

Of Darkness and Of Light:

*My Family's Struggle With Bipolar Disorder and Poverty*

Bi·po·lar dis·or·der (noun) 1. A mental disorder marked by alternating periods of elation and depression.

It's an unwanted suspicion that clouds your day, the sudden need to analyze every word and action to see if she took her meds last night. It's coming home to a house dripping in haphazard paint, clothes in heaps on the floor, worried neighbour's messages on the phone. It's last month's groceries rotting in the fridge and the audible pangs of your brother's empty stomach. The torment of greeting a stranger in place of your mother – a babbling, busy stranger who knows nothing of your needs, of your wants.

It's the deafening footprints of your feet on the pristine white floors of Ward 1 West. The innocent eyes of your eight-year-old brother, white-spun lies shielding him from the moans that emanate from behind closed doors. It's guilt-ridden glances at the monochrome clock. Lies of homework, of needing sleep, of coming back soon. The tears of your grandmother as she blames herself for letting it happen again; and you're fumbling words as you try to provide strength, a mere 15 years old, too young to be strong.

It's the heated shouting matches, the sparks that fly from your mother's burning eyes, and your quivering fists as the dust settles. It's the midnight showers, her dissonant notes echoing through the house as she tries to wear out the restlessness within. It's the quiet relief in her absence, the timid loosening of the taut strings that held you together when she was there, their fragile fibres no longer threatening to break.

It's an illness of fear, and of shame. Of darkness, and of light.

It's a tortuous wait, and an emptiness when she returns. A fear of letting her back in, of trusting again, only to have her ripped away from you in another instant. It's learning to love again, to forget. To laugh with her and know that it's real, that her joy is not the product of some chemical imbalance in the brain, not something to be afraid of. It's a welcome readjustment to the normal; a return to the quiet routines of school, family, and work.

Until one night, she neglects the pills, and doesn't sleep. And you watch as the delicate framework of the life you had to rebuild crumbles again.

You stumble, as she falls.

Over, and over, and over.



Bipolar is a costly illness. Studies in the US suggest an total annual cost of \$4.5 billion dollars (Kleinman, 2003), with most of the money being incurred from indirect expenses (Hirschfeld & Vornik, 2005). It's not just the medication or hospital visits that rack up the bills, but the therapy visits, psychiatric assessments, and lost productivity as well. Since my mom's illness is exacerbated by stress, she's been recommended not to work. Her sole income, then, is what she receives from the government in Disability Benefits - around \$1000 a month (Government of Canada, 2016). Even with health insurance to offset the cost of medication, what she receives in Disability is not enough to cover our monthly expenses. At the Halton Leadership Summit on Poverty Reduction in 2010, Councillor Clark Somerville admitted that the numbers just don't add up. "Right off the bat a one bedroom apartment in Halton is around \$750 a month"(Commisso, 2010). My mom agrees that she

must stretch her budget, or rely on gifts from her family to keep her afloat. And financial worries only serve to push her closer to the edge of another bout of instability.

Exercise, however, is one thing that my mom can count on to keep her out of the hospital. There are strong links between sports and positive mental health; it boosts energy, promotes emotional stability, and increases the concentration of the neurotransmitters involved in feelings of happiness and satisfaction (Guylo, 180). For my mom, however, the \$4 price for a drop-in game of basketball is too much when she needs to cover groceries, hydro, and rent. Fee reductions are available in Halton, but only for registered programs (City of Burlington, 2016), which are often located across town. With no car, and a round-trip bus fare costing \$7 (Burlington Transit, 2015), even a free program is not something we can afford every week.

In an ideal world, there would be a sports program in place designed specifically for low-income families with mental illness. Sports groups in the past have helped my mom enormously. She was part of a bowling league for a few years, where she met some of her closest friends today. But when the cost became too much, she had to stop attending. If the community was to recognize the financial obstacles facing mental illness victims, and work towards dismantling them, we would be one step further towards keeping my mom out of the hospital.



My parents separated in 2004, and while my dad remarried, my mom has not. As a result of being alone, it's hard for her to cope with maintaining the house, especially after a manic episode. Each period of instability often leads a trail of debris that must somehow be

cleaned up. Sometimes it's an impulsive cleaning spree that leads the house in disarray, or a neglected leak that floods the apartment and the home of our neighbours.

Luckily, my mom receives aid from PACT, a nonprofit community program that provides at-home support for those with mental illnesses. They drive her to get groceries, monitor her medication, and give emotional support when it's needed. In many ways, PACT is the caregiver, relieving myself and my grandparents of some of the stress that accompanies her illness. There are, of course, several flaws in the system. It took years for my mother to be put in contact with PACT, as it requires an official referral from a mental health professional stating that the illness is 'prolonged' and 'severe' (Halton Community Services Database, 2013). In the time that it took for others to recognize that we needed help, we had suffered through countless cycles of my mom's illness, relying solely on family and friends for help.

My mom has met many, many people are in a similar situation - struggling, alone, and not receiving any assistance. "I'm one of the lucky ones," she told me once, when we were discussing the system. Mental illness, like physical disability, has ramifications that reach beyond week-long hospitalizations or constant medicinal monitoring. They often render daily tasks very difficult, and create financial barriers that are not easily overcome. We need more programs like PACT to assist families battling mental illnesses, which are readily accessible to those who need it.

There's a strong correlation between mental illness and poverty (Belle, 1990), and in Halton, there are over 10 000 people living below the poverty line (Poverty Hits Home in Halton, 2013). How many of those are suffering from an undiagnosed illness, or are waiting for the help they need? Mental illness is costly; to its victims, to their families, and to the community. But the sooner we step in to lend a hand, the sooner we keep mothers, sisters, and daughters healthy and at home.

I wish, in many ways, that I could go back and change the way our lives have played out. I'd remind my mom to take her pills at night. I'd comfort 10-year-old me, help her to understand that she doesn't always have to be the parent, and that everything will be okay.

Most of all, I'd ask for help. Mental illness throws up barriers that seem insurmountable, but with support from the community, we're finally starting to break them down. Mental illness doesn't have to be synonymous with unhappiness, poverty, or failure.

It is an illness of darkness.

But it is also an illness of light.

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