

CHAPTER ONE

Raw

“What if all your symptoms were your heart trying to tell you something?”

I drove fast. Maybe it was nerves, maybe it was fear of the unknown, or maybe it was just my lead foot. I had made the drive a hundred times before and my mind flooded with memories of my younger, more naïve university days. This time I was not on my way back to university but rather meeting a new client - a client who wanted me to write her book.

I definitely felt more apprehension than usual. Would I be safe? Would I feel threatened? Might I find myself in an awkward situation? What if she wasn't "mentally fit" for the meeting? I had never met anyone clinically diagnosed as bipolar before. I felt badly just for *thinking* such thoughts and yet how could I not? The world can be a fucked up place. Later I would discover that these thoughts are the very ones this woman has faced her entire life. With mental illness comes stigma. And I was living proof of it.

It was an overcast and chilly day in February. Car parked and laptop in hand, I walked up the street to the hotel. Small, boutique-style and trendy, I liked the look and feel. It added to the mystique of my interesting meeting. I took the elevator up one floor and made my way to Room 205, as she instructed me.

Knock.
Knock.
Knock.

Here goes nothing.

The door opened. There she stood. A bipolar stranger. Given all our phone calls and witty email exchanges, not to mention the undeniably intimate nature of our meeting

inside a hotel room, a handshake didn't quite feel right. She must have read my mind because she prompted our embrace before I even had a chance. Almost immediately afterward she said, "I'm sorry, my meds haven't quite kicked in yet so I'm a bit of a mess."

The tone of the meeting was set.

A little taken aback, I couldn't help but wonder what exactly that felt like - the necessity to take a pill in order *not* to feel a mess. She didn't seem a mess to me at all. Her long blonde hair draped over her shoulders and down her back. Comfortably dressed with a natural beauty about her, I could tell she had great style.

She ushered me inside and we spoke about how quaint and beautiful the hotel room was with its cute chandelier, deep soaker tub, king sized bed, table and chairs, and comfortable arm chair where she spent the bulk of our meeting huddled up with her knees to her chest. I wasn't sure how exactly we would begin, but it just happened.

The words poured out of her mouth.

Effortless.

Natural.

Raw.

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"The truth is rarely pure and never simple."

- - Oscar Wilde

From the moment I could think for myself, I knew something was wrong with me. Behind closed doors, I had many odd actions and behaviors. If I had been able to communicate those in some way from a young age, the people around me would have figured it out a lot sooner. Instead, I hid those details. Internalized them. And became an expert user of coping mechanisms to hide my differences.

When I think back upon my high school years, my mind floods with fond memories of amazing teachers. I was fortunate to have made meaningful connections with a few,

particularly in grades 4, 6 and 7 in elementary school and a handful of others throughout high school. They were powerful people in my life who I kept in touch with for years after. Unfortunately, as my mental illness progressed, I began to distance myself for fear of them seeing a terrible side of me. When I think of this today, I feel awful and I live in regret, not only for the impression I must have made but also for the fact that I lost some of the most impactful people I've ever met.

In high school, I also had truly wonderful friends but the sad reality is today I don't know a single one of them. You see, by the time I reached adolescence, I did not yet have a diagnosis but I *did* recognize the fact that there were different sides of me. Like the cycles of the oceanic tides, I would experience perpetual psychological and physiological sequences. Every so often I would feel changes begin to take place deep within me and I would know it was the start of a new cycle. Aware of the fact that I could not suppress nor control these changes, I had no choice.

It was fight or flight.

Sometimes I chose to alienate myself from the group. Other times, I put myself in a position to be bullied so I could be intentionally shunned by those around me. Even worse, at other times I became the bully. Difficult, sad, shameful...this was the only form of defense I knew. My cycles were perpetual in more ways than one because after I ended one friendship, I'd move on to the next, finding people to accept me for whatever my symptoms were at the time. Then the moment I felt another side of me pushing its way to the surface, again I would extricate myself socially. Over. And over. And over.

Until the age of 22.

It was winter. Cold and dark. Hard as I try to think back upon the day that marked the start of my healing journey, a hazy-like dream is as far as my memory takes me. It's as though it were a reverie of my subconscious, leaving me only with flash images and fragmented pieces. I cannot even tell you what I was doing just before the moment struck when I knew I had to take myself to the hospital.

Sometimes the right thing and the hardest thing are the same thing. Driving to the hospital that night was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, but I knew with every fiber of my being it was also the right thing.

Something began to brew and boil deep within me. It was something out of a horror movie - utterly indescribable. While I couldn't define it, I knew I needed professional help. Fast. I have no idea *how* I knew that. Raw instinct, I suppose.

