

Do More, Be Less:
A Discourse with Depression

by Ben SD

The time feels early, but my coffee is ice cold. How long have I been staring at this blank document, not even wondering how to start, but if I will at all? I want to write about depression, but what is there to say?

“Nothing,” he says. “Go back to bed.”

I know it’s a trick; it’s always a trick. I know I should ignore him, but he’s got such an alluring voice, and we’ve been friends for so long that it’s hard to imagine he’d lead me astray again. Still, sometimes he’s a little overbearing.

“Go back to bed,” he insists, and it’s tempting.

I manage to deny him. “No,” I say, “I can’t; I’ve got to get this done.” I make a visible show of turning away from him and typing something, anything, just a title, into my blank file.

A Discourse with Depression

“What is it?” He sounds interested. I do believe that he cares, that this is some obscure way of trying to look out for my best interests. He’s interested in me if nothing else. In fact, he has a way of sounding like he’s the only one who is.

“It’s an essay,” I tell him, “but not one of those formal things; it’s a personal essay.”

“I hope it turns out better than the last one,” he says. “What’s it about?”

“Um...” It’s embarrassing to say. I don’t want to admit that he’s so often the object of my attention and affections. “It’s about you.”

He smiles at this. He rarely smiles. “What are you going to say about me?” he asks. I wonder if he doesn’t already know, probably better than I know myself. “Are you going to tell them how I’m the only one who loves you? The only one who will take care of you?” He’s not, but he has a good way of scaring anybody else who tries away.

I say, “Yeah, I guess I’ll have to mention that.” I guess I have to. I look away from him again, trying to focus on the words I need to write out.

Depression is a stain. Depression is a blight. Depression is the culmination of all my failures given abstract form and concrete motivations. Depression is my friend.

There must be a thousand ways I could start this, but none of them sound right. “Why not just start honestly?” he asks, reading over my shoulder. “Not that honesty has ever been your strong suite, but this is drivel. Tell them you can’t live without me.”

Can I live without him? I want to say I have before, but I haven’t. I want to say I’ve tried, but have I ever really tried? I say, “Can you just keep your mouth shut long enough for me to do this assignment? Then we can go right back to the self-loathing.” Sure, I take the pills to keep him sedated, but he’s still my responsibility, my own unwanted pet. If I could, I’d give him away. Hell, if I could, I’d have him put to sleep.

“Tell you what,” he offers, all full of benevolence, “why don’t you just lie down, and I’ll finish the essay for you?” How many times has he offered to help? He’s always let me down. Then, by extension, I always...

“That’s not what I need,” I tell him. It’s a lie, and he knows it, but we both know I don’t need his version of help. I’ll wake up with nothing done, one more stressor added to the list. I turn back to my work in defiance, turn away from letting it become *our* work, and hover my fingers over the keyboard, waiting for my moment of inspiration.

The moment doesn't come. I switch over to a search engine, typing in "figurative definitions for depression." Sometimes when inspiration doesn't come to you, you have to seek it out. I'm rewarded with a list of very literal definitions and an article questioning if depressed individuals are more likely to use figurative or literal speech patterns. I spend half an hour reading it, taking in the data and numbers, and when I'm done, I still don't have the answer to the article's title question. He says, "What's the matter?"

I sigh (I sigh a lot) and say, "I don't have a thesis. I don't even know what my essay is about."

He says, "I thought it was about me."

"You think that about everything," I retort. One thing the article says is that people suffering depression use the pronoun "I" more often than those who aren't. When I look at my depression, I can see that's true. I say, "Why don't you go lay down for once? Take a nap; I'll be sure to wake you when I'm done." I turn back to my work again. He says something, and I can't ignore it or choose not to hear him, but I can choose not to write it out for him.

Depression is the thing saying that you can't when you must. It's the voice that reminds us that we're afraid of heights every time we try to climb higher. It's that indomitable will to won't that shows up whenever our will quakes.

"It's a cliché," he says.

"Yeah," I agree, "sometimes."

"No," he says, "the writing is a cliché."

"Yeah," I agree again. I'm trying to stay on task, but totally ignoring him is worse than any other answer, so I let my simple response hang in the air. *Focus*, I tell myself.

He's the one to break the silence. He says, "You know what I like about you?"

Conceding to his inane queries feels like losing the war, but I know he won't stop.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Nothing," he says.

"Great," I say. "Funny." I still have work to do, but he won't leave me to it.

"You know what? Let me tell you the secret," he offers. "Let me help you out." I sincerely doubt he has anything to say that could help me, but I'm listening. "You need to do more and be less, see what I mean?"

"No," I confess.

"You don't do enough for anybody; you barely do anything at all. You listen to bitter music and swear under your breath, and that's about it. You need to do more so that you can start to have some kind of value." That hurts, and I tell him that. "And that's the other thing," he says, "there's just too much of you. Nobody cares if your poor little heart is sad. Nobody wants to know about your next great project. You don't have value, so nobody cares how you feel. You need to tone it back to a level with *less you* and do more to contribute if you want anybody to give a damn."

I actually think on that one for a minute. He can be pretty compelling. I suppose I could stand to use that "I" pronoun a little less. I guess I use it a lot. I know I should be doing more; I'm always aware of that. "Isn't that a little harsh, though?" I finally ask.

"Maybe it is," he says. He's mimicking concern; he's great at mimicking concern. His faces are as authentic as my own. He says, "What do you think? What's your experience with it?"

That's how he gets me, this time and every time, by turning it back on me. With another sigh, and maybe another after that just for good measure, I turn once more to my word processor,

highlight my sub-par title, then press delete. I speak my new title as I type it in, one word at a time. “Do. More. Be. Less.” It sounds like an ironic self-help book. He’s smiling again.