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My Mother Mental Illness

I can give no concrete categorization of my mother, her life, my memory. I struggle to remember her in my life--struggled to remember how old I was each time she disappeared, yet push back each concrete image and memory which comes to mind. I look for memories of the things she said before she was sick, for the way she looked before she was crazy--and I can't find them.

My mother is hidden in the corners of the house. After battling her disease, her hatred, and her legal rights and hospitalizations for 8 years my father finally let go and divorced my mother. She wasn't coming back and she thought he was a minion of Satan anyway. He packed up her clothes, her underwear, her shoes and shipped them to her mother's house where they now exist crated in a closet. Some of mother's smaller belongings found their way into me and my sister (who is younger than me)'s lives--a tube of lipstick, a small set of ruby earrings. Other relics of her still hide within the house.

Downstairs in the family room on the tall narrow bookshelf, on the bottom shelf beneath the dusty cookbooks for fondue and whole grain bread, rests her journal--written during the last few months she lived here. Its pages detail her disgust with her disease, Schizophrenia, and the disaster it has made of her life, the cloudiness the medications create--something very distressful for an artist, it gets in the way of her paints. The entries end abruptly one month after she quit her medicine, one month before she disappeared again.

In the basement, in the long rectangular room with the furnace, lay 18 boxes full of greeting cards she created, her sister published, they never distributed. The next room over was her art studio, a dank little space with no natural light and no ventilation. All the art, the paints are gone. She threw them out, shredded the canvases. In the art room there is a tall shelf. On the top, pushed out of the way is a box. Within the box is my mother's high school diploma, a picture of her high school sweetheart and his wire-haired dog, and a postcard from Mammoth cave sent by someone named Bobby who has really bad handwriting.

Upstairs in my father's closet, beneath the sports bags, the shoeboxes, the racquetball rackets, remain another small stack of my mother. There is a cross-stitch, still in the ring, a craft from her first hospitalization stitched in baby blue and peach letters it says, "First Things First". There is a workbook of tests and questions to rate motivation and find goals. There is a 1996 newspaper article cutout about a lawyer and his descent into the deep darkness of Schizophrenia completed by a happy ending and the smiling picture of his family reunited. Folded and broken out of order are her commitment papers, legal court documents assessing my mother's need (by trial) for hospitalization.

The only other bits of my mother are her letters, bits a chit chat and religious propaganda which I conveniently lose throughout the house as soon as I open them, unable to find them to check the address of the week, to reply by mail.

These articles of her life are the only factual details, the only information with concrete existence. These little bits she left behind are not the parts of her that run through my head deconstructing, rebuilding meaning, ruining my composure, lancing my logic. These are the parts of her that don't mean much anymore—when I touch them, I wonder who she was. They bring me no connection with my mother.

Over and over people (doctors, therapists, father) have told me to know that it is not my mother but the illness--the illness which started calling me repulsive names when I turned thirteen, screamed at invisible Ravens, told me my father was in league with the devil. It was not my mother, don't get the two confused, they warned. I thought I knew the difference--knew that all the words that came twisting from her mouth did not belong to her, but to the sickness in her brain. This belief left me with one overwhelming question--then who is my mother? If it is not her behind the crazy eyes then I must have no mother. You can't have a relationship with a mental illness--it will make you crazy.

"My life is shit," she says, almost screams. Her face, her voice--it's all distorted.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"What do you know? You have no idea what this is like."

This is my mother. I want to tell her she has put me there before, the edge where everything crumbles, all falls apart.

"Of course I don't," I say. "I never claimed to."

"Don't worry. You'll get your chance," she says. "Remember, it is hereditary."

This was when I was 17. This was my mother "better" when she was on her medications and "sane". My mother was too depressed to talk to anyone, because she was different, because she was mentally ill. She wanted to be normal--desperately needed to believe that she had defeated Schizophrenia, that the battle was over and she was a freak case that would be somehow amazingly cured for life. Amazingly cured from a chemical imbalance which caused parts of her brain to actually corrode--brain damage. The process is only controlled with medication.

When I was 19 and away at college my mother miraculously convinced her doctor that it was in her best interest to come off her medication. Somehow she made him believe that she was

a unique case and was forever cured of the awful debilitating mental illness. She was an artist; she wanted to go back to painting and illustrating fulltime and the medication clouded her head--made it hard to think much less create. Within two months of the doctor's decision to grant her a cease in treatment she was gone again. My sister called me at work at the campus coffee shop hysterically upset, said mom had tried to come and take her from the school--tried to take Karena into "the Wilderness" to await the Lord. When I got home from work there was a bible and short note from her left in my mailbox, a message on my answering machine. Three weeks later they found her purse at a rest stop somewhere in Missouri. This was the last I heard of her for over a year.

