

The Shadow¹ of Black Swan

Nightmare² – the Dark Knight of the Soul

The spelling “Knight” is deliberate, anticipating the horse and rider imagery that recurs throughout this account.

For an archer to shoot his arrow, he first pulls the arrow in the direction opposite to his target. So it is with the pursuit of the true nature of the Divine, of Life and the Self.



Joash Shooting the Arrow of Deliverance – William Dyce³

“One can resist the invasion of armies; one cannot resist the invasion of ideas.” — Victor Hugo, Histoire d’un crime (1877)

“This is what the LORD says—I have summoned you by name; you are mine.” — Isa. 43:1 NIV

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.” — 1 Cor. 9:24 NIV

“Then he said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’” — Luke 9:23 NIV

“I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.” — Rev. 6:1-2 NIV

"The Dark Night of the Soul is a period of utter spiritual desolation, disconnection, and emptiness in which one feels totally separated from the Divine. Those who experience the Dark Night feel completely lost, hopeless, and consumed with melancholy. The Dark Night of the Soul can be likened to severe spiritual depression." — Mateo Sol⁴

The Dark Night of the Soul (Losing Who We Thought We Were) — Einzelgänger⁵

Dark Night of the Soul, a song by Loreena McKennitt⁶ based on the poem by the 16th-century Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross⁷.

CONTENT NOTE

This essay is a first-person account of severe depression, psychosis and recovery. It includes references to suicidal crisis, psychiatric treatment, disturbing delusions, intense religious and apocalyptic themes, and other distressing experiences. Some names and identifying details have been omitted to protect privacy. Please read with care and pause if the material becomes distressing. The account reflects my memories and later understanding of events; it is not medical or therapeutic guidance. If you are in immediate danger or considering suicide, contact local emergency services or a crisis-support service in your country. Religious and esoteric language describes how I understood events at the time or how I later found symbolic meaning in them. It is not offered as a clinical explanation of psychosis or as a substitute for professional mental-health care.

In 1991, I moved from Freiburg⁸ in southern Germany to Hamburg⁹ in the north to continue my musical studies. When I had previously completed the entrance exam in Hamburg, I stayed with a couple in Niendorf¹⁰ on the city's outskirts. They had offered that I could contact them again if I had difficulty finding lodging. That happened, and I lived with their family for the next three years.

In my first semester in Hamburg, the winter semester of 1990/91, I desperately wanted to prove myself to my new professor. My studies with my Spanish cello professor in Freiburg had ended in a painful, unresolved rupture, after which I spent more than a year searching throughout Germany for a new teacher. The way I experienced that ending left me carrying shame, guilt, and a profound sense of failure. In retrospect, I believe it became one of the most significant emotional pressures contributing to the depression and psychosis that followed. Eventually, I found a brilliant cello professor in Hamburg whose bow technique was very similar to the French style I had learned in Freiburg. I felt I could relate to him. In my eagerness to impress him, I overindulged in a newfound joy in practising the cello. One of the pieces I had been feverishly practising was the First Cello Concerto by Camille Saint-Saëns¹¹. He also composed the *Carnival of the Animals*¹², a musical suite that includes *Le Cygne* (The Swan), probably the most famous Romantic character piece¹³ for cello.

Over and over and over, I practised a virtuosic passage¹⁴ in the concerto¹⁵, straining every muscle in my right arm to let the bow ricochet rapidly over two strings. After two consecutive days of eleven-hour practice sessions, I was pleased with my progress. On Sunday, the day after I had worked so intensely, I volunteered to cook *Bobotie*¹⁶, a typical, aromatic South African dish, for my new cello class at my Hamburg professor's home. As I stirred the sizzling mincemeat in a large saucepan and strained my right arm, I noticed irritation and mild pain around my elbow and forearm. Unlike the normal muscular fatigue I was used to from playing the cello, I had never experienced this sensation before. Two days later, when the irritation still distracted me while practising, I reluctantly visited an orthopaedic surgeon. The verdict—I had developed overuse syndrome. Coincidentally, two other students in my cello class had also recently developed overuse syndrome. Like them, I had to stop practising immediately. Tendinitis¹⁷ is a dreaded condition among musicians from which one does not recover quickly. The weeks of not being allowed to play my cello became months.

While studying the cello in Germany, I also took correspondence courses towards a Musicology¹⁸ degree through the University of South Africa¹⁹. I had recently cancelled the courses I was enrolled in that year to concentrate fully on preparing for my final examination for the Music Teacher's Diploma. I could not handle doing nothing. My unbalanced life, which at that stage was defined entirely by being a cellist, seemed to be falling apart. It was an incredible privilege for a foreigner to effectively study for free at a German educational institution in the early nineties. My parents and I covered my living expenses, but the post-war public education system covered all my tuition fees. At the time, I understood that five per cent of students at German tertiary institutions were expected to be foreign students. The professional standards were extremely high. Our teachers expected much of every student who passed the entrance exam and was awarded a coveted place in one of only three cello classes at the *Hochschule für Musik und Theater*²⁰. I judged myself harshly, gradually slipping into a mild depression intensified by a grossly exaggerated sense of failure. I did not feel good enough and felt intense guilt for disappointing my new teacher, who had put his trust in me, and, ultimately, everybody else in my life, including myself.

