This section features original works on pathographies—that is, (auto)biographical accounts of disease, illness, and disability—that provide narrative inquiry relating to the personal, existential, psychological, social, cultural, spiritual, political, and moral meanings of individual experience. The editors of this section are Nathan Carlin and Therese Jones. For submissions, contact Nathan Carlin at Nathan.Carlin@uth.tmc.edu.

# *The Upside of Madness*

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They called me mad, and I called them mad, and damn them, they outvoted me.[1]

Restoration playwright Nathaniel Lee, regarding his committal to Bethlem Royal Hospital

It was late, maybe three in the morning, and Mom was sitting in the dark with one leg hiked up on her bed and a pack of cigarettes by her side, the street light angled across her face like a three-quarter moon. I wiped the sleep from my eyes and blinked at the night. It was the summer of 1962 and I was eight—a skinny, restless eight, sitting cross-legged on the bed next to her, trying my best not to yawn. I knew better than to look uninterested or to get distracted.

"Can you keep a secret?" she asked, flicking the ashes off her Pall Mall. I nodded solemnly and listened as she whispered warnings about Grandpa poisoning the food: "I knew he was in cahoots with the mafia and this proves it. So ya can't eat anything for another couple of days until I'm sure the food isn't contaminated anymore." My stomach growled and my head ached; the clock ticked off another minute. I wanted to try to reason with her, but I knew it was no use. When Mom started acting like this, the only thing to do was ride it out.

The year before she thought he'd gassed the house to try to kill us all and opened every single window in the dead of winter, refusing to close them until frost collected on the Venetian blinds and

More than fifty years have passed between then and now, and yet what was true when I was an eight-year-old girl remains true today: navigating and surviving mental illness means navigating and surviving society's stigma against it. The paradox of shame is that *there is shame about shame*. Raising awareness about the myths and realities of mental illness can help us work toward and achieve an ethical responsibility for ourselves as well as others. And after a half-century of little or no change in how we view an illness that affects so many of us, doing so would be no less than a triumph and no more than an act of humility.



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my teeth banged together like piano keys. Sometimes I could talk her down from the voices in her head, but sometimes I couldn't.

"Rosemary I can't believe you've been letting this child go hungry," Grandma said the next day when she heard me begging Mom for a piece of toast. "If you don't start taking your medicine again, I'm going to have to send you back to Longview."

"Oh go ahead and send me back to the nuthouse; see if I care. At least I'd get a break from all your nagging. Hell, living here with you two is enough to drive anyone nuts."

"I told ya she needed to stay locked up with the rest of the lunatics," Grandpa hissed on his way out the door to work. Mom gave him the evil eye and lit a fresh one, smoke shooting out her nostrils in hard, determined bursts.

The next morning two men in starched white shirts and black suits came to take Mom away again, but this time she didn't even put up a fight. She just grabbed a carton of cigarettes from the top of the refrigerator and slipped it under her arm as if she'd been expecting them. I stood on the front porch and watched as they put her into the back seat of their long black sedan; her head held high and her chin jutted out. Even though her face was in a shadow, her expression was unmistakable. It was the same proud, defiant look I'd seen a thousand times before, the one that marked who she was more than anything else about her. She'd made her life with that look, made it the hard way. It was the only way she knew how.

As I watched them pull away from the curb and go down the street, I felt sad and relieved at the same time, wishing things could be different. Mom always seemed to be fighting the world, and the world always won—a world that never did take too kindly to a poor, single mother on welfare. Especially one who wasn't pretty, wasn't sociable, and wasn't afraid to show how angry she was about it all. Even when she wasn't all riled up about something, Mom seemed to give off a charge of electricity every time she walked into a room, and if you weren't careful you'd get the shock of your life. She'd been known to haul off and knock a person to the ground if she thought she was in the right about something. Mom stood up for her principles and looked down on anyone who didn't have the backbone to do the same. Grandma always said she had too much pride and too much passion for her own good. As the car faded into the distance, I figured she had to be right.

"Paranoid schizophrenia, that's what it's called," Grandma told Grandpa one morning over breakfast. I'd just come downstairs when I heard them talking and quietly stood against the dining room wall to listen. "There's no cure for it but they're giving her what they call shock treatments, and the doctor says those should help. And he's going to try some different medication this time around too. Maybe those shock treatments will work, and maybe the new medicine will too. Lord knows that's what I've been praying for."

