

The Staircase

There's a girl standing at the bottom of a staircase who thinks to herself: "There's something wrong". She's only eleven years old, but already she's discerning, already she owns the survival skills that will see her through life. It's difficult to tell where she picked up these skills. But now, staring up at the darkness from the bottom of the staircase, she realises this feeling is not to do with her interactions with others. This type of unease has everything to do with *her*.

She dismisses the feeling, carries on through her teens thinking that everyone feels and sees the world as she does. She is driven, energetic, passes exams without studying. A slim, attractive brunette, she flutters from one boyfriend to the next. She finds sleeping difficult, some nights it's near-impossible, yet she remains alert, retains the glow in her face. She makes endless trips up and down the staircase, spending weeks, sometimes months, on the highest step or the lowest rung. Rarely does she pause for breath on the steps in between; her mind knows only how to plummet to the bottom, and how to propel itself to the top.

The teenager can arrive at the top step in an instant, without warning or furore and, once there, she never wants to come down. But the top step, like any high place, is not without its dangers. At this altitude, the teenager can get wedged in a moment, lucid and unmistakably real, when she thinks she is a saint. Then she formulates a plan to travel to the Domain, to stand on a butter box and proclaim to the strollers, the joggers, the dogs playing on the grass, how the world should be run. You can't tell her anything when she's standing on the top step, not a single fact that will challenge her opinion, for then the anger sets in, the aggression takes over, and the attractive brunette turns into a fireball. The danger, then, is not that she could fall and hurt herself, not even that she could fall and topple someone else. The real danger is that from the top step, the mania tricks her into thinking that there is nothing wrong.

Years pass, bringing with them a handsome suitor who soon becomes a husband, and three sparkly-eyed kids. She doesn't know it now, she won't realise for some time, that she already has the most vital survival mechanism in place: a family who loves her unconditionally. She tells herself that she is too busy being a mother, maintaining one household and renovating another, to make trips up and down the staircase. But, still, the mania persists; it is mangled like a bad car crash, with the debilitating lows.

At thirty-five the mother slides down the banister and hits rock bottom, her body lying crumpled in a heap. When suicidal thoughts prevent her from catapulting to the top again, she finally acknowledges, in the most timely and haunting way, that something is terribly wrong. Suddenly she is afraid of her next thought, petrified of her next move.

"Whatever you do, don't leave me," She pleads with a friend.

And so the friend stays, sitting beside her on the bottom rung, until the mother is hospitalised for an illness she has always sensed, but never been able to grasp.

It isn't until the mother's third hospitalisation that she is diagnosed with bipolar disorder. When the doctor explains the symptoms of the illness to her, it is as if someone has turned on the lights and the mother can see the staircase. She is relieved to see the staircase: she always sensed that it was there, but finally she has tangible, undeniable proof. Now that she can see the stairs with her own eyes, she is confident that she can travel up and down them with her own feet, rather than with her mind. She is keen to get going then, to get back to her husband and children. But before she takes off on her latest adventure, the doctor prescribes her Lithium, which keeps her – give or take a few steps – towards the middle of the staircase. The mother returns to her home, to the family who loves her, with awareness by her side. Now that she has been formally introduced to bipolar disorder, she can recognise its symptoms and curb its urges. Her movements have grown cautious; she knows to slow down when she is close enough to read the sign at the top of the stairs. "Warning!" screams the diamond-shaped sign, "High step

ahead". Underneath the sign, in much smaller print that only the astute can read, are the words: "euphoric mood, excess energy, surge of ideas, impatience and irritability, fast and furious speech, decreased need for sleep, distracted mind, flirtatious libido, and overzealous wallet".

The mother adopts a set of strategies to control her ascents up the staircase. She knows she likes to shop – she has a credit card statement and a husband to remind her – but now she has the insight to choose where she spends her money. She exchanges Carla Zampatti and her designer friends for St Vincent de Paul and the Salvos, where she can buy clothes as bright as her mood, for a fraction of the price. She begins a diary, loses herself in books, spends more time in the garden; she does anything that minimises stress. After dinner each evening, she walks to a neighbouring suburb with her husband and, on returning home, she lies down to sleep, even though sometimes she has enough energy to power the whole street.

On Sundays, the mother frequents the local church, for she believes faith keeps her focused. She has a doctor she can trust, whom she can contact at any time; someone who not only considers her patient's life when giving advice, but the lives of her husband and children. She knows no self-pity and exercises little hesitation in seeking help for her problems. She takes pleasure in the simple things in life: brunch with a friend, a family dinner, a trip to the Blue Mountains. Every Monday evening she meditates in a room full of friends, her mind always returning to her from a different road from the one it departed on. But above all – when she is literally 'above all' – she tries to look at the humorous side of life. For, if you can't laugh at the top of the staircase, you may as well slide down the banister.

Despite the mother's strategies, the mania can still take hold of her, suddenly and ferociously, and whisk her away toward the top of the staircase. It is during these high-flying episodes that she relies on her family the most. They remind her to take her medication, three times a day, even though the mania is hollering: "I don't need drugs, life is wonderful up here!". But by now, the family can see the staircase clearly, especially the steps towards the top. Gently, they persuade the mother to take her medication, and the family meets midway up the flight of stairs.

Now sixty, a doting grandmother, a treasured mother-in-law, she has collected suitcases full of wisdom on her many trips up and down the stairs. She imparts her wisdom to others, not standing on a butter box in the Domain, like she once envisaged, but within the walls of her own home. Her wisdom is the quiet kind, the type that lurks in the tone of her voice, in her off-hand comments and heartfelt advice. Wisdom, she believes, is the by-product of living with bipolar disorder. For each time she has plunged headfirst into pain, she has resurfaced with a few scars, and a little more insight. Surviving the pain has propelled her forward, encouraged her to grow, and, having experienced more pain than most other folk, she now stands ten-foot-tall.

Almost twenty-five years after she first discovered the staircase, it is still brightly lit, the polish worn away by years of pedestrian travel. Yet, the strangest thing is happening to the staircase. Every day, it becomes a little more crowded. Her husband, her son and two daughters, her grandchildren and her in-laws, are making the journey up and down the stairs alongside her, just to keep her company. This is the beauty of the staircase: anyone can see it, if they truly want to.