I got to know one of my classmates who also had tendinitis, and we often talked about our condition. I took the advice of the other student who had tendinitis, followed his example, and visited an acupuncture specialist in Germany. He happened to live in Freiburg, 800 km to the south. I also booked a few sessions with a Reiki practitioner in Freiburg. The husband of the cello teacher who had prepared me for Germany was a luthier, then building a beautiful new cello for me. He had introduced me to the practitioner. So, I went to Freiburg for a break from my surroundings and to see whether these two people could help.

But I returned to Hamburg without any noticeable change in my condition. My daily routine consisted of getting up late and sitting in front of the family's television, on which I would watch

the gruesome proceedings of the first Gulf War^{1,2} until the family started returning from school and work. I did manage to do real work. Because I was not allowed to practise physically, I decided to try a learning technique I had heard travelling musicians use to study repertoire during long hours in transit. I started learning a piece of music that had been on my mind for years simply by intensely imagining the physical and auditory process of practising it. Because I knew the sounds and physical patterns of cello playing so well, I was able to rehearse the piece intensely in my imagination without touching my instrument. Months later, when I took up playing the cello again, I played the piece off by heart without looking at the sheet music.

An extraordinary cello teacher came to Port Elizabeth in 1982, when I was in the ninth grade, after my previous teacher left South Africa to work and study in Amsterdam. My new teacher had recently completed her studies in Freiburg with my future cello teacher, whom she had met at a master class in Santiago de Compostela. She was available to come to South Africa.

In northwestern Spain, Santiago de Compostela is the destination of the Camino de Santiago²¹, a network of pilgrimage routes that became one of medieval Europe's principal Christian pilgrimages, comparable in importance to Jerusalem and Rome. The cathedral shrine is traditionally associated with St James the Great²², although the identification of the remains belongs to religious tradition rather than established historical fact.

St James the Great and St James the Just²³ are generally regarded as distinct figures. Christian traditions also differ on how St James the Just was related to Jesus; the Epistle of James²⁴ has traditionally been attributed to him. My parents derived my name from the Afrikaans²⁵ equivalent for James, Jacobus. My brother and I were named after my grandfather's first and second names; my own name was derived from Jacobus.



Years later, a young cello pupil of mine returned to Johannesburg from walking the *Camino* with her family and gave me this beautiful scallop shell³. The scallop, the primary symbol of the

¹ [Gulf War](#)

² While chatting with fellow cello students at the music school, I made a flippant remark about the war. One classmate looked at me and asked: "Jacco, do you know what carpet bombing is?"

³ The scallop shell is the best-known emblem of the Camino de Santiago. Its radiating grooves are commonly understood as the many routes converging on Santiago de Compostela. These are traditional interpretations rather than established historical facts. Source: [The symbols of the Way of St James](#).

Camino, represents, among many other metaphors, the different paths that lead from across Europe, converging in Santiago de Compostela.

And so, my new teacher found her way to Port Elizabeth. To have a mentor, pedagogue, and benefactor like her—someone who gave her absolute best so selflessly—was a rare privilege. Not only did I have more than one cello lesson a week during my final school years to help me catch up after my relatively late start on the instrument, but she also conducted us in two orchestras on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. She organised “listening sessions” in her students’ homes after Junior Orchestra on Saturday mornings, where we would discuss and dissect the cello repertoire. There, I began to think critically, analyse what I heard and reach my own conclusions. I did not need a university to teach me that—I learned it among the eager chatter of my curious music friends from all over Port Elizabeth, accompanied, of course, by plenty of delicious things to eat.

While my schoolmates were sweating it out on the sports fields, I had a music party to look forward to every Saturday late morning. During those sessions, my teacher would sometimes sit with ten printed editions of a Bach solo cello suite strewn across the floor, allowing us to listen repeatedly to and freely critique a range of recordings. We would compare each interpretation’s aesthetic²⁶ strengths and weaknesses in perhaps just the opening phrase—the first fifteen seconds of a three-minute composition. Our regular listening sessions were among the many activities that instilled in me a passionate love for music. In stark contrast to the culture in which I was raised, the world she created for her students was a warm environment where I could express myself freely, both personally and artistically.