I drove my black truck (the one I really couldn't afford but that I'd purchased in one of my manic states, before I ever knew what a manic state was). As I swiftly pulled into a convenient parking spot, I saw the sign "1-hour only". I remember thinking, *I'll definitely be towed*. Not a single part of me cared. The hospital was old and has since been torn down. Today, if you were to speak with anyone who stayed inside that psychiatric ward, they'd tell you it reminded them of a scene from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* or *Girl Interrupted*. "The psych ward", as everyone called it, was not representative of how we do things now. It was set up in a way that reflected the general public's view towards people like me in the early 2000s - you know, for "the crazies". Today, these areas of any given hospital are for "the mentally ill". There is an important distinction to be made between the two.

In the triage, I cannot recall precisely what I told the intake nurse except that I made it clear the urgency of my need to speak with someone. This is what put me in front of a woman I will never forget. Her name was Lorraine and she was the crisis nurse on staff that night. I didn't even know there was such a thing as a crisis nurse at that time (most people didn't). When the intake staff told me this is who I would meet with, it all felt so foreign. For so long, I thought I was the only one who felt this way, and now the presence of a crisis nurse on staff proved I wasn't. I was no longer alone, and at the same time, I also wasn't aware. If I had been, perhaps I would have sought help sooner. Lorraine and I sat together in a little room where she introduced herself and asked me, quite frankly, "What's going on?". Her kind, nonjudgmental and compassionate demeanor made me feel comfortable and safe. The words spewed out of my lips.

After a little while, Nurse Lorraine left the room and returned with a male doctor who held a bright yellow piece of paper. I was about to be "formed". This is when a patient signs away their rights to leave the hospital and is only permitted to do so upon the dismissal of a doctor. I signed...I knew I had to be there. And yet, I didn't *want* to be there. No one *wants* to be the person in the psych ward. Life doesn't always go our way though, does it?

"What others think about you is none of your business."

- - Jack Canfield

Before long, Lorraine guided me upstairs, gave me a sandwich to eat and wished me well as she handed me off to the psychiatric ward nurse on the third floor. From here, I was assigned to a dedicated area with five beds, one of which would be mine. The other four were already occupied. Beside me, was an old and very quiet woman whose presence I barely noticed. Across the room in the corner was another middle-aged woman. Beside her was an old, crotchety lady with tightly curled grey hair and a miserable expression on her face, and then directly across from me was an overweight woman who looked disheveled and devoid of any form of personal hygiene. I tried to pass no judgment (can't say I fully succeeded) since I could recall many a depressive state where so much as a shower felt like climbing a mountain. Over the course of my one-month stay at the hospital, she constantly farted and I couldn't help but giggle even though I knew it was entirely inappropriate.

Once a day, a nurse would speak with us each individually. There was Lily, sweet and loving, with enormous breasts who one time embraced me (even though this was not permitted by staff members) and I burst into tears in her arms. This one, seemingly simple, hug shook me to my very core because it came at a time when I felt as though my life couldn't possibly become any more horrible than it already was. Her gesture meant the world to me, and as a matter of fact, about 13 years later Lily became my daughter's nurse which gave me the opportunity to properly thank her for what she did.

Nurse Shirley also circulated the floor, a wonderful woman who just so happened to be a nurse in the maternity ward two years prior when I had my daughter. It was Shirley's lovable, caring and heartwarming personality that made her so special. One thing I've undoubtedly learned over time is that you can forget people's names, or what they were wearing, sometimes even what they look like, but you'll never forget how they made you feel. She always made me feel like I was going to be okay. No matter what each new day brought, she gave me that gift of hope.

The same way you always remember the people who made you feel good, you too remember those who put you down. Another nurse in the ward, Betty, was devoid of any kind of compassion and always had a chip on her shoulder. When she would find me sneaking to the men's side of the ward, she would embarrassingly call out to me, offending me and questioning the presence of a boyfriend in my life. I felt such shame. Because she was right. At the same time, I had absolutely no control over my impulses at the time. As a nurse who was supposed to be caring for me, I don't believe shaming was in the job description. I live in hope that in this critical profession, there are far more Loving Lilys than Bitchy Bettys.

In the ward, I was assigned a doctor - the doctor who saved my life. The doctor who saved me from myself. Until quite recently when he altered his career role, this man remained my doctor for 15 years. Right from the start, we bonded quickly and I had a deep level of respect for him. I used to joke about the fact that when it came to my psychological cycles, he was more of a psychic and less of a doctor. It never ceased to amaze me how he predicted my current and future states to such a high level of accuracy. During my stay in the hospital, he gave me much of his time and provided me with advice, feedback and recommendations that I still carry with me to this day.