A chair screeched across the linoleum, and I quickly tiptoed back up to the room we shared, glancing over at Mom's bed as I lay on mine. The dirty-white sheet she refused to wash was still wadded up in the middle where she left it, her blanket stuffed at the foot like always. I stared up at the cracks in the ceiling, trailing the deepest one all the way down the length of the wall until it almost met the crack in the middle of Mom's dresser mirror. I mouthed the words to myself: *para noid schiz ophrenia*. It sounded serious. And what were shock treatments? Did they shock the illness right out of you so you wouldn't have to be crazy anymore, like when

someone slaps you in the face to shock you, hoping to bring you to your senses?

"Oh hell, those labels don't mean a damn thing," Mom once explained to me. "We're all crazy in our own way and don't you forget it. Some are just better at hiding than others, that's all." Maybe she was right, I thought. Paranoid schizophrenia was just the label they'd given her, and labels didn't tell a person's story, did they? No, they only told part of it. Besides, how can you label someone if you don't know what lies inside them, in the deepest corners of their hearts? Those doctors didn't know what went on inside Mom's heart. No one did. All they knew was what she chose to show them, and knowing Mom that probably wasn't very good. Maybe speaking her mind with so much rage all the time was what made her *seem* crazy, made her *look* like she'd gone nuts. A lifetime of angry hurt could do that to a person. It could close up your heart so completely that all you're left with is a wild, lonely rage that's easily mistaken for crazy but isn't crazy at all. It's just a closed-up heart crying out for love the only way it knows how.

"Now listen, your mother's back in the hospital because they can help her there," Grandma told me when school started. "But I don't want you going around telling anyone about this. No sense in airing your dirty laundry. It's best to keep things like this in the family." I nodded up at her, already knowing what I'd be if I told. I'd be the kid with the crazy mother they had to put in the loony bin, the mom who was nuttier than a fruitcake. I'd be a laughing stock, an easy target for ridicule. No, I would never tell. That much I was sure of. As far as I was concerned, going crazy was the worst possible thing that could happen to a person, even worse than death. People were afraid of death, but, truth be told, they were afraid of going crazy even more. Death wasn't embarrassing like being crazy was. It was just sad, with lots of sympathy and food for those left behind. There wasn't anything left behind for the family of a crazy person except shame.

The following month we went out to visit Mom at Longview. Grandpa waited in the car, and Grandma stayed behind to fill out paperwork. Miss Berg, one of the nurses, took me to her ward. Tall and thin with overly tanned skin, she glanced down at me and pursed her lips, her face as creased and worn as an old pair of shoes. I followed her outside, past a series of wide, red brick buildings, guessing she was probably one of those who went to Florida each year to escape the Ohio winters. She clearly wasn't one for polite chitchat either; the swishing of her arms against her uniform was the only sound between us.

When we came to Mom's building it was smaller than the rest and not as well cared for, stuck like a postage stamp at the far end of the grounds, apart from the others. Paint had chipped off the dark gray siding in sheets, and the windows were covered with thick, chain-link wire screens. I looked up at the screened windows and saw women peering out, each face carved up like a jigsaw puzzle by the diamond-shaped wire. Noses, eyes, cheeks, chins, and foreheads—all disjointed and separate, staring down at me with the same blank expression Mom had whenever she took her medicine. They scared me, those broken-up faces, so I focused on the enormous ring of keys that hung from Miss Berg's fingers. There must've been a hundred keys on that ring.

I followed her inside and then through a dark, empty hallway. We climbed three flights of stairs to get to Mom's ward, and when Miss Berg finally got the door unlocked, we entered a long, rectangular room that seemed to go on forever. Women of all ages were stacked up

against the walls like pieces of furniture, all with blank stares and open mouths. Some stood rocking back and forth with their arms wrapped around themselves while others talked to the wall in front of them. Some sat in straight-backed wooden chairs without moving or blinking, looking more like statues than real people.

"Rosemary, I've got your daughter out here," Miss Berg said as she poked her head through a doorway at the end of the hall. Suddenly Mom appeared, wearing one of her faded blue muumuu dresses. Her dark, chin-length hair was clean and combed and she looked well rested.

"So they finally drove ya all the way out here to see me, huh?" she said, grinning down at me.

"Uh huh," I said, surprised at how happy she seemed.

"Well, wonders never cease. Ya wanna go to the commissary?"

"Sure," I said, thinking I'd go anywhere to get out of here. I didn't see how Mom could stand it, but she seemed genuinely happy. She even had a little spring in her step as we went to the nurse's station to tell them where we were going. One of the nurses had to escort us out because we couldn't get off the ward without a key. Mom bought us each a bag of potato chips and a coke at the commissary and then led us outside to an empty bench.

"Ya know if I play my cards right I'll get out of here on CS soon," she said.

"What's CS?"