At one of these listening sessions during my final year at school, I heard David Geringas play Tchaikovsky’s *Nocturne* for cello and orchestra. I fell in love with it immediately. Its melancholy and pathos seemed to belong uniquely to the cello, and it intensified my desire both to become a cellist and, one day, to perform this piece. Knowing how much it meant to me, my former teacher—who had returned to Freiburg after I finished school in 1985—once told me that learning to interpret it well would mark an important stage in my mastery of the instrument.

Tchaikovsky composed the *Nocturne* as the fourth of his *Six Pieces*, Op. 19, for piano in C-sharp minor in 1873. When he prepared the version for cello and small orchestra in 1888, he transposed it to D minor—the key in which I came to know and perform it. Its opening begins with a rising minor sixth—my favourite melancholic interval—and unfolds in phrases that seem to sigh: tension gathers, descends, and briefly settles, only to begin again. The middle section brings greater movement and a glimmer of light before a short cadenza leads back to the opening material. To me, that return has never felt like a simple repetition. It sounds as though the same sorrow has been revisited and heard differently.

THE OPENING GESTURE

A rising minor sixth



Years later, on one of my birthdays, another of my former teacher's pupils gave me Eugene Ormandy's recording of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, the *Pathétique*, with the *Philadelphia Orchestra*. Tchaikovsky conducted its première only days before his death in 1893. The officially recorded cause was cholera. Later writers proposed suicide and read the symphony as a disguised requiem, but those theories remain disputed and are not established fact. I cannot know whether the grief I hear in this music represents Tchaikovsky's private intentions. What matters to this account is that his music gave me a language for feelings I could not yet express.

Tchaikovsky was a master at giving musical form to melancholy and grief, and the *Nocturne* became deeply entwined with my own descent into illness. It did not cause what happened to me, nor did it cure me. It became a symbolic expression of—and companion through—the frightening journey I was unknowingly beginning. During the months that followed, I returned to it repeatedly, silently in my mind or by humming it softly. Its familiar shape gave me moments of continuity, comfort, and something inward to hold on to when much of my world no longer felt reliable.

A month after returning to Hamburg, when the depression had deepened further, I decided to go down to Freiburg again. I stayed with my former teacher and her husband again. It was during this second visit to Freiburg that the depression suddenly became much worse. I had dropped over the edge of a waterfall, and I found myself gasping for air in the rapids. I decided only to consult the Reiki practitioner again, and it was during a visit to him that I first spoke to anyone about suicide. The response I got from him was not the sympathetic one I was looking for. Speaking from his spiritual perspective, he told me gently but firmly that suicide was not a solution: he believed that I would reincarnate²⁷ into another life and still have to confront the unresolved issues from my present one. After that last session, I walked back towards Freiburg's town centre to catch a tram and meet a South African opera singer and close friend studying there. As I dragged my feet along the cobblestone street, I looked up at the cathedral spire and found myself overwhelmed by

thoughts of ending my life. I imagined my own death and how those who knew me might respond. The thought was no longer abstract; it had become frighteningly immediate.

My friend was alarmed by the condition in which she found me and advised me to go back to South Africa immediately. I could not sleep anymore and developed extreme anxiety. The days and nights became a continuum of ever-increasing fatigue and delirium. I was fast losing it altogether. I stopped communicating with anyone around me. I was in a *horrific* state. Increasingly, I felt that I was becoming a burden to my former teacher and her husband and intruding on their busy family life. In my deteriorating state, I experienced the limits of what they could provide as abandonment and projected a profound sense of betrayal onto them.

At this distance, I cannot always separate what occurred outwardly from what I imagined or interpreted while becoming ill. The fear, abandonment and betrayal I felt were real experiences, but that does not mean that the people around me intended to abandon or betray me. Only later, with a greater psychological understanding, did I begin to recognise how I may have projected²⁸ those feelings onto others. My description of this period as a descent into Hades²⁹ is an interpretation I give the experience now, not proof that the events were arranged to produce such a journey.

I decided to take up an offer to stay with one of my former teacher's adult cello pupils, with whom I had an excellent relationship. With her often wild, long blond hair, she looked every bit the part of a Wagnerian³⁰ Valkyrie³¹. And it seemed that if she could have her way, I would live another day and not be slain and escorted to Valhalla³². She did everything in her power to lift my spirit. It was the beginning of summer, and she took me walking through golden wheat fields around the small town where she lived. They were basking in the warm, late afternoon sun, and she tried hard to make me aware of how delightful everything in nature was. Yet I was beyond experiencing any beauty anymore. Though my eyes registered the images in my deluded mind, my heart could not *feel* the splendour. Outside, it was summer; inside, my world had frozen into the monotonous grey of a northern European winter. We went into Freiburg one evening to go and watch a romantic comedy, *Green Card*³³, which was on the circuit then. I was in a complete state of paranoia³⁴, expecting to be assassinated at any moment by any random stranger in the audience behind us. Many years later, I asked her how she remembered me in the cinema that evening. She told me that I had laughed throughout the film. Her recollection differed sharply from mine: I remember only terror and paranoia, although outwardly I may still have responded to the comedy. I cannot now reconstruct precisely how those two experiences coexisted.

