

**When
Nothing
Feels
Real**

When Nothing Feels Real

**A JOURNEY INTO THE MYSTERY
ILLNESS OF DEPERSONALISATION**

Nathan Dunne

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The horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. Our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home.

— DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

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Prologue

It was approaching midnight. Despite London's winter cold, Maria and I decided to go night swimming. I wheeled my bicycle out of the gate and onto the pavement. My bike made a rusty creak as I squared up the frame and put my feet on the pedals, looking ahead at Maria who blew dust off her handlebars. She turned to me with a smile, and a light wind rushed in among the strands of her hair. Her youth was held by the dark, tree shadows dancing across her face.

The streets were shiny with old rain and streetlights. Car tyres and letterboxes passed in a blur. On one lawn a drunk couple staggered through a garden, kicking the flowers. Maria laughed at the sight of them and, sharp as a church bell, she gave a shout of excitement.

Cold air clung to my face. As I rode, it was as if I was merging with the bicycle and the night air, the shifting of my heels joining with the solid frame, its clarity and purpose, dodging parked cars, weaving through rubbish, the jolt of my arse in the seat as I tried to speed up and jump the gutter. All I could think about was the sensation of my body plunging into the cold water. When we turned from Chester Road into Swain's Lane, I felt like we were crossing from an old country into a new world.

Maria and I had met a year earlier, when she was working as an usher at an old theatre called the Greenwich. It was New Year's Eve. The lighting had an uncommon glow, with candles filling the stage. I made a fool of myself asking Maria out, knocking over a tray of drinks in the process. Maria was chiselled and shy. With black hair that marked her Portuguese lineage, she had incredibly sad eyes, as if her ancestors had passed down ancient sorrow. Up close, you could see a deep scar across the bridge of her nose where she had fallen from a swing and broken her nose as a child. On our first proper date, she arrived carrying André Breton's *Nadja*. She dreamt of being an artist. On the book's slip cover she had drawn statues and plane crashes in black pen.

I was in my first year of graduate study at the University of London, and devoted much of my time to researching a conceptual artist called John Latham. Recently deceased, Latham

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had a long career and produced thousands of paintings, sculptures and performances. After witnessing the sinking of the German battleship *Bismarck* in World War II, he became haunted by images of drowning soldiers. I loved being a student. It was the greatest joy to immerse myself in the history of art. All that paint, muck and intellect. All that desire for creation. Looking at this art, contemplating its material and structure, made me feel alive. My daily routine was often spent at home, working on my thesis, or at the college library poring over exhibition catalogues and reviews by snarky critics.

Art was one of the reasons I fell so deeply in love with Maria. It was something we shared, spending entire days in conversation about the art we admired and the strange disconnect between what was written and said about it. Images and articles about exhibitions filled our texts. We kissed on the steps of Tate Britain and the Victoria and Albert Museum, kissed on the lawn outside the Serpentine Gallery, and kissed in front of Botticelli's painting *Venus and Mars* at the National Gallery. After Maria moved in with me, we lay on the floor listening to records and stared up at the ceiling in the dark. When she laughed at some of the bad lyrics, I leaned over and kissed her scar.

Arriving at the edge of Hampstead Heath, we dropped our bikes and made our way up the hill, moving silently between the trees that seemed to lead us towards a secret rustling in

the grass. We shed our clothes at the edge of the pond and waded into the shallows. Stars shimmered on the water and a half-moon bobbed in the inky black. It was so cold we saw our breath. Swimming out to the middle, we fingered mosses and reeds, then began diving under the water and coming up in wild leaps, splashing one another in a game. In close, she nuzzled my cheek with her nose and lips, her tenderness seemed to come through my skin and settle for a moment.

Immediately afterwards, something happened.

I was hit with a great force, torn in two, ripped from myself.

I swam frantically towards the bank, trying to reach solid ground. Even though my head stayed above water, it was like a great hand was trying to push me down to the bottom of the pond, where the black mud and the sludge would wrap me up like a mummy.

There were no lights, never were. No doors, no keys, no sound. Only a black cave of suffocation and terror and whirling black dust. My eyes were full of black soot. I couldn't see. I kept reaching up to clear my eyes, but the soot wouldn't stop piling up. The more I cleared the soot away, the more there seemed to be.