"Convalescent status. It means I can go home if I mind my p's and q's." She threw her head back and poured the coke in her mouth, her lips barely touching the bottle. "So how's the old biddy treating ya?"

"Fine," I said, pulling a chip out of my bag. She fingered a cigarette out of her half-empty pack and lit up. A passing breeze stirred some dried leaves on the ground in front of us, nudging them along like children. "When do you think you'll be coming home?" I asked.

"Oh who knows? They take forever to make a damn decision around here, with all their committees and boards and crap. Jesus, you'd think it was the fucking White House instead of the nut house. Well, I'd better get back. Don't want the natives to get restless."

On the long drive home I couldn't get over how happy Mom looked, how comfortable she seemed there. I remembered her once telling me that she didn't mind being at Longview because she could be herself there, that even though she was locked up she was free to be who she was. And I guessed in a way she was right. There was nothing else to lose. She never had to engage in polite conversation if she didn't want to, never had to pretend to be happy when she wasn't, and if she wanted to have a tantrum like a toddler and scream and yell and pound her fists into the ground until she wore herself out she could do that too. I figured it was the one upside of being crazy, a free pass to be true to yourself no matter what. It was the one thing no one could take from you.

Three months went by before Mom came back home again, walking in the door with a white paper bag full of pills that jingled like spare change in her hand. Her dark brown hair had been cut so short it only came down to the middle of her ears, and the sides were choppy and uneven. Streaks of grey I'd never before seen fanned out from her temples like sprouting weeds, and her skin was the color of sand.

"Oh Rosemary, I'm so glad you're home," Grandma said as she met her at the front door. "That taxi I paid for got you here right on time. How was the traffic?"

"Fine," Mom said, though she didn't sound like herself at all. Her voice was flat and empty, her eyes fixed and unmoving. She looked and sounded

like she was in a trance. I was doing homework at the dining room table, and when she sat across from me I told her I'd missed her, but she didn't even look at me. Didn't seem to notice I was in the same room. I looked into her eyes for the longest time and saw nothing—not boredom, not happiness, not even sadness. She barely blinked. Just reached into her dress pocket for a cigarette and lit up, moving slowly and methodically, as if more out of habit than desire. By the time she was ready to take a drag, the only thing left between her fingers was a long stick of ash.

I looked up at all the pills sitting on top of the refrigerator, each bottle marked with a different name: Thorazine, Stelazine, and a host of other names I couldn't even pronounce. They were lined up in a row like watchful guards sent to calm her nerves and curb her rages, and yet all they'd done was steal the life right out of her. There must've been more than a dozen of them sitting up there, some old and some new, some of the pills in brown plastic bottles and some in rust-colored ones. Looking up at all those bottles now, I was convinced she'd been right about the doctors all along. They'd finally shut her up just like she said they would.

Mom never did learn how to be different enough to be found interesting but not so different that it scared everyone. Sometimes when I'd watch her staring off at nothing I'd wonder if the world inside her head was better than ours, if maybe she just got fed up with this one and went to another one of her own making—a world that offered love and acceptance, no matter if you were crazy or not. This world never did want much to do with a woman who said and did exactly what she felt, no matter how vile or inappropriate. Unlike most, Mom refused to keep her feelings under lock and key, so Longview State Mental Institution went ahead and did it for her.

All through the long winter and the wet spring I kept expecting Mom to change back to her old self again, but the only thing that changed was the world around her. The snow had finally melted, and the days were getting longer, daffodils and crocuses shooting up in bright, bold sprays of color while Mom stayed transfixed, locked away in a world of her own that no one could touch, not even her. I began to wonder if she'd ever snap out of it.

It wasn't until school was out for the summer that Mom started to come back to life again, as if the warm weather had poured some energy back into her. I noticed it first in her eyes. Instead of the same empty stare, they seemed more focused, as if they were finally seeing what was in front of them.

"Rosemary, you haven't stopped taking your medicine again, have you?" Grandma asked one morning, peering over her newspaper.

"No, I'm taking the damn stuff," she said, lighting a fresh cigarette.

"Well just make sure that you do. You know how important it is to take it every day and not skip any."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Mom said, waving her off. Mom looked over and shot me a quick wink, the corners of her mouth turned up in a tight grin. She reminded me of a Cheshire cat with that grin. I glanced over to see if Grandma had noticed, but she was busy cutting out coupons, talking about the prices at Kroger's being higher than the A&P this week. When I looked back at Mom she gave me another wink, her grin so wide it verged on a full-blown smile. Things were back to normal again.

## Note

1. Quoted in Meggitt JJ. The madness of King Jesus: Why was Jesus put to death, but his followers were not? *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 2007;29:379.