After not sleeping for ten days, I desperately phoned my mother, mustering only one sentence: "I am going to commit suicide." In *my* reality, that was the last time I knew I had spoken a word to anyone for many weeks. My brother, who lived in London then, sped to my rescue. During the two

days I was waiting for him, my mind kept contorting increasingly surreal scenarios for my immediate future. Just before he arrived in Freiburg, the friend with whom I was staying took me back to my former teacher's home, from where we drove to town to fetch my brother at the station. We stopped at the post office on the way. When I was briefly left alone in the car with my former teacher's baby, I became petrified that the car would explode, killing us both. As my psychosis deepened, I became convinced that people close to me intended to punish and kill me in front of my brother and friends. I interpreted this imagined punishment as retribution for rejecting spiritual ideas I had encountered during my first years in Freiburg. None of these scenarios occurred outside my mind. During the psychosis, however, they felt absolutely real, and I could not recognise them as symptoms of illness. I was trapped inside a horror film generated by my own mind, unaware that another account of reality was possible.

The day after my brother arrived, we left for London, where we waited a couple of days for a South African Airways flight back to Johannesburg. In London, the psychosis got even worse. While watching television, I had visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, and olfactory hallucinations³⁵—bizarre visions of an absurd, senseless, and utterly cruel world. I was constantly aware of the smell of death. The smell convinced me that many corpses were decomposing outside in the garden because I could smell them wherever I went, in every room in the house. Once, while reluctantly accompanying my sister-in-law to a nearby shop, I hallucinated that her credit card had grown too large to fit into the payment machine. I related every hallucination directly to myself, particularly what I perceived on the television in my brother's lounge. Everything I saw and heard suddenly acquired a perverse symbolic meaning, which I took as proof that the whole world knew about me and was mocking me. I believed that my closest friends had betrayed me and that even the BBC's programming had been arranged to taunt me. Because my landlord's sixteen-year-old son sometimes imitated what he called my "Kermit the Frog" accent, I experienced Kermit's appearance in *The Muppet Show* as a message directed at me. In another hallucination, I believed I was watching live news footage of firefighters laughing and jeering at people burning to death in front of their eyes. The concealed message I concluded from every person on the television screen that echoed in my mind boiled down to this—"Why bother caring about anything anymore, Jacco? Why bother to love anyone and make peace? Why forgive and try to make a difference? What purpose is there to save a precious life when you, Jacco, with your sinister presence on this planet, have ruined life for absolutely everyone else, and the whole world is going to Hell because of *you*, Jacco?"



Odin rides to Hel – W.G. Collingwood (1908)

Finally, my brother prepared for us to leave for South Africa, which I believed would be my final journey. While passing through Heathrow, I remember watching a Virgin Atlantic aircraft repeatedly taxi in a circle. Its movement struck me as a needless waste of fuel and, in my psychotic state, I interpreted it as a message directed at me: “Why spare the environment, Jacco? There is no point anymore in a world descending into Hell.”

What I remember next was an overwhelming physical and mental shock. In the symbolic language I later used to describe it, it was as though I had impaled my soul on Odin’s sword and been struck by Thor. Instead of charging me with energy and light, the experience seemed to draw everything that remained of my soul out of my body. At that moment, in my psychotic state, I believed that the extra “c” in my name was a sign that I was the Biblical Antichrist, responsible for all evil in the world—including the Gulf War and every other war, death and pestilence. I took upon myself the blame for the “sins” of humanity.

The transition into complete psychosis was utterly perfect. My soul was dead, and all that remained was for my brother to lead us to our physical deaths. I imagined that I had so disgraced the people of South Africa that, because I deserved to die, they did not even want me to be executed on South African soil. I imagined a scene inspired by the Afrikaans book I scrutinised for an oral literary commentary in my last year of high school. I selected a book my brother had recently studied at university by an author with the same name as our neighbour from a few years earlier. It was Elsa Joubert’s 1963 novel, *Ons wag op die Kaptein*³⁶—We Wait upon the Captain—for which she won the acclaimed Eugène Marais Prize³⁷ in 1964. In her book, Joubert described events on a farm in northern Angola where a family of white farmers is held captive, brought before trial, and awaits their imminent execution upon the arrival of the ominous “captain.” In 1984, André P. Brink³⁸ argued in his commentary in *Writing against Big Brother: Notes on Apocalyptic Fiction in South Africa*³⁹ that the Captain is a type of Second Coming⁴⁰. So, in my apocalyptic⁴¹ vision of my Last Judgement⁴², on that day, I imagined that my brother and I would be flown to an unknown destination in Africa. My whole family would be hanged on the gallows before my eyes, after which I would be executed similarly. I saw my death and removal from the planet as the only way to make the world whole again, to bring balance to the equation and lasting peace to the earth.

