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Personal Essay by Jamie Passaro

On Mothers, Daughters, and Mental Illness



My memories go like this. I'm sixteen and driving Mom two hundred miles to Seattle for a psychiatrist's appointment—me at the wheel, because she gets panic attacks driving faster than thirty miles an hour, which is all the speed she needs in our town. And then we're shopping and shopping and buying lattes and shopping some more, thrilled to have made it, to have navigated that big city with its scary hills, both of us working the stick shift and the emergency brake of whatever sports car Mom and Dad are driving then, me revving hard, peeling out, doing what I can to move forward and up and not roll back into someone's BMW. Both of us laughing. A little Cheetos dust caught in her lipstick at the corner of her mouth.

She's recently dyed her hair, which was the same mousy brown as my hair. It's platinum, and it makes her eyebrows look very dark. In Seattle, she buys me a black-and-cream wool coat and a matching hat, flowered silk pants, and a

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cashmere sweater with embroidered flowers, all of it impractical for a girl in high school in a town with the most rainfall of any place in the continental US.

I've said I remember the waiting room of her psychiatrist's office more vividly than any of the bedrooms of my childhood friends, and this is true, but what I remember most from those trips is the shopping. I'd get euphoric just walking into a mall with her—a mall being an exotic place, given that the nearest one to our town, Forks, is three hours away in Silverdale. It's thrilling to be with her when she's excited, to know we'll buy a new outfit that day with matching accessories.

I wonder if these were manic times or just plain happy times for her, for both of us. Manic wasn't a word I would have known then. I still don't know, looking back, what was *too* up, though down—*too* down—those times were unmistakable.

This goes for both of us.

Now, it's 2015. I'm a grown-up at forty, though I'm still vaguely bemused with myself when I go to a meeting or rent a car. Like recently, when I drove to the ninetieth reunion of my college newspaper at Pacific Lutheran University. Two-hundred-and-fifty miles north, and the freeway exits were familiar, Sleater-Kinney, Pacific Avenue—*Pac Ave*. I was trying to remember how I started, what it was like when I didn't think I could have her illness, when I was nineteen and ate Thai food for the first time and saw Jewel live.

My friend from the newspaper staff and I went out for dinner at an old favorite restaurant, ordered the same thing we'd always ordered, talked about our kids, our husbands, our work, then went to the reunion, where there was no one we knew except for our newspaper advisor, who looked exactly the same, who was supposed to be retired but kept advising our old newspaper, the *Mast* (now folded into the digital *Mast Media*). He continued to rage about the typo in the headline at the weekly huddle, kept on sending those poor kids to cover the Board of Regents meeting. He told me he was also teaching a class on global ethics. I tried to think of something to say about global ethics, but could not.

I might have been projecting, but I felt he was disappointed in me for not sticking it out in journalism. It reminded me of when I was news editor and took off for a few days to celebrate my twenty-first birthday with a boy whose accent I liked very much. "Where have you been?" my advisor had scolded me when I returned.

Where have you been?

It's a fantastic question to ask myself. I am newly better after a long, fragile crazy. How I know I am better is that if I hear a siren or a train whistle, I don't think it's connected to something I've said or done. That car alarm, for instance, has nothing to do with the fact that I've left the kids alone in the bath to check my email for the forty-seventh time today. I can go out to a restaurant and no longer think the people at the next table are sending me messages in their sentences about how vain and self-absorbed I am.

I wish I were joking or exaggerating. It was a long two years.

What is good: full nights of sleep, my daughters' laughter, making dinner with a dandelion tucked behind my ear, the college radio deejay who just the other day played a Mozart concerto followed by "Rock Me Amadeus" by Falco.

What is bad: lost time, lost friendships, the possibility that the paranoia will come back.

Coming out of it is like emerging from a bomb shelter where I've been waiting with dread for months and months. And then, whoa, it's bright out there! And there are people and emotions to reconnect with, foods to taste, books to read, music! There have been four times now, four episodes, as they say, and each time my reemergence is tentative and sweet. Each time, I come back a little more vulnerable.

The other day, during a walk between winter rainstorms, my daughters and their friend dropped to their knees in wet grass around a budding crocus and began to sing a song they'd learned from their Waldorf preschool: *Crocus, crocus, waking up, catch a sunbeam in your cup....*

It was charming—one of those moments as a parent when you watch your children engaging in something that's their own culture, completely separate from what they know from you. Like when they agreed they both loved sauerkraut, and one of them said she'd made sauerkraut before. And even though I've never made sauerkraut, it's plausible that somewhere in her eight-and-a-half years she has. And I think, who are these flower-worshipping, sauerkraut-eating people in my care? What can I do to keep them so strong, so resilient?

Last winter, I helped write the obituary for my uncle, whose heart gave out. I've always said I'd love to be an obituary writer, but I didn't realize how hard it is. You take a life and boil it down into a few salient grafes. He was a computer programmer and a poet. He was great with kids, lousy with money. He stood at his wife's funeral and rocked gently while they piped in Cat Stevens's "Hard-Headed Woman." I don't think he ever got over losing his wife, Julie. He took good, fierce care of his son, my cousin, who has schizophrenia. He called me Jamikers for my whole life. I Googled his poems, and they're pretty good. I like the one where, house in foreclosure, he took off to Maui for the wedding of a distant friend, ended up teaching some of the other wedding guests to body surf, eating Thai brownies and drinking mimosas with them, remembering that "making new friends is one of the best things."

I always remember compliments. My uncle came up to me at my mother's memorial five years ago and said I'd "killed it" when I spoke. I had listed her favorite things, such as giving gifts and Nordstrom and high thread-count sheets and Ellen DeGeneres and that moment when you sit down at the restaurant and they bring you the basket of bread.

