

I reared and performed a pirouette in the hall, galloping to my office. I couldn't believe my colleagues were discussing strategies for working with me, and in the tearoom. My head slumped in my hands, negative feelings flooding my mind once again. Here I was feeling like for once, just maybe once I was okay, able to cope, able to function like everyone else but now this. I felt like the flimsy unstable tower of cards I tentatively balanced on was crashing down beneath me. I felt my heart race, my hands go clammy, the voices drawing my headache closer and closer to the surface like a volcano close to eruption, and I had to get out, escape to my house of bricks, strong enough to shelter me from any huffing puffing wolf, a sanctuary to house the black dog, an escape from work, colleagues.

I grabbed my bag and trotted past the front desk; "I have to go, I'll email Tom later" I dry retched as these words leaked from my mouth. Alice looked up briefly and shrugged as I rushed out the office doors so suddenly that the automatic sensor almost missed its cue to open. As the warm, non air conditioned air hit my face it almost pushed me back, yet I determinedly dug my heels into the cement path and pounded the path as I anxiously darted to the car, sweat droplets forming across my nose.

I could just see Alice looking to Tom over her glasses and telling him that "the strange girl" had once again fled the workplace. "Strange girl" was not the only name I had overheard, at times my managers and colleagues had even confronted and asked what happened to make me *this* way, suggested I get a hobby or a life so that I have something more important to focus on, all the while not understanding that these comments, these names just made me feel isolated in the workplace, different and not understood. I turned the key and took a breath. "Strange girl, OCD er, Beyond Blue" Why instead could they not talk to me? Any number of them suffers colds, incidence of cancer, issues with partners, children, money, all discussed openly over tea and biscuits and never to be passed before a court, yet challenges of mental illness, almost taboo. Why they cannot talk, ask, listen, at least attempt to seem like they are interested in understanding. Surely this is kinder, surely more helpful, more humane than name calling and talking about me behind doors.

Just then I looked up from my world to re-join the world of others, the world I felt I was an observer in, not a participant, only to see a stationary bumper bar within metres of my screeching brakes. What was I doing, I was so weak, now they would really be talking, they're probably glad I've left for home, strategies for working with me, helping me, they sounded like they were educating each other on how to train a dog, how to control a child fed nothing but candy canes and cordial all day. I'll give them a strategy, how about they ask me what would make me feel supported, safe, at ease. There's a strategy! Instead they discussed leaving me to *just focus*, inviting me to join their Tuesday afternoon tennis comp - like they even know if I like tennis, giving me some time off to work things out, decreasing my tasks and giving me space by not consulting me in case it results in feelings of being overwhelmed.

The only strategies that had even been remotely valuable were once overheard coming from an intern whose mother had been living with mental illness for her the duration of Sophie's young sixteen years. I heard Sophie interrupt a conversation whereby my colleagues were discussing, well me I guess. Sophie in all her boldness bluntly reminded my colleagues that I was just a person and that mental illness was not a contagious disease. Sophie continued to suggest that they speak to me and don't take my distance as superiority, yet a simple lack of confidence; that they drop the labels, as Sophie put it; they are not red booted lady or brown haired man so why label me. Give me time, patience, love and authentic relationships.

On arrival home I thought carefully about my next move, like a player about to move a pawn, my instinct, to retreat to my room where I could draw my eyelids on the world, on my life, however experience had taught me that this did not work. Many retreats had lasted days, some weeks. Once I had retreated, breaking free was hard and day by day I would be missing more work and finding it more and more challenging to venture out. Finally the path would end in an unspoken understanding that I was not returning, I would then lay free yet caged in a spiral of nothingness, hopelessness, defeated once more by more fear, my illness. Here again, the fifth job since Christmas I could not slip again. Before my room could draw me like a magnetic force I ran to the phone to call mum. I found that openly discussing my fears, feelings and experiences with family and friends that I can trust was the first step in conquering my challenges. As much as my instinct was to isolate myself what

I had learned I actually needed was people. Mum understood me well by now and she made me feel good as I knew she accepted and loved me for me. She dropped everything and in attempt to circumvent the start of a long solitary retreat, she ran to my aid where we sat and watched a movie and sipped at hot chocolate.

Once the storm had settled in my mind mum delicately broached the subject of work with me. She knew that although resistant, it was essential that I develop a strategy or I simply won't return, yet again. She would never call for me, or email, thus refused to let me bury my head in the sand, yes she kindly, openly and non-judgmentally guided and supported me. I emailed Tom, my boss nervously informing him that I had had an emergency and would need a day or so off and then would like to have a meeting with him. My strategy, to be brave and to explain the challenges I encounter in the workplace. I planned to discuss suggestions for assisting not only myself, yet anyone in our workplace that has a mental illness.

My outlook became slightly more positive. I envisaged a workplace conducive to working with a mental illness. I envisaged a training session on social literacy, on differences, focussing on mental illness. I closed my eyes and saw posters in the foyer promoting national mental health weeks, relevant publications on the coffee table. A workplace that respected me, supported me, spoke to me as me not as a person with a mental illness, worked with me not just beside me. With that I must have drifted off, exhausted from the energy required daily just to get myself to work, not to mention getting through each day, I slept deeply and was at ease as my mum pulled a blanket over my lethargic torso and images of my new workplace.