The fact that my name had an extra “c” made me aware, from very early on, that I was *different* from other children and had a “special” name. In South Africa, my first name is consistently spelt with one “c,” i.e., “Jaco.” My name, “Jacco,” is an *anomaly*⁴³. Even Google suggests the regular

spelling when I search for my full name. This awareness has affected my life in many unconscious ways and shaped my personality and life path. There were two other Jacos in my class throughout my school life, with only one “c.” Every time I had to spell my name, I had to remind people it had two Cs. Another aspiring cellist with the same surname and the standard one-“c” spelling of my first name once attended a South African National Youth Orchestra course.⁴⁴ Although Jacco is more common in the Netherlands, I have encountered only three South Africans named Jacco online.

In May 2001, I went out one evening with fellow musicians and started chatting about the symbolic meaning of birth dates and personality. The conversation sparked a significant new interest in my life: Pythagorean numerology⁴⁵. Numerology is an esoteric practice⁴⁶ that assigns symbolic meanings to numbers. Traditions of number symbolism have appeared in several cultures, including ancient Greek thought and Jewish mysticism⁴⁷, but the modern system I studied should not be treated as a single, 10,000-year-old science. I bought *Initiation into Numerology*⁴⁸ by the Brazilian author Johann Heyss and began an intense study of the numbers in my life.

j	a	c	c	o	v	i	l	j	o	e	n
1	1	3	3	6	4	9	3	1	6	5	5

Using the letter-number system described in Heyss’s book, the letters of “Jacco Viljoen” total 47, which reduces to 11. Within that system, 11, 22 and 33 are retained as “power numbers”; my surname reduces to 33, while my birth date reduces to 9. In that numerological framework, I described myself as a “9-11.” Later that year, on September 11, 2001, when my mother called me down to come and see what was happening on television, I was just in time to see the second aircraft strike the World Trade Centre. My first instinctive exclamation was: “That is [the work of] God!” Soon afterwards, I posted an online numerological interpretation of the attack. The following year, my website logs appeared to show several visits from internet domains associated with the Pentagon⁴⁹ and CIA⁵⁰. I could not establish who had visited or why, but the entries frightened me, and I eventually closed the blog.

In 1985, the same year I spoke about Elsa Joubert’s apocalyptic book, I delivered my final oral examination in my mother tongue at school. I talked about the Coming of the Antichrist and the Second Coming of Christ⁵¹, basing my predictions on some American Christian End Time⁵² literature my father had brought home. The late principal of our primary school gave it to him. The passage from Revelation 13:18—“*This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is a man’s number. His number is 666.*”—was the line I used to open my rather ominous speech. My Afrikaans teacher encouraged me to deliver my “sermon”—my first rather dismal attempt at prophecy⁵³—to the school’s debating society. Weeks later, I panicked when

challenged to write my final essay in Afrikaans. I could not relate to any of the five mundane subjects from which I was required to choose. I hit a total blank; my creativity seemed to have evaporated. I could think of nothing to write about except the same topic as my oral examination. I bent one of the prescribed topics in a direction that allowed me to write about the only subject that inspired me at the time, the coming of the Antichrist and the Second Coming⁴.

To distinguish me from the other two Jacos in our school class, my Afrikaans teacher, who witnessed both my apocalyptic speeches, used to call me a nickname—*Jakkals*. I thought the word “jakkals” was the equivalent of the English expression “fox.”⁵ Under the numerological system I was using, the letters in this nickname reduced to 666.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R
S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	

On arrival in South Africa in 1991, I could not recognise any familiar landmarks in the city. My delusion was so powerful that I refused to believe I was in Johannesburg, the City of Gold⁵⁴, for many weeks. Instead, I thought that parts of Johannesburg had been reconstructed in another African country to satisfy what I imagined was a demand by all South Africans not to allow me back into the country. It was my horror version of *The Truman Show*⁵⁵, a film released seven years later. My father drove me near the place where I had lived for several years in Melville⁵⁶, so that I could see the most prominent landmarks in the city, the twin towers⁵⁷ of the Johannesburg skyline: the Brixton⁵⁸ and Hillbrow⁵⁹ towers. Only then was Doubting Thomas⁶⁰ convinced that he was indeed home in Johannesburg.

From July 1991, I spent five weeks in the Morningside Mediclinic⁶¹ in Sandton⁶², diagnosed with severe psychotic depression⁶³. The doctors administered sleep therapy⁶⁴, antidepressants⁶⁵, and antipsychotics⁶⁶ to me. The periods when treatment kept me unconscious are the only parts of that time I cannot recall. Three or four times a day for approximately four weeks, I walked up to the

⁴ Sadly, the examiners did not appreciate my creative effort. My Afrikaans teacher had awarded me 90% for my oral examination on the topic, and I stood an excellent chance of achieving a distinction (80% or above) for Afrikaans. Still, I must have gotten zero for my written essay because I ultimately scored a C aggregate (60-69%) on average for Afrikaans.