I was leaving my body.

Bent over in the shallows, I clutched my chest, trying to hold my sense of self together. There was nothing I could do. I cried, tears streaming. I couldn't stop. My whole face began

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to shake, my cheeks going into spasms and my nose dripping snot that mixed with the tears to form a sour metal taste on my lips. I continued clutching at my chest and the air, but it was hopeless.

For a moment, everything stopped.

I stared at my wet hands. They were ghostlike, not my own. I had disappeared, and what was left of me was only a shell. I lost my words.

Maria's voice was far away. 'Nathan, Nathan. Can you hear me?'

Naked before her, dripping with water, I said nothing in response. I couldn't. In a single moment, a split second, I had been locked away, condemned to wander in a body that was not my own. All my nerve endings had, like tiny candlewicks, been set alight. A searing pain tightened around my spine. The great hand was squeezing me from behind. Was it day or night? I knew it was after midnight, here, right by the water, but at the same time I doubted my jangled senses.

Slowly, the soot began to clear, and I could see again. Maria's face was a stranger's, just as my body was that of an unfamiliar entity.

The light on the heath was muted, imprisoned in a tomb of mineral rocks.

Finding my words, I said, 'I'm not me.'

'What do you mean?' asked Maria.

‘I’m not myself. I’m lost.’

‘It’s okay, love,’ she said, itching the tip of her tongue with her front teeth. ‘It’s just very cold, you’re probably a bit dizzy.’

I screamed out, a primitive and bloodcurdling sound, a part of me that I’d never accessed before. I wasn’t sure it was even my own scream. Maria put her hands on my shoulders.

I turned away and ran into the long grass in chaotic, dizzying steps, picking up speed, weaving between logs and rocks with ferocious energy. My thighs had sharp pains. I staggered into a thin stream of moonlight. Stars began to dot my vision. All the blood in my body poured into my face, piling between my skull and skin.

When I finally stopped running, it felt like I’d been going for miles. But Maria was right there, meaning I couldn’t have gone too far. She spoke to me softly for several minutes, leaning in close with a hard look of concern and irritation. I couldn’t hear what she said, only muffled sounds.

‘Seriously,’ I said to Maria, who was, herself, taking deep breaths. ‘What the fuck is happening?’

I fished around in my pile of clothes and found my wallet. For years, I had kept a VICTORY 1945 medal inside its plastic pocket, having bought it at a Sunday market because it reminded me of my grandfather, who fought in the Pacific during World War II. While it was a cheap object, it said to me that if my bloodline can survive war, I can survive being

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out in the streets at peacetime, whatever the trouble. I held the medal in my palm, turning it over and over, pressing it hard into my skin.

The medal weighed me down, and I needed it, a precious worldly anchor in a terrifying new land, one with an entirely new map for sensing and feeling and thinking. I wanted to go back before the swim, where everything would be as it was.

Maria blinked, very slowly. 'Let's get you out of here.'

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Back inside the flat, coats hung, I continued to unravel. My words and thoughts ran away from one another and then circled back, criss-crossing, appearing then disappearing. I had to pretend that I could talk properly, that this voice was really mine, that this façade of skin was really me. But the performance was hard to maintain and took all my energy. I felt that the more I clenched my muscles and stood upright, half-smiling, trying to be normal, the more this strange unreality would be gone from me.

‘I’m not imagining it,’ I said to Maria.

Her mood shifted from amused tolerance to slight concern. ‘Do we have to do this now? You’ll feel okay after a good night’s sleep.’

'I'm sinking.'

'What?' she fired back. 'Get yourself together.'

'I'm going to die.'

She slid a finger along the polished surface of the table.

'Shut up. Not for ninety years.'

I had a frightening sense of moving towards the bathroom, taps running, and lights being turned on and off. In the bedroom, Maria sat me up against our dishevelled pillows and pulled my ruddy corduroy robe in around my shoulders.

My eyes. They're turning themselves inside out.

