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How to Survive a Bad Day

Kalie N. Miles

Sometimes, individuals feel that their day is a series of unfortunate events. Whether it be as small as waking up with an obvious red blemish or as large as getting fired from a job, people complain and sulk until their struggles pass. What if one's misfortune never ends? Jean-Dominique Bauby's never did. This healthy young man had a stellar career, loving family, and promising future. A sudden stroke robbed him of his life, and it left him with eternal paralysis. Bauby's diagnosis was locked-in syndrome; he could hardly rotate his head and move his left eye, but his mind was left perfectly intact. In his memoir, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, he writes about his life post immobility. With assistance from irony and sarcasm, he sprinkles dashes of humor to ease the intensity of his frozen state. However, at times, this lightheartedness fades. Bauby shows his readers that feeling sorrow in difficult times is normal and understandable but being positive and hopeful is crucial to remaining a strong, healthy individual.

Upon first learning about Bauby's rare condition, potential readers may assume that his memoir's tone is bleak. However, after reading the literary work, they find this prediction to be false. Bauby quickly shows his audience that his story has layers beyond negativity and sadness. When describing his syndrome at the memoir's start, Bauby states, "It is small consolation, but the chances of being caught in this hellish trap are about as likely as those of winning the lottery" (Bauby 11). In other words, "What are the odds?" Bauby takes the irony of developing a condition as rare as winning the lottery and uses it to make his audience chuckle. He could have utilized a different, darker example to show his case's rarity, such as going to prison for life as an innocent man. The author eliminates the perception that his tale has a pessimistic mood. In addition, he reveals that the purpose behind his writing goes deeper than teaching his audience how to sulk.

Bauby continues to reveal his purpose while informing readers of his new lifestyle. His dramatic weight loss forces him to transition back to his college wardrobe, which contains cashmere aplenty. In addition, his paralysis causes him to salivate uncontrollably. He jokes, "If I must drool, I may as well drool on cashmere" (Bauby 17). One would expect a middle-aged man in a similar situation to demean and ridicule himself. Instead, Bauby uses this as

an opportunity to elevate his spirits by using sarcasm and making fun of the bewildered crowd. He wants readers to practice this behavior and realize that laughing at one's self is necessary and healthy. If people take their flaws too seriously, they are bound to have minimal self-worth.

The author promotes poking fun at one's self as well as judgmental peers. In physical therapy, Bauby sees people of various ages recovering from injuries. He considers these people "tourists" because their stays are temporary, unlike Bauby's (Bauby 33). He stands out like a needle in a haystack with his frozen body and irregular appearance, not to mention needing to be strapped to a platform to do his exercises. Individuals stare and study. Bauby notices. After Bauby moves his eye to acknowledge their looks, the observers' eyes simultaneously scatter to a ceiling smoke detector. He remarks, "The 'tourists' must be very worried about fire," (Bauby 33).

Bauby knows why he caught the patients' attention. He is an eyesore, and others cannot help but ponder his story. Rather than feeling ashamed, he turns the attention on his viewers. He uses sarcasm to make these individuals, instead of himself, seem out of place. Bauby urges readers to do the same with their critics. Sometimes, victims of stares or harsh words let their perpetrators get to them. Individuals can avoid this by following Bauby's example: ignore others' bitterness and realize that the tormentors are the ones at fault.

The *Diving Bell and the Butterfly* emphasizes the importance of maintaining a lively attitude; however, it also includes deep emotional moments. Particularly, the tone changes when Bauby mentions his family. First, he informs readers of the relationship with his father. Before the stroke, Bauby catered to his elderly father's needs, such as shaving. Suddenly, Bauby needed constant care, and he was less functional than his father. "Now I am the one they shave every morning," he writes (Bauby 45). The irony of the caretaker becoming the patient is devastating. Without the ability to help or even speak to his father, Bauby feels guilty and helpless. He wants readers to address difficult emotions such as his. If individuals suppress sadness, they will make themselves miserable.

Bauby was a father as well as a son. Seeing his lively, young children while stuck in his locked-in state crushed him. He recognizes that he will never again completely fulfill his role as a father. He will never tell his children, "I love you." He will never wrap them in his arms. He will never play ball with his son in the backyard. He will never walk his daughter down the aisle. Perhaps Bauby's most devastating realization surfaces when his son, "Théophile, dabs with a Kleenex at the thread of saliva escaping [his] closed lips" (Bauby 69). Not only is he unable to take care of his children, but his children must now take care of him. Unfortunately, this ironic role reversal came thirty years too soon. Again, Bauby feels guilty. He knows that he is useless and his relationship with his son and daughter will deteriorate with

time. The author reveals the hardest parts of his syndrome when irony provokes sorrow rather than amusement in readers. By unveiling these moments of weakness with his family, he clarifies that feeling defeated is understandable. Rather than hiding from and being ashamed of emotional weakness, readers should face it. Therefore, Bauby sees no shame in crying in dismal times; he encourages it.

In one of the memoir's shortest chapters, Bauby uses literary devices to bring up both sadness and humor. The patient is in his hospital room, and nearly everything is going wrong. His feeding machine lets out irritating beeps, his eyelashes are tickling his face, and the catheter's disconnection leaves him soaked in urine. Finally, a nurse comes to his aid, but, first, she turns on the television. It reads, "Were you born lucky?" (Bauby 57). The audience could view this chapter in one of two ways. They may chuckle at the irony of the sarcastic prompt, for Bauby is the definition of an unlucky individual. Or, they may experience remorse for Bauby's unfortunate life. The answer is foggy, like the answer to coping with one's individual struggles. Bauby gives his audience tools to manage, but the decision is personal. Depending on the situation and the sufferer, one may need to cry or find a way to laugh. Here, Bauby encourages his audience to persevere however they see fit.

This perseverance is an important part of Bauby's story. In his memoir, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, he writes about his thoughts after a sudden stroke leaves him with locked-in syndrome. The abrupt transition from a successful middle-aged man to a permanently paralyzed patient is catastrophic. With little to no hope, people in Bauby's situation are chronically depressed and lack ways to feel remotely happy. However, he manages to find glimmers of light through irony and sarcasm. He wants readers see light in their lives' lowest points as well. Yet, the author acknowledges that mourning and weeping is necessary and acceptable. By offering details of his thoughts and experiences, the author equips readers to decide how to cope with their life's distresses. If one reads closely, Bauby's account is a secret guide on how to survive a bad day.

Works Cited

Bauby, Jean-Dominique. *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. New York, Vintage Books, 1997.