⁵ The word *jakkals* translates as jackal. Jackals belong to the tribe Canini in the family Canidae; most foxes belong to the tribe Vulpini in the same family.

hospital's flat roof and stood there contemplating suicide. This was not a thought that remained abstract or distant: I was repeatedly placing myself physically at the brink of acting on the belief that my death would free the world from the curse I imagined I had placed upon it. During this time, I continued to take total responsibility for all the senseless events I saw reported on television. For example, I took responsibility for the sinking of the *Oceanos*⁶⁷ on August 4, 1991, off the Wild Coast⁶⁸ in the Eastern Cape, where I grew up. Remarkably, all 571 people on board were rescued. I also took responsibility when Eugène Terre'Blanche⁶⁹, then leader of the AWB⁷⁰, fell from his horse during a parade in Pretoria⁷¹. Many South Africans may remember that day—I took responsibility for that too. I anticipated that I might one day envy him—not for the values he represented, but for being a leader among the Afrikaner⁷², the tribe into which I, too, was born.

While I was in hospital, my mother brought me Jeffrey Archer's short-story collection *A Twist in the Tale*, a gift from a friend of hers whom I had not yet met. Her friend had no specific intention other than to help me pass the monotonous hours. The particular Coronet paperback had a cobra coiled into the shape of a figure eight beneath the publisher's red C emblem, together with the line "The expected never happens in..." above the title. Years later, while trying to integrate what had happened to me, I chose to read the serpent, the figure eight, the letter C, and the title, *A Twist in the Tale*, as interconnected symbols. I now understand that as meaning I later gave to an otherwise ordinary book cover, not as a message deliberately placed there for me. The "twist in the tale" nevertheless remained a useful metaphor for the unexpected turns I came to associate with Black Swan events⁶.

After five weeks in hospital, when I had gradually begun to speak the odd word again, I begged my parents to take me home. I did not know how much longer I could resist the suicidal thoughts that returned every day. Initially, I stayed indoors, fearing for my life if I were to go outside alone. When I finally ventured outside alone, it was to walk around within the safety of the townhouse complex grounds. The first time I did this, I walked once around the complex driveway and came straight inside again, immensely relieved that no harm had come my way. Over a couple of weeks, I increased the number of times I walked around inside the complex, and then came the big day when I ventured out the gate and walked around the block all by myself. That day was a triumph for me. And so, over another couple of weeks, I systematically increased the distance and time I spent outside the walls of the complex, walking in the neighbourhood of Fairlands⁷³, ever farther from my parents' home, returning safely after each expedition. It was how I gradually reclaimed the physical world as a place where I felt relatively safe.

⁶ Nassim Nicholas Taleb popularised "Black Swan" as a term for rare, high-impact events that are difficult to predict and are often rationalised only afterwards. He developed the idea in *Fooled by Randomness* (2001) and *The Black Swan* (2007).

But I still was not psychologically safe in the world. Both terrified and intrigued, I treated the television with utmost suspicion and attention. The grotesque hallucinations I had experienced watching television in my brother's house in London convinced me that the TV was “programmed” by the South African Broadcasting Corporation with messages *just for me*. Hence, I ensured that I never watched by myself, just in case I saw something that needed verification from another person. During the five months I spent recovering in my parents' home, I saw precisely two programmes containing footage from Germany, among everything else I watched. The first one I saw was a detective story made in Hamburg, where I had just begun studying. The second was part of a mediocre Canadian three-episode television series called the *Dick Francis Mysteries*⁷⁴ about racing horses. Like the other two episodes, *In the Frame*⁷⁵ began in Canada or Ireland. Then for a short while, the plot moved briefly to none other than Freiburg in Germany, where I had just experienced the beginning of my psychosis. Though it seems on IMDb.com⁷⁶ that no filming took place in Germany, the producers added street scenes to create the impression that it had been filmed on location in Freiburg. I recognised the streets in the beautiful old city where I had often walked; my mother had also walked them when she and my sister visited me in Freiburg a few years before.

To say I was shaken when I saw this would be an understatement. I felt entangled in a mystery not of my choosing. My mother was sitting with me in front of the television. I felt defeated, staring into her perplexed eyes as I tried to explain the immense significance of this mundane synchronistic⁷⁷ event we had just experienced together. At the time, this coincidence felt like proof that my psychosis was not random and that the events surrounding me carried a distinct occult meaning. That was how I interpreted it then; it is not something I can establish as an objective fact.