Before she turned out the light, Maria folded a number of t-shirts, intent on making them as neat as possible, stacking them in a pile on top of the dresser. Even though I was back at home, in my own bed, I felt worse, dangerously bleak. I was stripped raw, my stomach full of pain. I wanted to be cleaved open.

'Please,' I said, begging the darkness. 'Release me from this. Let me return to my body.'

The noise of a passing train.

I couldn't sleep and got up to have a shower. My feeling of having a split self became more acute. One part of my self was empty: a dusty, windswept space. The second part of my self was in a state of confinement. I felt like a puppet, manipulated by something, or someone, outside my body. As I

reached for the hot water tap, the part of me that had split off was watching. I turned around to brush away this feeling of being watched, but my second self stayed behind my back. It was looking at me but I couldn't see it. I had no sense of its form or how this second self was moving me around, only that the awareness of 'me' was now gone.

The feeling of not being me, of having no self, was a radical loss of freedom. The sense of being unfree, of having a part of my self imprisoned, was like the reversal of my life's evolution – the reversal of 'me'.

When I woke the next morning, Maria had already left for work at the graphic design firm, where she sat in meetings surrounded by well-dressed colleagues named Stefan and Annaliese. My first thought was a flicker of hope, that everything was okay, that I was myself again, followed immediately by an overwhelming sense that I was still a puppet, watched and controlled by my second self.

I dressed slowly, shirt first, then underwear, speeding up when I put on colourful socks. With a fire burning up my spine, I began to clean, stripping bed sheets, dusting the dresser, wiping benchtops and walls and light switches and picture frames that housed strange photographs of me from another life. Pausing to stare at them made the fire worse. I raced into the lounge room and put on some loud music, turning it up until the windows shook.

‘I am twenty-eight years old,’ I said to myself, trying to believe it. ‘My name is Nathan Dunne.’

I went to the sideboard, picked up a green vase and began storming about wildly, running into walls, and into the bathroom, where I came to the sight of my strange face in the mirror. Every second, every microsecond, was palpable and vicious. The terrifying slow sense of time wrapped up my nerves, searing my psyche. My face contorted in the mirror. *I’m not me*. I chanted to myself, but couldn’t make out what I was saying. And then I heard it: my name. I tried to chant my last name, too, but I couldn’t.

I started screaming at my face: a gaping wound. A murderous rage built up in me, a medieval cauldron. *Stop*. Violence surged through me, and in my extreme woundedness and terror at the sight of my face, I hurled the vase.

It smashed and the shards littered the tiles.

I reached for the VICTORY 1945 medal in my pocket, rubbing it. Feeling like I might vomit, I lurched towards the toilet. The medal slipped out of my hand into the drain. I dropped to my knees, pressing my fingers into the grate, frantically reaching for the medal. I grabbed an old silver hairbrush and managed to unsettle the grate, only to find pieces of toilet paper and excrement stuck inside. Flakes broke off and stuck to my hand. The smell was of shit and mushy peas.

‘Please, no,’ I said, begging the drain, and hitting the hard porcelain of the toilet with my fist. ‘Please ...’

The smell rushed at my face. I began to gag, but I didn’t pull my hand out, reaching in further and desperately fingering the drain – nothing.

I crawled back out onto the carpet and collapsed onto my side, staring at dust motes, waiting. For what? For my stable sense of self to return. For an evaporation of the distance between the two parts of my self: the release of the part in confinement and the re-embodiment of the fragment left behind.

Amidst the tears, I convinced myself that as long as I kept moving, I would stay alive. *Get up. Do it, now.* I put on my yellow raincoat and black gloves, then made for the front door, where I tried the knob several times before committing. It was snowing. I set out walking along the old path, towards the park, which led up to a set of traffic lights that were changing more rapidly than usual.

I spoke to the part of me in confinement, my second self. ‘I think I can see you. Can you see me? I think I can hear you listening to me.’

A flock of nuns walked out the doors of St Gabriel’s. One of them picked up a snowball and threw it at the back of another nun. A fight was on. Pockets of excited white breath puffed out between them, and in the rush of the game a nun fell over, her black habit spreading out in the snow. She rolled over

onto her back while the others quickly gathered around and pelted her with snowballs, hopping and twisting, throwing their heads back, laughing in full view of the sky.

