

The Storm

The room was 8 ft by 8 ft with an 8 ft ceiling. Each surface, from the walls to the ceiling and floor, was covered with dingy gray canvas mats. A single lightbulb, set in the ceiling and protected by a steel grill, spilled harsh light into the cell 24 hours a day, ensuring that attendants could easily observe its occupant when looking through the protective glass window of the door, the only access to the room.

A thin, naked woman sat huddled in the far corner, her head between her drawn-up knees, her arms clinched tightly around her legs, swaying almost imperceptibly to a rhythm only she could hear. Her long black hair, once full and shiny, lay in limp, dirty strings across her hunched shoulders, her sides and thighs a pasty white with visible bones under the skin. Despair and fear seeped into the corridor, the only emissions from the sound-proofed room. The woman was broken, without hope, and she was my mother.

I ran from the hospital, barely able to contain my tears of fear and rage. At fourteen, I thought I could handle anything. I had helped my father in his home construction projects since I was eight, added a morning and evening newspaper route for the Wichita Falls Record News at ten, and began working full time in the summers as a busboy in a popular restaurant at twelve. My earnings paid for clothes and entertainment, and my car, which I had purchased shortly after my birthday in January that year. I was 6 ft and weighed 170 pounds with more than my share of street fights and some experience with drinking and sex. But I was not prepared to see my mother that day in those circumstances. I sat sobbing in my car, slamming my fists into the steering wheel, screaming curses at God, ashamed for myself and her, blaming the hospital for

putting her misery and nudity on display, my Dad for not rescuing her, and myself for my failures as a son. If only I had been better, smarter, or popular, things might have been different.

Wichita Falls, my hometown, lies at the nexus of hot, moist air boiling up from the Gulf of Mexico and cold, dry winds sweeping down from Canada, the region of America meteorologists have dubbed “Tornado Alley”. During late spring and early summer, the skies could instantly transform from puffy, white cumulus clouds drifting lazily to the horizon to angry black monsters spawning violent thunderstorms and devastating twisters. Neither a tornado’s path nor its duration is predictable. Some touch the ground briefly, scattering dust and stripping leaves from trees before retreating into the angry cauldron of their birth. Others stay and visit, moving generally to the northeast and leaving broken trees, crushed buildings, and shattered lives in their path. Mother’s mental illness was the tornado in our family, sometimes benign, more often raging, with lifetime impacts upon my father, my little brother and me.

In the 1950s, mental illness was still in the closet. Most people considered those with a mental disorder prone to unpredictable violence. As a result, psychotic incidents and the identity of those suffering from mental illness were kept secret within families, hoping to avoid the shame and stigma associated with being “crazy”. Mother suffered from manic-depression, a condition we now call Bipolar Disorder, cycling between periods of high energy, staying up all night to start one project after another, to deep melancholy and inactivity. She could appear normal for months, then spin off into a new cycle of frenzied animation. Her illness first appeared when she was in early 20s and I was in grade school. We never learned its cause, though her psychiatrist believed repressive memories of her early childhood were its roots. Whatever the reason, she and the rest of us went through periods of hell for more than a decade.