I always tagged along with my mother like a child who feared staying home alone. Once, I accompanied my mother to the local library. As I browsed the shelves, a book lying alone on a reading table caught my eye. I strolled over and, as I looked at its cover, a chill ran down my spine, and goosebumps flooded my skin. It was a book by the famous Welsh-born mystery novelist Dick Francis^{7 8}. I walked away, afraid to return to the table. Just before we left the library, I thought I should show my mother the book to prove what was happening to me again. When I returned to the table, the book had vanished.

⁷ [Dick Francis](#)

⁸ Dick Francis (1920–2010) was a champion jockey who became a journalist and bestselling crime novelist. Many of his novels are set in the world of horse racing.

Many of his novels deal with crime in the horse-racing world, with some of the criminals being outwardly respectable figures. The stories are narrated by the main character, often a jockey, but sometimes a trainer, an owner, a bookie, or someone in a different profession, peripherally linked to racing. This person always faces great obstacles, often including physical injury. More than forty of these novels became international best-sellers.

One book remained especially vivid in my memory: a German paperback edition of Tania Blixen's posthumously published stories, *Gespensterpferde—Ghost Horses*—which had been given to me in Freiburg. Its cover showed a mottled green horse rising from a barren landscape, its eyes covered by a bright red band, while the pale head of a winged horse appeared behind it. After my psychosis, I came to read the unsettling title and image as though they had anticipated the nightmare I would experience two years later, just as I associated Tchaikovsky's *Nocturne* and Sixth Symphony with what followed. I now understand this as a symbolic interpretation I formed afterwards, not as evidence that the book or its giver predicted my illness.

I regularly accompanied my mother to her weekly Bible study group meetings during the months I lived with my parents. As far as I knew, the invitation had no connection with my experiences. A speaker presented to the group as a “born-again⁷⁸ former Satanist”⁷⁹ was invited to deliver a series of lectures on the occult⁸⁰, spiritual warfare⁸¹, and triumph over Satan⁸² through faith⁸³ in Christ. In my still-fragile state, I interpreted the lectures, the television programmes and the other coincidences surrounding me as evidence of a colossal demonic onslaught—a conspiracy directed against me. That religious interpretation became one of the ways I tried to make sense of experiences I did not yet understand psychologically.

During the five months after leaving hospital, my depression⁸⁴ gradually lifted. With the help of a psychologist⁸⁵, I worked to distinguish events that had occurred from hallucinations and delusional interpretations. At first, I did not want to return to Germany. When my cello class learned that I did not intend to return to Hamburg, I received a letter from a cheerful and bubbly Finnish classmate. She told me that she had never experienced depression and attributed this to being a born-again Christian. That was her understanding of her own life, not a general claim that religious faith prevents depression. She encouraged me to return and offered to help me settle back into Hamburg by introducing me to the Anskar Church⁸⁶, where she and her boyfriend were members. Her offer of friendship and community gave me confidence to consider returning. Encouraged by that letter and driven by my curiosity to investigate and understand the source of my turmoil, I decided to complete my studies in Germany.

Before returning to Germany in February 1992, I had two benign tumours⁸⁷ removed from my body, one from my lower right jaw and one from my right breast. I still had the stitches in my breast when I boarded the aeroplane to begin the next part of my Odyssey.

On my first visit back to the music school in Hamburg, the first familiar face I bumped into was the classmate who had also suffered from tendinitis. She hugged me and enquired how I was. I had no words to describe my adventures, so I avoided a conversation and told her I was well.

In the language of the faith I had found, I came to see God's care expressed through three sources of support that helped me recover a sense of being alive and whole: the enduring love of my family, like the middle section of the *Nocturne*, which became a beacon of light during the winter of my soul; my newfound faith in Christ; and playing the *Nocturne* on the remarkable new cello completed for me earlier that year and brought home by my brother as a Christmas present from my parents. These sources of meaning and support accompanied, but did not replace, the psychiatric and psychological care involved in my recovery.



I later dubbed my new cello *Destiny*⁸⁸—the counterpart of *Fate*⁸⁹—the name I had given the previous cello that my parents had bought me during my second last year at school.

A violin-maker friend recently made unique tuning pegs for me. He calls them *Vincent* pegs; they allow me, as a tall cellist, to sit fully upright without touching the back of my head. I therefore gave my cello an apt new nickname: the *Van Gogh*⁹⁰.

I hope readers take from this essay an appreciation of balanced, sustainable practice. Had I begun working systematically on scales⁹¹, études⁹² and repertoire⁹³ earlier in life, I might have felt less compelled to practise so intensely later. I cannot know, however, whether different practice habits would have prevented my breakdown or changed the timing of my later diagnosis of bipolar disorder⁹⁴. The excruciating psychological pain I describe here has inspired many dreams I hope to realise, including the creation of a music foundation for early childhood development. The philosophical⁹⁵ and spiritual interpretation of my essay I leave to the reader. May everyone learn what they need from it.