Was any of this real?

The path was uneven, rising and falling with clumps of snow. I was jittery, full of burning pins and needles. I needed a sanctuary. But I wasn't sure exactly where I was. This place, or another place, this street, or the one over by the post office with the stubborn bollards and garish real estate signs, the one I had walked a thousand times.

'Hey,' I said to myself. 'It's this way.'

'No, it's not.'

'What's wrong with me?'

'You're dying.'

Entering the park, it was deathly quiet. Ferns and frosted thorns sprouted from the undergrowth. Coming to a dense crossing of branches, I surprised a wren. It trembled on its perch, before sailing through several trunks and circling back to the perch, where it stared at me. Its stumpy tail flapped in pert excitement. Something about the freedom of this wren to fly between the snow-covered leaves increased my belief that I was, finally, at the end. I would never be able to return to my stable sense of self. A core part of me would remain lost forever. This excruciating, demonic pain had exhausted me. Every moment, every fresh step in the snow,

was torment. The mere presence of this tiny free bird, a creature of heaven, crushed me. I banged my head against the tree trunk, over and over again, and when I looked up, the wren was gone. I had no self. I had no grasp of 'me'. I couldn't go on. The nightmare must end. I had been changed, morphed, destroyed, reborn into an aching shell of skin. I was no longer free.

There was only one way out.

I waddled into the bathroom and sat on the edge of the bath, turned the taps on at full blast and rocked my head in my hands, trying to soothe or shock my eyes back to their normal state. Nothing worked. The tiles were littered with shards of the broken vase, and I reached for one, running a finger along its sharp edge. Touching my skin with it, I trembled, looking out into the steam, and for a moment I felt the horror of what I was about to do.

All my notions of myself were shattered. My sense of being, self-confidence, self-worth, the way I understood and processed the world, had been ripped away. I sensed that my feeling of no self had its origin in my mind, but I couldn't make sense of how it related to the devastating physical symptoms. My face had become a foreign object. It wasn't

a mask. It was the same face I'd always had. But it no longer *looked* or *felt* like mine. I was a stranger without substance or geography.

My love for Maria was everything. She was the only thing that gave me pause. I had just yesterday believed we would be together forever, have a wedding day, children. But none of those dreams could happen any more, not with this dis-integrated, empty me.

Slowly and carefully, I sank the shard into my skin, cutting from my ankles to my knees. The next cuts were across my shoulders, running behind my neck. I put the shard in my mouth, where it cut my gums and tongue and warm blood began to drip down my chin.

Staring at the cuts on my legs, they were clean – for a moment – and then, slowly, beneath the water, blood clouded the bath.

How could I call out to my body and say, 'Here, this is you?' There was nothing I could do, no willing of the body itself, no particular action, no single vine out of the cave, nothing to cling to. There was no way to grasp my self any more, no tools to put the two parts back together and stand up and say, 'I am me.'

I peed in the water, warmth spreading, and for a moment it brought back a sense of clarity, a granite belief that for some reason I should stay alive. Scrambling around for my phone,

I saw that it was on its last bar, blinking red. I called Maria, saying something at high pitch, saying enough.

By the time the sirens arrived, I crawled out of the bath into bed. The ambulance team hovered over me in the room, uniforms blurring into one, and I heard the quick tear of bandage strips as a woman's hard voice asked me my name. 'Tell me who you are.'

She slapped my face repeatedly, and everything went white.

'Mr Dunne?' A voice came out of the darkness. 'Can you sit up a little higher for me?' It was a blue man, narrow-shouldered, long legs. His eyes were wide and penetrating, but veiled, as if he'd been trained to look at me without looking in. His small mouth was a serious line, and all of his fingernails had been bitten to the quick.

'Mr Dunne ...' The tone was mildly threatening; a schoolmaster who'd spent years trying to teach Latin. 'The sedative we gave you should be wearing off. I know you've had a horrible time, but you're safe here now.'

I fingered the bandages on my legs. 'What's wrong with me?'

Beneath his blue coat, he wore a pair of sleek patent-leather shoes. 'Don't cry, son.'

