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The adult I may have become

Sarah Swainston

I sometimes wonder who I would have been if I had not become mentally ill. At seventeen I was head girl at school, doing well in my A-level course and on target for entry to medical school. From eighteen to twenty I was a medical student, doing reasonably well and enjoying life. At the age of twenty-one, I suddenly and unexpectedly crashed into a depression that lasted several months and required ECT even to begin to lift it. At twenty-two I returned to medical school better, but a different person. Once you have looked into that black empty hole, the memories never quite fade.

But I was young, on the whole optimistic and assumed that my life would continue on its previously smooth road. I knew that I had lost contact with some of my friends but it never occurred to me that I might have lost contact in a way with my previous self.

Over twenty years later and following several more episodes, it has finally dawned on me that I have never grieved for that lost twenty-one-year-old. It was brought home to me by a film *Shine*, which is about a brilliant young pianist whose future is suddenly shattered by a devastating psychiatric illness. I found myself crying for him – for whom he could have been, what he could have done, the relationships he missed – and I thought, 'what about me?' I've been much luckier. I've got a family, a career and a husband. But, I still wonder – how would I have been different if I had never been ill?

When someone loses a leg we understand the loss; when a couple has a disabled child, we recognise that they need time to grieve for the other child they never had. When working with an adolescent with a chronic illness we try and help them come to terms with the fact that they may never have a future. But when working with a young person with mental illness, do you ever think of it in terms of the loss of the adult they could have become?

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