning in my room at the Hôtel Pont-Royal commenting to myself that I felt reasonably sound, and I passed the good word along to my wife, Rose. Aided by the minor tranquilizer Halcion, I had managed to defeat my insomnia and get a few hours' sleep. Thus I was in fair spirits. But such wan cheer was an habitual pretense which I knew meant very little, for I was certain to feel ghastly before nightfall. I had come to a point where I was carefully monitoring each phase of my deteriorating condition. My acceptance of the illness followed several months of denial during which, at first, I had ascribed the malaise and restlessness and sudden fits of anxiety to withdrawal from alcohol; I had abruptly abandoned whiskey and all other intoxicants that June. During the course of my worsening emotional climate I had read a certain amount on the subject of depression, both in books tailored for the layman and in weightier professional works including the psychiatrists' bible, *DSM (The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association)*. Throughout much of my

life I have been compelled, perhaps unwisely, to become an autodidact in medicine, and have accumulated a better-than-average amateur's knowledge about medical matters (to which many of my friends, surely unwisely, have often deferred), and so it came as an astonishment to me that I was close to a total ignoramus about depression, which can be as serious a medical affair as diabetes or cancer. Most likely, as an incipient depressive, I had always subconsciously rejected or ignored the proper knowledge; it cut too close to the psychic bone, and I shoved it aside as an unwelcome addition to my store of information.

At any rate, during the few hours when the depressive state itself eased off long enough to permit the luxury of concentration, I had recently filled this vacuum with fairly extensive reading and I had absorbed many fascinating and troubling facts, which, however, I could not put to practical use. The most honest authorities face up square to the fact that serious depression is not readily treatable. Unlike, let us say, diabetes, where immediate measures taken to rearrange the body's adaptation to glucose can dramatically reverse a dangerous process and bring it under control, depression in its major stages possesses no quickly available remedy: failure of alleviation is one of the

most distressing factors of the disorder as it reveals itself to the victim, and one that helps situate it squarely in the category of grave diseases. Except in those maladies strictly designated as malignant or degenerative, we expect *some* kind of treatment and eventual amelioration, by pills or physical therapy or diet or surgery, with a logical progression from the initial relief of symptoms to final cure. Frighteningly, the layman-sufferer from major depression, taking a peek into some of the many books currently on the market, will find much in the way of theory and symptomatology and very little that legitimately suggests the possibility of quick rescue. Those that do claim an easy way out are glib and most likely fraudulent. There are decent popular works which intelligently point the way toward treatment and cure, demonstrating how certain therapies – psychotherapy or pharmacology, or a combination of these – can indeed restore people to health in all but the most persistent and devastating cases; but the wisest books among them underscore the hard truth that serious depressions do not disappear overnight. All of this emphasizes an essential though difficult reality which I think needs stating at the outset of my own chronicle: the disease of depression remains a great mystery. It has yielded its secrets to science far more reluctantly than

many of the other major ills besetting it. The intense and sometimes comically strident factionalism that exists in present-day psychiatry – the schism between the believers in psychotherapy and the adherents of pharmacology – resembles the medical quarrels of the eighteenth century (to bleed or not to bleed) and almost defines in itself the inexplicable nature of depression and the difficulty of its treatment. As a clinician in the field told me honestly and, I think, with a striking deftness of analogy: “If you compare our knowledge with Columbus’s discovery of America, America is yet unknown; we are still down on that little island in the Bahamas.”

In my reading I had learned, for example, that in at least one interesting respect my own case was atypical. Most people who begin to suffer from the illness are laid low in the morning, with such malefic effect that they are unable to get out of bed. They feel better only as the day wears on. But my situation was just the reverse. While I was able to rise and function almost normally during the earlier part of the day, I began to sense the onset of the symptoms at midafternoon or a little later – gloom crowding in on me, a sense of dread and alienation and, above all, stifling anxiety. I suspect that it is basically a matter of indifference whether one suffers the most in the morning or the evening:

if these states of excruciating near-paralysis are similar, as they probably are, the question of timing would seem to be academic. But it was no doubt the turnabout of the usual daily onset of symptoms that allowed me that morning in Paris to proceed without mishap, feeling more or less self-possessed, to the gloriously ornate palace on the Right Bank that houses the Foundation Cino del Duca. There, in a rococo salon, I was presented with the award before a small crowd of French cultural figures, and made my speech of acceptance with what I felt was passable aplomb, stating that while I was donating the bulk of my prize money to various organizations fostering French-American goodwill, including the American Hospital in Neuilly, there was a limit to altruism (this spoken jokingly) and so I hoped it would not be taken amiss if I held back a small portion for myself.