The man helped me out of bed, walking me slowly down a long corridor into a side room. There was a row of thin, adjustable lights, trolleys propped against the walls, and a framed photograph of clouds that sat harmlessly by the soap dispenser.

‘Hiya, Tom,’ said the blue man in a deep, rich voice.

I was handed off to a shorter man who must have been the ophthalmologist. He wore a plastic cap and spoke gently about eye diseases and vision disorders, guiding me towards a strange goggle machine, which he called ‘the instrument’. Soon, I clamped up in horrible pain. I was in another room. Someone must have said ‘brain scan’ or ‘MRI’ and my mouth became so dry I could feel every movement of my tongue as it probed the cuts on my gums. The machine bore down on me in terrifying shapes, and the rhythm of its beeps had the on/off throb of + – + – + –, the beat that rides the heart. In the half-light there was a low swell of voices and the sound of pens being dropped into a cast-iron mug.

Dread clawed at the pit of my stomach.

‘This won’t take long at all,’ said a repulsive voice.

On my back, alone in the machine, I thought of all the work I was neglecting. How would I ever be able to get back to it? And did I even want to? It seemed irrelevant, even ridiculous. I couldn’t possibly think about the soldiers, not any more. And my finances, already dire, would dry up if I didn’t get it together. The only income I had was from an almost depleted

student loan and what I could make as a freelance copywriter, which wasn't much.

Although my sense of self was gone, I told myself: 'This mind is still my own.' I hoped it was.

Once I left the machine and was able to amble around the ward – rooms groaning with the noise of television cowboys, others smelling of cough mixture and faeces – a woman in gloves appeared in front of me.

'There's someone here for you. She's waiting for you in the cafe.'

Maria at a round table, hands folded in her lap. When she saw my dishevelled state she began to cry, but she didn't turn her head away.

I cried too. It felt like I'd never be able to stop.

'What's happened to you?'

'I'm sorry ...'

She stroked my brow with cool fingers, like a young mother trying to tell if her child has a fever. 'I didn't know things were so bad.'

'I didn't know either. It all happened so quickly.'

She cuddled against me silently, kissing my hands several times, before catching herself and pulling back.

'Things will get better,' I said, my voice straining, trying to sound convincing.

'The house is a mess. Are you ready to talk to me?'

‘I can’t explain. It’s like I am dead, like I’m not really here with you now.’

Her bony knees tilted together under the table. ‘Why did you break the vase?’

‘I didn’t recognise myself any more. I left my body.’

‘What did the doctors say?’

‘They’re going to call me with some results this week.’

Her face was stiff and puzzled. ‘Why is it such a mystery? Are you depressed?’

On the table next to us there was the low rasping sound of a grandmother turning the pages of a newspaper. She was enjoying her Coke.

‘I brought you a change of clothes,’ said Maria, gesturing to a white shopping bag at her side.

I pulled out the shirt, a baggy Hawaiian that I’d only ever worn once on a foolish day trip to Brighton.

‘I thought the colour would make you happy, make you feel better.’

That evening we ate chicken and baked potatoes and salad with too much balsamic dressing. There was no conversation. The red digits on the clock said 8:16. I felt the return of some energy, and after we were done, while Maria loaded the

dishwasher, I scraped the chicken bones and soiled napkins into big black garbage bags. She moved heavily on the linoleum, folding tea towels. I managed to smile for her, and she came to lift up my t-shirt, running her fingers gently over my bandages, before scratching my back.

‘Maybe you had a stroke.’ Her voice was clipped and subtly condescending. ‘A minor one, it could be.’

‘Maybe.’

‘We should have never gone swimming. It was a bad idea.’

I pulled on her pyjama sleeve. ‘I love you.’

She shifted away and put her hands in the sink, fishing around in the cutlery. ‘You might be right.’

‘What does that mean? *You might be right.*’

Shaking her head. ‘This is too difficult.’

A sharp, fiery pain rose up my spine. ‘I need you to be here for me right now.’

‘Thank you for helping with the garbage bags. I know you must be exhausted.’

‘Maria.’

‘I can’t see you like this.’

I reached again for her sleeve.