Despite the fact that I was in the care of great professionals, my hospital experience was anything but a positive memory. At first, it was scary and lonely - and yet, I felt weirdly comfortable being there. Fear was not a foreign sentiment to me but here it felt different. I was afraid, mostly of the other patients. Everyone looked "different" and no one was "normal" like me.

At each scheduled smoke break, one lady would frivolously pick up all the old, used cigarette butts outside on the ground, stuff them in her pockets and bring them inside. Another man was admitted after he was found handing out mittens to strippers outside the local club in town. One afternoon, a lady who was known to wander the halls sputtering odd and disturbing remarks, came walking hastily towards me with her arms stretched out straight in front of her, hands in an open circle formation as she reached for my throat muttering over and over again, "You killed him...you killed him...". I was frightened for my life, and yet I was also willing to do whatever it took to defend myself if it came to that. In a split second of time, my mind raced. *In this ward, there's no way anyone would get to me fast enough if this lady got her hands on me unnoticed.* Sure, there were cameras, but they weren't watching every second. It was a glitch in the system and I knew it.

Lucky for me, it wasn't my ending. A nurse came around the corner in the nick of time to pull the woman away from me and back to her bed. I was so terrified - didn't know where to go or what to do. I remember thinking: *What am I doing in this place? Who are these people? I don't belong here.* At the same time, I knew without a doubt that I did, in fact, belong there. I was exactly where I was supposed to be and yet my thoughts were constantly contradicting one another.

"Mental illness and addiction are some of the easiest things to have an opinion about, but some of the hardest things in the world to go through."

The common room consisted of two rows of long cafeteria-style tables. The shelf on the back wall had old board games, word searches and donated books. Each hour of the day was scheduled from the morning wake-up call, to meals and snacks, to designated activities and lights-out at night. I'd like to say I missed my family. My daughter, my partner, my mother and father... The truth is, I didn't. I didn't miss anyone. It was a combination of embarrassment and emotional shutdown. My loneliness was palpable and yet I didn't find myself thinking of anyone from my outside life.

I did, however, always enjoy my visitors' company. Thank goodness for them. While I had an extensive support network around me, there were two visitors who I especially cherished: my Grandma and Grandpa. Grandma is the woman I aspire to be. Loving, sweet and selfless from head to toe, Grandma is the kind of lady everyone adores. When it came to me, she showed her love through food. There were a few of her recipes that somehow always made me feel better (that's the true definition of a comfort food). Grandma's secret ingredient was love, sprinkled with her God-given gift to care for others. Even though the hospital had strict rules on outside food, she took it upon herself to talk sternly with management in order to grant me permission to eat whatever she brought me each day. This was so unlike my Grandma - the woman who never raised her voice, started an argument or caused a scene, and yet for me, she raised havoc to make sure I received her food each day.

While Grandma's concern was for my physical health, Grandpa's worry lied with my mental and emotional wellbeing. Grandpa was a pastor and used to minister to patients at the hospital. He had his own entrance pass, which made it easy for him to stop by unannounced. Beyond my hospital stay, he did this at my home throughout my life.

Sometimes he'd show up with a poem he'd read that morning which he thought I'd take comfort in. Other times he'd come with a printed prayer or a picture to help me in whatever my current state was that day. He would always talk to me about it and share the reasons why he believed it was relevant and important. And some days he'd arrive at my doorstep and simply say, "Get dressed, we're going to have our favorite clam chowder!" I can't recall exactly what I did but one day I said something or acted in some harsh way that made him believe I didn't want him to do this anymore. And then just like that, it stopped. No more surprise visits or unannounced appearances. At the time, I felt thankful he wasn't showing up because that meant I could just be in my dark hole on my own, but as I look back, my heart aches because I now see how special and meaningful his gestures were. I took it for granted and now I'd give

anything to have those moments back. How I wish I could sit on my front porch and wait for him.

During this period of my life in the hospital, I felt not an ounce of happiness. But when Grandpa's head poked around the corner to greet me in that gloomy ward, my body instantly relaxed as it flooded with feelings of comfort, relief and security. Grandpa was everything good. For as long as I can remember, we had a personal connection as pure as they come. He always said the right thing. From his poems and spiritual stories, to his profound guidance and advice, any ounce of wisdom I have today comes from what he's told me. I miss him.

With the perfect mix of nurses, doctors and special visitors, my healing journey took flight. Just over one month later, my official diagnosis was determined.

Bipolar.

Four weeks after my admittance into the ward, it was clear that the medication was working, my blood levels were healthy, I felt good and it was time to go home. What an incredible feeling - while it lasted, that is. Unfortunately, none of us had the slightest idea what was lurking around the corner for me.

I am eternally grateful for the people who cared for me in that hospital. If it had been any other combination of individuals, I cannot say I would have gone down the same healing path. Would I be who I am today? How would my life differ if the nurses and doctors weren't who they were that month?