What I did not say, and which was no joke, was that the amount I was withholding was to pay for two tickets the next day on the Concorde, so that I might return speedily with Rose to the United States, where just a few days before I had made an appointment to see a psychiatrist. For reasons that I'm sure had to do with a reluctance to accept the reality that my mind was dissolving, I had avoided seeking psychiatric aid during the past weeks, as

my distress intensified. But I knew I couldn't delay the confrontation indefinitely, and when I did finally make contact by telephone with a highly recommended therapist, he encouraged me to make the Paris trip, telling me that he would see me as soon as I returned. I very much needed to get back, and fast. Despite the evidence that I was in serious difficulty, I wanted to maintain the rosy view. A lot of the literature available concerning depression is, as I say, breezily optimistic, spreading assurances that nearly all depressive states will be stabilized or reversed if only the suitable antidepressant can be found; the reader is of course easily swayed by promises of quick remedy. In Paris, even as I delivered my remarks, I had a need for the day to be over, felt a consuming urgency to fly to America and the office of the doctor, who would whisk my malaise away with his miraculous medications. I recollect that moment clearly now, and am hardly able to believe that I possessed such ingenuous hope, or that I could have been so unaware of the trouble and peril that lay ahead.

Simone del Duca, a large dark-haired woman of queenly manner, was understandably incredulous at first, and then enraged, when after the presentation ceremony I told her that I could not join her at lunch upstairs in the great mansion,

along with a dozen or so members of the Académie Française, who had chosen me for the prize. My refusal was both emphatic and simpleminded; I told her point-blank that I had arranged instead to have lunch at a restaurant with my French publisher, Françoise Gallimard. Of course this decision on my part was outrageous; it had been announced months before to me and everyone else concerned that a luncheon – moreover, a luncheon in my honor – was part of the day's pageantry. But my behavior was really the result of the illness, which had progressed far enough to produce some of its most famous and sinister hallmarks: confusion, failure of mental focus and lapse of memory. At a later stage my entire mind would be dominated by anarchic disconnections; as I have said, there was now something that resembled bifurcation of mood: lucidity of sorts in the early hours of the day, gathering murk in the afternoon and evening. It must have been during the previous evening's murky distractedness that I made the luncheon date with Françoise Gallimard, forgetting my del Duca obligations. That decision continued to completely master my thinking, creating in me such obstinate determination that now I was able to blandly insult the worthy Simone del Duca. "*Alors!*" she exclaimed to me, and her face flushed angrily as she whirled in a

stately volte-face, "*au . . . re-voir!*" Suddenly I was flabbergasted, stunned with horror at what I had done. I fantasized a table at which sat the hostess and the Académie Française, the guest of honor at La Coupole. I implored Madame's assistant, a bespectacled woman with a clipboard and an ashen, mortified expression, to try to reinstate me: it was all a terrible mistake, a mixup, a *malentendu*. And then I blurted some words that a lifetime of general equilibrium, and a smug belief in the impregnability of my psychic health, had prevented me from believing I could ever utter; I was chilled as I heard myself speak them to this perfect stranger. "I'm sick," I said, *un problème psychiatrique*."

Madame del Duca was magnanimous in accepting my apology and the lunch went off without further strain, although I couldn't completely rid myself of the suspicion, as we chatted somewhat stiffly, that my benefactress was still disturbed by my conduct and thought me a weird number. The lunch was a long one, and when it was over I felt myself entering the afternoon shadows with their encroaching anxiety and dread. A television crew from one of the national channels was waiting (I had forgotten about them, too), ready to take me to the newly opened Picasso Museum, where I was supposed to be filmed looking at the exhibits and

exchanging comments with Rose. This turned out to be, as I knew it would, not a captivating promenade but a demanding struggle, a major ordeal. By the time we arrived at the museum, having dealt with heavy traffic, it was past four o'clock and my brain had begun to endure its familiar siege: panic and dislocation, and a sense that my thought processes were being engulfed by a toxic and unnameable tide that obliterated any enjoyable response to the living world. This is to say more specifically that instead of pleasure – certainly instead of the pleasure I should be having in this sumptuous showcase of bright genius – I was feeling in my mind a sensation close to, but indescribably different from, actual pain. This leads me to touch again on the elusive nature of such distress. That the word “indescribable” should present itself is not fortuitous, since it has to be emphasized that if the pain were readily describable most of the countless sufferers from this ancient affliction would have been able to confidently depict for their friends and loved ones (even their physicians) some of the actual dimensions of their torment, and perhaps elicit a comprehension that has been generally lacking; such incomprehension has usually been due not to a failure of sympathy but to the basic inability of healthy people to imagine a form of torment so

alien to everyday experience. For myself, the pain is most closely connected to drowning or suffocation – but even these images are off the mark. William James, who battled depression for many years, gave up the search for an adequate portrayal, implying its near-impossibility when he wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: “It is a positive and active anguish, a sort of psychical neuralgia wholly unknown to normal life.”