She went to bed early and I typed *minor stroke* into a search engine, immediately regretting it. My nerves were coarse and brutal. Among the statistics and helplines and alarming personal testimonies, I came across several articles

that suggested we are all dying of cancer. All the time. Sad click after sad click, articles and forums and feeds, scrolling endlessly in an effort to distract from the pain in my spine, to find out what was wrong. Oh, and WebMD, always terrifying, belittling, the fire that never goes out.

It's brain disease, no it's heart disease; it's depression, the worse kind, clinical, the deepest black, no one returns from this kind; it's schizophrenia, of course it is, the delusions, the voices, the seasons all have one name; it's cataracts, lung disease, bowel cancer – yes – probably got a month. No, that's ridiculous: maybe it's colorectal cancer or bladder cancer or kidney cancer, the data, deadly, the stats, bad cells, common in men, chances extremely high, yes, it's some type of cancer, the hourglass in my lap; it's fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, diabetes, body dysmorphia, capgras delusion, Diogenes syndrome, Huntington's disease, transient global amnesia, amaurosis fugax, Joubert syndrome, encephalitis, Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease, wolfram syndrome, dystonia, thalassemia, dysthymia, early dementia, sounds right, can't think, can't remember; cirrhosis, hepatitis; no it's bipolar, splitting open, the trap door, it has to be, this is it, the highs, the lows, mania. Am I bipolar? What the fuck is this? No, it has to be brain cancer.

It's hard to describe my bewildering panic at not knowing what was wrong with me when something was so deeply wrong with me. I was reduced to the status of a child, helpless

and stumbling, trying desperately to reach solid ground. I'd lurch between denial, 'It's nothing,' and catastrophe, 'This is the end.' The panic was so great that I'd descend into clichés: *One day at a time, This is not how my story will end, The sun will always rise in the morning.* When I was of a healthy body and mind, I might have dismissed these as Hallmark card platitudes. But now these clichés held universal truths of resilience and survival.

Even when coming down with a common cold, you never really know how bad it will be, whether you'll have a chest cough or a dry cough, how many days you might need to take off work, whether you'll need to go to the doctor, how much that will cost, whether you'll be able to care for your children or be able to sleep. But now, when the core of my existence, my self, that centre that held me together, was no longer in place, it was like a razor-sharp sword had been jammed down my spine, breaking me in half, casting an essential part of me into a violent storm.

I thought of the VICTORY 1945 medal and how I used to hold it in my hand for comfort, how I would turn it over and press it into my skin, thinking of my grandfather. I wanted to feel its anchor again, the rough texture of its age and the scent of its cheap metal, the way it promised an extension of me. But it was gone now, fallen through the grate into the dark, far beneath me – lost forever.

If I chose to keep living it would always be like this, trying hopelessly to balance on a tiny rock, on this crumbling, unsteady planet. My life was nothing but waiting for the avalanche of hell to bury me in fire. 'Fuck you! I will survive!' They were stupid words. Inside my heart, I knew I wouldn't survive. Soon, I'd be gone from this earth. Every thought I'd ever had about not being good enough, a fraud and a coward and a second-rate lost cause and having a defective brain and bad genes and not being able to do anything right out here in a cruel world of broken humanity, those thoughts had been right. They had led me to this moment of total abandonment and abject loneliness, of living in an uninhabited body. The pain would never cease. No one cared, *not really*. Maybe Maria did, but how long could she tolerate me in this state? No one would be truly there for me and give me the endless, selfless love I desperately needed. I was alone, a petrified little boy. Each minute that passed pressed tighter on me, the great hand holding me down, drowning me, making sure I knew that there was nothing I could do.

I fought with everything I had to stay off the balcony. But I was completely in the grip of the illness. I wanted to die ferociously and instantly. It was urgent. Slam on the asphalt and have my guts smashed upwards against my broken ribs and cracked neck and torn shoulders, nothing left of me but a smear of organs and bones. Only after my physical body

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had been obliterated would this chamber of hell burst open. Only then would the world stop being a burden and I a burden to it.

I looked down at my withering hands, full of spots and lines. My hands were those of a ghost. They were not my own.