This personal account will be supplemented by a separate Jungian reflection on these experiences. That companion essay will consider the symbolic meaning of the images that arose during my illness—including Christ, the Antichrist, descent, death and rebirth—without treating a later interpretation as proof of what those experiences objectively meant.

Thank you for reading this chapter of my life. As a sign of my appreciation, I share the [Van Gogh Playlist](#), which I listen to regularly, along with my recordings of Felix Mendelssohn's [Spring Song](#) and Pyotr Tchaikovsky's [Nocturne in D minor, Op. 19, No. 4](#).

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- ¹ [Shadow](#)
 - ² [Nightmare](#)
 - ³ [William Dyce](#)
 - ⁴ [Mateo Sol](#)
 - ⁵ [Einzelgänger](#)
 - ⁶ [Loreena McKennitt](#)
 - ⁷ [St. John of the Cross](#)
 - ⁸ [Freiburg](#)
 - ⁹ [Hamburg](#)
 - ¹⁰ [Niendorf](#)
 - ¹¹ [1st Cello Concerto by Camille Saint-Saëns](#)
 - ¹² [Carnival of the Animals](#)
 - ¹³ [Romantic character piece](#)
 - ¹⁴ [YouTube link to a recording of the virtuosic passage](#)
 - ¹⁵ [Concerto](#)
 - ¹⁶ [Bobotie](#)
 - ¹⁷ [Tendinitis](#)
 - ¹⁸ [Musicology](#)
 - ¹⁹ [University of South Africa](#)
 - ²⁰ [Hochschule für Musik und Theater](#)
 - ²¹ [Camino de Santiago de Compostela](#)
 - ²² [St. James the Great](#)
 - ²³ [St. James the Just](#)
 - ²⁴ [Epistle of James](#)
 - ²⁵ [Afrikaans](#)
 - ²⁶ [Aesthetic](#)
 - ²⁷ [Reincarnation](#)
 - ²⁸ [Psychological projection](#)
 - ²⁹ [Hades](#)
 - ³⁰ [Richard Wagner](#)
 - ³¹ [Valkyrie](#)
 - ³² [Valhalla](#)
 - ³³ [Green Card](#)
 - ³⁴ [Paranoia](#)
 - ³⁵ [Visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and olfactory hallucinations](#)
 - ³⁶ [Ons wag op die Kaptein](#)
 - ³⁷ [Eugène Marais Prize](#)
 - ³⁸ [André P. Brink](#)
 - ³⁹ [Writing against Big Brother: Notes on Apocalyptic Fiction in South Africa](#)
 - ⁴⁰ [Second Coming](#)
 - ⁴¹ [Apocalypse](#)
 - ⁴² [Last Judgement](#)
 - ⁴³ [Anomaly](#)
 - ⁴⁴ [South African National Youth Orchestra](#)
 - ⁴⁵ [Pythagorean Numerology](#)
 - ⁴⁶ [Esoteric](#)
 - ⁴⁷ [Jewish mysticism](#)
 - ⁴⁸ [Initiation into Numerology](#)
 - ⁴⁹ [Pentagon](#)
 - ⁵⁰ [CIA](#)
 - ⁵¹ [Christ](#)

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- 52 [End Time](#)
 - 53 [Prophecy](#)
 - 54 [City of Gold](#)
 - 55 [The Truman Show](#)
 - 56 [Melville](#)
 - 57 [Twin towers](#)
 - 58 [Brixton](#)
 - 59 [Hillbrow](#)
 - 60 [Doubting Thomas](#)
 - 61 [Morningside Mediclinic](#)
 - 62 [Sandton](#)
 - 63 [Psychotic depression](#)
 - 64 [Sleep therapy](#)
 - 65 [Antidepressants](#)
 - 66 [Antipsychotics](#)
 - 67 [Oceanos](#)
 - 68 [Wild Coast](#)
 - 69 [Eugène Terre'Blanche](#)
 - 70 [Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging](#)
 - 71 [Pretoria](#)
 - 72 [Afrikaner](#)
 - 73 [Fairlands](#)
 - 74 [Dick Francis Mysteries](#)
 - 75 [In the Frame](#)
 - 76 [IMDb.com](#)
 - 77 [Synchronicity](#)
 - 78 [Born Again](#)
 - 79 [Satanism](#)
 - 80 [Occult](#)
 - 81 [Spiritual warfare](#)
 - 82 [Satan](#)
 - 83 [Faith](#)
 - 84 [Depression](#)
 - 85 [Psychologist](#)
 - 86 [Anskar Church, Germany](#)
 - 87 [Benign tumors](#)
 - 88 [Destiny](#)
 - 89 [Fate](#)
 - 90 [Vincent van Gogh](#)
 - 91 [Scales](#)
 - 92 [Études](#)
 - 93 [Repertoire](#)
 - 94 [Bipolar](#)
 - 95 [Philosophy](#)