

RAISED BY A BIPOLAR MOTHER

In November 1969 I entered the world. “Don’t worry mum, I’m here to help you.” Out of the womb and straight to work. My mother was twenty and I was her second baby, my sister was born three years earlier when mum was only seventeen. Mum walked down the aisle of the Cathedral at sixteen with a bun in the oven and with bipolar disorder, not that it would be diagnosed until twenty-three years later.

We started noticing our mum was different to other mums quite early on. She was always in and out of hospital. “What’s wrong with mum?” we would ask. The only explanation was that she was having another ‘nervous breakdown’. OK, but what does that mean to two little girls... it meant we had to go stay with the relatives again and be separated from each other.

Around my birthday mum always seems to be at her worst. This is okay now that I understand more about bipolar and that mania is usually heightened in spring due to light. Growing up, though, I thought it had something to do with me, especially when my sister pointed out that “mum always gets sick around your birthday”. I’ll never forget being told that mum was really bad after I was born and had to have shock treatment. I was a teenager by this stage, not really understanding what that was either. Well that was until when, not long after, with my cousin, I watched ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’. I can still remember the pain I felt, sitting there watching the scene with him having shock treatment, tears running down my face, silently crying. Screaming in pain on the inside. How could they have done that to my mother???

Now that I have a better understanding of mental illness and the treatments involved, I realise it is sometimes a procedure taken to have memory blocked. At least it is done under sedation nowadays.

Far too many people have a mental illness. I believe it is one of the cruellest illnesses, being that there is no cure, just management. I know people will argue with me and say at least it’s not terminal, but what about all those lives lost by suicide. Or the families destroyed because of the difficulty of living with a person with mental illness, the relationship breakdowns. I will admit it is very difficult at times to live with someone with such a condition. After my parents’ divorce, mum met my brother’s father, that relationship didn’t have longevity either. That was over twenty years ago, and speaking to my brother’s dad a couple of years back, he told me he might have stayed with mum if he had known she had bipolar, and how to cope with it.

So there she was late 20s, single mum with three kids and a mental illness. How did she cope? How did *we* cope?

I won’t lie; it was challenging at times and other times crazy and fun. Going to 10 different schools wasn’t fun though. Nor was the time I walked home from school with a boy, at that sensitive age of fifteen, and mum was getting taken to hospital by one of our neighbours. I was really scared. She couldn’t speak properly – her speech was all slurred. I remember thinking, “Mum you’re like a zombie”, and being very embarrassed in front of my friend. No need to be though. Years later he confessed his mum also had a mental illness. I guess he also felt too ashamed back then to talk about it. Thank God twenty years on it is not a taboo subject.

Being embarrassed by my mother’s behaviour, I was always trying to be the complete opposite to her. That’s the funny thing, no matter what you see in your parents that you don’t like or understand as a child, you will undoubtedly end up, in some ways like them.

Which brings me to the crazy times and what makes me have a childlike enthusiasm for most things I do. Partly that’s because I was busy being the ‘parent’ in my youth and partly because I observed the zany things my mother would do in moments of mania. Like the Christmas Eve we didn’t have a tree or presents: I was sitting at home feeling quite sorry for myself, being about eleven, knowing by that age Santa wouldn’t get us out of this one! There she came around the corner, taxi beeping, in the back seat with a six-foot Christmas tree, fully decorated, hanging out the window. “Mum, I thought you didn’t have any money?” “They let me buy the one on display in Coles.” I didn’t ask where she got the money – all I

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know was I was one happy little girl that Christmas.

Unfortunately gambling and bulk buying, being two of the side effects of mum's illness – and a signal that she is becoming high, was not so practical when living on a single parent pension and having to feed three kids. Thank God for the Salvos and other charities that came to our rescue at those times of need.

How have we learnt to cope over the years? I don't know. PATIENCE, or maybe because it is very repetitive. You seem to adapt to routine. We do try and be very patient when mum is talking really fast non-stop about the same topic over and over. Or the times when she's visiting and comes and sits on your bed at the oddest hours – also another sign – because she can't sleep and just wants to talk to someone. Well I like my sleep, but I try very hard not to lose it. My sister has a better knowledge of bipolar as she is a pharmaceutical rep for a drug that treats mental illness. Over the years she would always say "Mum can't help it, you must be more patient". I'm afraid she loses it too, occasionally. Mum was living in another state. My sister and I thought we would drive up from where we live and take mum to the coast for a few days. When we arrived we noticed she was a little high, but we thought we would get her out of the house and give her partner a break anyway.

Just twenty minutes into the drive mum started and wouldn't stop. Same old stuff we had heard hundreds of times before, reliving the past, paranoid about someone. "Mum we have to concentrate on the road, can you be quiet please?" Of course she didn't take any notice, so I told her to shut up. My sister gave me a right serve and told me how awful I was to speak to mum like that and once again that "SHE CAN'T HELP IT". I would say precisely one minute after that she turned her head while driving and said to mum, "Would you bloody shut up!" I gave her a look that said it all. We both started to laugh, what else can you do? Sometimes we all lose it a little.

Mum lost her partner of twenty years a few years after that trip. Death usually brings mum's mania on, but this time she had a delayed reaction. The first six months of grieving was hospital-free, but in the year and a half since then she has been in and out of hospital three times. I am so proud of her because she has accepted her condition, takes her medication and recognises when her levels are off and that she is becoming high. We don't know what the future will bring and I know there are some very good medications that treat bipolar disorder. I have to say, though, I pray for a cure. Mum has had a tough life and I would love to see her well always. She is a beautiful person, just a handful when she is manic.

No longer to be scared or embarrassed by mental illness, that is what having a mother with bipolar disorder taught me. I feel blessed for my life and it has taught me compassion. Mum gave love and care when she could, even in times of mania. My sister was a teacher before going into the pharmaceutical industry, my brother has been in the army for the last ten years and has been to East Timor on a peace-keeping mission, and as for me, I have recently sold my small business I had for thirteen years to start the next chapter. Mum must have done something right - not bad for a single parent with bipolar.

TO THE ALL MANY SUFFERERS THAT ENDURE THIS DISORDER I SAY: DON'T LET IT BEAT YOU.

TO ALL THE FAMILIES AND LOVED ONES I SAY: BE AS PATIENT AS YOU CAN.

TO SOCIETY I SAY: DON'T BE IGNORANT.

TO MEN AND WOMEN OF PARLIAMENT I SAY: MORE FUNDING PLEASE!

AND TO MUM I SAY: I LOVE YOU.