Even though today, I suffer long and short-term memory loss as a result of the 12 pills I am required to take on a daily basis to "stay sane", one recollection rings loud and clear in my mind. I have never, and will never, forget it: that pulsing, relentless feeling that I was going to be something big. This memory precedes my diagnosis by 15 years. I was just a child in my room, playing "The Oprah Winfrey Show". I would line up chairs and create a set. Oprah was always interviewing me for something huge I had accomplished - something that changed the world in some way. I still want this. My dream is the same, even today - except Oprah went ahead and ended her television show so I suppose it will have to be a personal interview.

I wish to be a voice for mental illness. I would certainly need a heck of a lot of Lorazepam (a benzodiazepine medication used to treat anxiety disorders) to speak in front of a large crowd...perhaps that's why the book dream always prevailed. Now

that it's out in the world, who knows where it will lead me. Dreams do come true sometimes, don't they? Why not mine?

Long ago, when I first had the feeling that I would become something big it wasn't associated with any form of doubt. This is because even if it was a high, I had no idea. I was completely unaware of my unusual mind. I hadn't the faintest clue why I was feeling what I was feeling, which also meant I was free to enjoy it. The unfortunate reality of a mental illness diagnosis, however (and particularly bipolarism), is that thereafter any grand thought or confident enthusiasm is instantly followed by doubt. It could be something as "normal" as the urge to repaint your bathroom or replace a piece of artwork, and it could be as large as dying your hair or starting a business. Whatever it is, you find yourself questioning the validity of it. The doubt doesn't always come from you, either. Even sadder, sometimes it spews out of the mouths of those you love the most.

'Are you feeling okay?'

'Did you take your medication today?'

'Are you in one of your manic states?'

If you are an Oprah Winfrey fan then you are likely familiar with the childhood story she has shared about watching her grandmother hang clothes on a clothesline when she says, 'you have to watch me Oprah Gail because one day you'll have to do this for yourself'. In that very still moment as she stood and watched her grandmother pull each clothespin from her mouth and hang every item on the line, Oprah says she knew inside of her this would not be her life. She didn't know *how* she knew it. Perhaps that "thing" we all have, instinct or intuition. But because Oprah, at the young age of just four or five, sensed this and connected to it so deeply, she was able to hold onto it for the longest of times. No matter what, she knew there was something bigger and greater for her.

I had that very same feeling. Sounds crazy, right? Is that because I am bipolar?

It didn't sound crazy when Oprah said it...or Lady Gaga...or Will Smith...or Jennifer Lopez, who states that she always knew she would later become "J Lo".

As I listened to this interesting and intelligent stranger tell me her story, my mind flashed with memories of myself as a child dreaming of my own fame on a Broadway stage. I couldn't help but wonder, do we all have this innate feeling of becoming "something big" as young children? And if we do, where does it go? What is the commonality among us all when we are so young? Is it the purity of a youthful mind that is not yet clouded by years of built up noise, information, knowledge, experiences bad and good, outside fears, social stigmas, worries...? Is ignorance really bliss?

Maybe we are so pure as young people on this earth that our minds have the ability to think bigger, without fear and doubt. We don't yet have the "sense" to say to ourselves, "Oh stop it. That's nuts." Since when did we start squashing our dreams and throwing away that raw belief in ourselves, and calling it "sense"?

RECIPE #1

Live with your mental variation

Ingredients

2 cups of acceptance
1 ¼ cups of acknowledgement
¾ cup of inspiration
1 cup of willingness
4 tablespoons of trust

Instructions

1. Accept your diagnosis. It is there. You may feel it has hindered you, or you may credit it with your life. No matter what your perspective, it is something you live with each day.
2. Acknowledge the fact that your diagnosis does not define you. It is not *who you are* but rather *something you have* - something that makes you a little out of the ordinary.
3. Let yourself be inspired. The next time you have a powerful thought, do not immediately dismiss it as a product of your mental variation. Instead, embrace it. Sit with it. Be still with it. Let those inspiring thoughts take you on a journey of exploration. Go slowly and take notes on your behavior. Have someone who

loves you keep an eye. And always know in your heart that just because you have a diagnosis doesn't mean it's everything in your story.

4. Be willing to open your mind and invite those grandiose ideas you had in the past. Tell them to come back. And when they do, take notes. Think. Feel. See where they take you.
5. Trust in yourself to act on your ideas (where it makes sense and seems feasible). Step by step, work towards goals without questioning your rightness of mind or ability to perform. On the flip side, be careful. As much as I recommend letting your aspirations guide you without hesitation, the reality is you do need to double check your mental stability. In fact, it's something you'll need to do for the rest of your life. This is just the way it is. And that's okay. Dream away...just be self-aware and err on the side of caution.