How she could rip off the price tags from a new item of clothing so stealthily with one quick snap, they'd be in the garbage before you could open the drawer to get the scissors. That song she had as the ringtone on her phone, "Bad Day" by Daniel Powter. I talked about her acceptance of some of our differences, how she endured hundreds of vegetarian dinners and even ate Tofurky one awful Christmas, for Christ's sake. How she handed over a Chevron card for a cross-country trip I took when I was nineteen, even though it must have scared the shit out of her for me to be traveling that many miles alone. You can pretty much live on the food you buy at a Chevron gas station, especially when you love Diet Coke and soft serve and Red Vines, and she never did question how much I spent on "gas" that summer.

When I was eight, a Seattle TV crew came to interview us for a feature about Mom on a magazine-style show, when everyone thought she had miraculously recovered from her illness that never had one name, that had, at times, manifested in a mom who didn't want to get off the couch. She'd recently traveled from our home on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington to Boston for an experimental surgery in which a neurosurgeon used lasers to try to zap the depression from her brain. Some other doctors were critical of the surgery, calling it witchcraft, but for her, it was a success at first.

I don't know how much of that success was a placebo effect or how much was temporary relief from the otherwise unstoppable depression that gripped her brain, turning her from sunny to flat. I don't understand her illness now, and I for sure didn't understand it then. But at the time, at that moment, from the TV reporters' perspective, it was a story with a happy ending. I can picture the cameraman filming me swinging on my rusty, creaky swing set as the sun filtered through the tall Douglas firs in our backyard. A reporter asked me if there was anything I wanted to say about my mom. Even at that age, I felt pressure to say something interesting, but I blurted out the first thing that came to me, maybe the truest thing: *I want to say that I love her.* That's how they ended the segment, just my voice.

Mom and Dad didn't want me to appear on camera; I'm not sure why. Our town was so small and isolated, anyone who saw the segment would know the voice belonged to that well-dressed Anderson girl with the bowl cut and the buck teeth. *I want to say that I love her.*

We had wiener winks for dinner the other night. These are hot dogs with cheese broiled on bread and served with ketchup and relish. Only we use veggie dogs because we're vegetarian. Ga-Ga used to make these, I said to the girls. It's a reminder that I had a mom who died, and maybe it's also a story about how Mom didn't cook. Except that she did, every night for years and years, dinner with a side salad of iceberg lettuce, tomato wedges, and Thousand Island dressing.

If I had a sister, she would say to me, *Remember the lasagne, remember the meatloaf with the bacon on top?* And I would say, *Remember how she used to leave the spaghetti out on top of the stove overnight?* And the sister would say,

Remember how she used to make those bar cookies in a nine-by-twelve baking dish, and they would sit on the counter with a butter knife in them, and you could just walk by and cut yourself a rectangle anytime you wanted?

And I would say, yes, she used to make the bar cookies when she felt like a sweet but didn't have time to spend on cookies. And maybe then we would remember the times she would make a small impromptu batch of cookie dough in a measuring cup, egg and all, and we would eat it with a fork.

I want to say this is how we remember. I wish I had a sibling to do this with, to help hold accountable my memories and sort out what was the illness and what was Mom's quirky personality. Mom's depression developed after I was born, and she was in and out of hospitals for years, so my parents didn't have other children.

I was always caught off guard by Mom's illness, by something that was such a fact of her life that we hardly ever talked about it. Now, that seems astonishing. And maybe not astonishing. If she hadn't been so adept at coping, maybe we would have talked about it more. Maybe we would have had a protocol or a system, but that's hard to imagine. In times of wellness, were we, her family, really going to come up with a contingency plan for if she thought the telephone wires had messages for her? What if she thought people were tiptoeing past the house at night? What if she wanted to launch a business selling soft biscotti to the masses, as she did in the last manic-y months of her life?

When you're well, it seems to me, in her life and in mine, what you think is, *that part of my life is over; I'm solidly living among the well*. You don't want to come up with a contingency plan, because you're sure there is no need.

When you're unwell, in her life and in mine, denial is a reflex. The alternative is a long set of appointments and the meds with the creepy side effects like drooling and shaking and eating M&M's by the bucketful and maybe a trip to the psych ward and all the dealing and the help-talking and the facing up to not being okay.

I have been in the thicket, and I have been outside the thicket calling in, when it seemed that we, the people in Mom's life, were going to let her down either way, by overreacting or underreacting to an episode. Is that the way it was, or is that what I tell myself? Is that what people tell themselves about me?

I'm at a steady place now. Maybe that's tenuous, if you study the narrative. I can still conjure up what it was like. I watch a red car drive by my house or read something in a magazine and know that just a year ago, I would have thought the car was a sign or that the words in the magazine were speaking to me in some way. I shake my head hard to physically dislodge the thoughts. I wish I had better armor—like my dad, who, after a serious car accident, bought himself a Chevy Suburban. I think that's what we all do—protect ourselves in the best ways we can from what we know from our pasts.

What I know is that if Mom were here, she could meet my second daughter, who looks like her in some ways—same blue eyes, same big smile, same blonde hair. Which is funny, because Mom had dyed hers for years. Viv is ebullient, like Mom was when she was truly happy—baking with my first daughter, Olive, right before the start of the movie or when Dad came home from work or when she bought me a new sweater.

Viv, at five, asks about *my* day, just like Mom would. But Viv's laugh is something all her own. She throws her head back and busts up, staccato laughs on laughs, harder and longer and more joyfully than any of us. Mom would have loved to hear it.

Art Information

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Jamie Passaro's articles, interviews, and essays have been published in the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, *Full Grown People*, the *Sun*, *Utne Magazine*, and *Oregon Humanities Magazine*, among other places. She lives in Eugene, Oregon, with her husband and two daughters.

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