After my sister's phone call I cried for three days and never left my bed. I had grown accustomed to the life of sanity--where a mother did not just disappear. The other times she left I was hardened against her illness, knew that my life would not be normal. It had been two years since her last disappearance, two years for me to sink into believing that my life would go on, a family of four united and sane. I was crushed by her disappearance--and angry that my parents had told neither me nor my sister about the decision to take mom off her medicine. I mourned her like she was dead--and for the next year coped with it the same way I had in high school--I no longer had a mother. She was completely gone from my life: no phone calls, no letters, only silence. She was dead.

And that is what I told people--well, nearly. I said I did not have a mother, and my life moved somewhat smoothly in her absence.

It was not until a year after the filing of the missing persons report and the release of her photograph to NAMI (National Alliance of Mental Illness) headquarters across the United States that there was finally word of her. She was applying for a job in Los Angeles and someone was seeking a reference of her. My father flew to Los Angeles with custody papers from an Indiana court, and California State Law wouldn't recognize them. He could do nothing for her.

It was after our discovery of her location that she began writing me. She writes, almost always someplace different, sometimes every week, sometimes not for two months or more. I started to feel guilty saying I had no mother, yet I truly do not believe in having a mother daughter relationship by letter, especially when the letters offer nothing more than "The sky is very blue today" or "Have you made your peace with the Lord? Leave your things and follow him, for he is coming and the world will burn". Her letters are filled with weather reports, scripture and oracles. I write nothing in response. Here is my mother, written into my life, yet I feel no relationship but a forced sense of guilt--for writing nothing, for saying I have none. I quit telling people I had no mother after the letters continued. The letters gave small charts I could relate to them (everybody wants to know how things are "going" when they find out your mother is mentally ill and has been missing or drifting for over two years). Now I can tell them she's in Montana, or North Carolina or Colorado. She floats from state to state in search of religious sanctuary with various "true sects of Christ". She lives in homeless shelters, homes for abused women--claiming she is on the run from a wretched and deadly home life. Letters that mention a husband suddenly, plans to move to Alaska, begin a mission for the Lord. Mother doesn't mean much when it is just words in letters that never wonder how things are going--that never mention calling or coming home. For my 21st birthday I received a package with no letter postmarked from Indianapolis. She did not call, she did not visit. I left several message on my grandmother's machine (assumably where she was staying) but got no response. I decided to mourn my mother. It became obvious to me that I would not see her again, that these letters may go on for years. The prospect of having a mail only relationship with my mother for 20+ years did not appeal to me, repulsed me. The cycle repeats: I stayed inside for three days and felt like she was dead, mourning her again, for the fifth time--this time for good. This time, I decided, I really had no mother, and I prayed the letters would stop coming, that

she would leave me alone to get on with my life. I did not hear from her for several months. I lived without her, again, forgot her. I never wrote her back, not once.

She never goes for good—and despite all my wishing her presence endlessly resurfaces in my life. She came back, arriving shortly before Thanksgiving. She stayed with her mother, brought her new husband—a man who has lived on streets across the country drinking to hallucination for over 25 years.

She was thinner than I remembered—the diet of a street person. Her hair had grown streaks of grey, and her skin glowed. This is what struck me the most—she looked really pretty. It was hard to look into her glowing skin, her rosy cheeks, her smile and see the picture of mental illness which I remembered before—the wild eyes, the gaunt and grey face. But there were still the little things to remind me: the way she turned all the couch pillows with flowers or birds around so the blank side faced the room, the crooked way she held her hand, the way she sometimes struggled to talk—carefully choosing her words to make sure she gives away no secrets. She kept smiling and she wouldn't answer any of my questions about what she had been doing while traveling the country. She avoided answering any questions which related to her life, so I was still left with no answers for what my mother had been doing for the past two years. She was secretive and insulated—keeping her self (her delusions?) out of my reach. She kept it light and inconsequential.

It was not until she invited me for a goodbye cup of coffee that I was let in for a slight glimpse of her world. Sitting in Perkins, it was not really even her world which I was glanced around. She let her husband come, and he monopolized the conversation, speaking for my mother at times, but mostly speaking about him self and drinking and all the screwed up stuff he has seen—like gangs of stray cats holding an organized meeting, the lord Jesus in a tree, a real Voodoo Zombie in the corner of the bar. I stared at my mother, tried to speak to her. I could not. She was

engrossed in his hallucinatory stories, believed them as true--as signs of the end times. The only thing she said to me was that if it were up to her she would have my sister and I entrapped on an isolated island, for life, with the Bible the only thing to read or do. Then we would be saved. She said they would be opening a mission in Alaska and would like me to come. When I hugged her goodbye I cried. I still get letters. I still have never written back.