The pain persisted during my museum tour and reached a crescendo in the next few hours when, back at the hotel, I fell onto the bed and lay gazing at the ceiling, nearly immobilized and in a trance of supreme discomfort. Rational thought was usually absent from my mind at such times, hence *trance*. I can think of no more apposite word for this state of being, a condition of helpless stupor in which cognition was replaced by that “positive and active anguish.” And one of the most unendurable aspects of such an interlude was the inability to sleep. It had been my custom of a near-lifetime, like that of vast numbers of people, to settle myself into a soothing nap in the late afternoon, but the disruption of normal sleep patterns is a notoriously devastating feature of depression; to the injurious sleeplessness with which I had been afflicted each night was added the insult of this afternoon insomnia, diminutive

by comparison but all the more horrendous because it struck during the hours of the most intense misery. It had become clear that I would never be granted even a few minutes' relief from my full-time exhaustion. I clearly recall thinking, as I lay there while Rose sat nearby reading, that my afternoons and evenings were becoming almost measurably worse, and that this episode was the worst to date. But I somehow managed to reassemble myself for dinner with — who else? — Françoise Gallimard, co-victim along with Simone del Duca of the frightful lunchtime contretemps. The night was blustery and raw, with a chill wet wind blowing down the avenues, and when Rose and I met Françoise and her son and a friend at La Lorraine, a glittering brasserie not far from L'Étoile, rain was descending from the heavens in torrents. Someone in the group, sensing my state of mind, apologized for the evil night, but I recall thinking that even if this were one of those warmly scented and passionate evenings for which Paris is celebrated I would respond like the zombie I had become. The weather of depression is unmodulated, its light a brownout.

And zombielike, halfway through the dinner, I lost the del Duca prize check for \$25,000. Having tucked the check in the inside breast pocket of my jacket, I let my hand stray idly to that place and

realized that it was gone. Did I "intend" to lose the money? Recently I had been deeply bothered that I was not deserving of the prize. I believe in the reality of the accidents we subconsciously perpetrate on ourselves, and so how easy it was for this loss to be not loss but a form of repudiation, offshoot of that self-loathing (depression's premier badge) by which I was persuaded that I could not be worthy of the prize, that I was in fact not worthy of any of the recognition that had come my way in the past few years. Whatever the reason for its disappearance, the check was gone, and its loss dovetailed well with the other failures of the dinner: my failure to have an appetite for the grand *plateau de fruits de mer* placed before me, failure of even forced laughter and, at last, virtually total failure of speech. At this point the ferocious *inwardness* of the pain produced an immense distraction that prevented my articulating words beyond a hoarse murmur; I sensed myself turning wall-eyed, monosyllabic, and also I sensed my French friends becoming uneasily aware of my predicament. It was a scene from a bad operetta by now: all of us near the floor, searching for the vanished money. Just as I signaled that it was time to go, Françoise's son discovered the check, which had somehow slipped out of my pocket and fluttered under an adjoining table, and we went

forth into the rainy night. Then, while I was riding in the car, I thought of Albert Camus and Romain Gary.

II

When I was a young writer there had been a stage where Camus, almost more than any other contemporary literary figure, radically set the tone for my own view of life and history. I read his novel *The Stranger* somewhat later than I should have – I was in my early thirties – but after finishing it I received the stab of recognition that proceeds from reading the work of a writer who has wedded moral passion to a style of great beauty and whose unblinking vision is capable of frightening the soul to its marrow. The cosmic loneliness of Meursault, the hero of that novel, so haunted me that when I set out to write *The Confessions of Nat Turner* I was impelled to use Camus's device of having the story flow from the point of view of a narrator isolated in his jail cell during the hours before his execution. For me there was a spiritual connection between Meursault's frigid solitude and the plight of Nat Turner – his rebel predecessor in history by a hundred years – likewise condemned and abandoned by man and God. Camus's essay "Reflections on the Guillotine" is a virtually unique document, freighted with terrible and fiery