

Beginning

My autobiography

My childhood was happy and carefree

The world was a simple, safe place
and my parents loved me

School was pretty good
and I had a few friends

I felt weird at times in primary school
but doesn't everyone?

I had a few problems in high school
but don't most people?

I met the love of my life when I was seventeen
went to uni, became a teacher, got married and had four
children

In my mid-thirties I went back to uni
got a Master's degree and went back to work

Ten years later
I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder

I am now a member of an exclusive club
and in very good company

Agatha Christie, Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf
Nina Simone, Sting and Brian Wilson

Vivienne Leigh, Carrie Fisher and Catherine Zeta-Jones
... just to name a few

These days I do the same things everyone else does
I spend time with my family and friends and I go to work

I'm lucky
Life is good.



Assume nothing - Mixed media on paper, Photoshop 190 x 270 mm

Hot chips with vinegar

When I was ten

My best friend was a girl named Amy. On the weekends we would go roller-skating in the playground at our school or down my street. We sang in a children's choir and every Tuesday we would walk to the local primary school hall together for choir practice. On other afternoons we bought hot chips with vinegar, took them to the park and sat on the swings.

Sometimes we would climb the mountain at the top of my street and look at the sheep grazing in the valley on the other side. I loved to catch tadpoles, take them home and watch them turn into frogs.

My mother was busy (I suppose with five children she must have been), but my life was relatively quiet and uncomplicated. There were no computers and we weren't allowed to watch TV. After school and on weekends we played outside or at our friends' houses until it was dinnertime and after dinner we helped with the washing up and did our homework.

When I was twelve

Amy was still my best friend but I also played with another girl, Rebecca. I went to Rebecca's house most afternoons after school, as she lived nearby. Rebecca and I would hang around playing games (Monopoly) or cards (Go Fish) while she sucked sweetened condensed milk from a tube. This, together with a plate of biscuits was her afternoon tea. I was envious as I had never tasted condensed milk and my mother didn't allow us to have biscuits at home. We had milk, water and fruit at my house.

Sometimes when I knocked on Rebecca's door, her mother told me she wasn't at home. One day Amy took me aside and said that Rebecca's mother was lying when she told me that Rebecca wasn't home. According to Amy, Rebecca didn't like playing with me but she didn't want to tell me herself.

Apparently Rebecca would hide in the hallway or in the kitchen and get her mother to tell me she wasn't home. She would then stand behind the curtains looking at me through the window as I walked away. I knew Amy was telling the truth the day I saw Rebecca watching me from her bedroom window. I was shocked. Mothers didn't lie for their children. Did they? Mine wouldn't have, that's for sure.

I should have realised there and then that Rebecca was a bit weird. Who sucks condensed milk from a tube and hides in hallways so they don't have to see their friends? In her defence, she was shy and I did go to her house almost every day. Nevertheless ...

I felt a burning sense of shame, embarrassment and humiliation. I believed that there must be something wrong with me if people who I thought were my friends didn't actually like me.

I kept these feelings close to my heart and spoke of them to no one. I stopped going out to play. I stopped roller skating,

stopped climbing the mountain, stopped looking at the sheep and stopped catching tadpoles and watching them turn into frogs.

Amy and I didn't walk together to the park or to choir practice anymore and we didn't eat hot chips on the swings. I wondered if *anyone* liked me.

What if everyone was pretending, like Rebecca had been? I was no longer happy and carefree and I began to feel rather strange.

One day I realised I couldn't look people in the eye and it felt weird not to be able to do that. I wanted to. I tried and tried but I couldn't. It was like a hole in a tooth that you keep putting your tongue in to check if it is still there. It *was* there for what seemed like an awfully long time.

When I was fourteen

Mum was talking. I wasn't listening, I was thinking:

I don't want to die, but what if ...

... what if I topple from a tall building? What if I fall in front of a bus?

What if I am driving along the highway and I open the car door for some reason and roll out onto the road? If that happens, I hope I die straight away. I don't want to end up alive but all mangled or a vegetable. It won't be my fault. Honestly it won't. I don't want it to happen, really I don't.

So why is it, that when I am in the car, I get this weird feeling? This overwhelming sense that it's going to happen. It will be me doing it, but someone or someone else will be directing the action, making it happen.

Is it a premonition? Will it really happen? I don't want it to.

I tried not to think about it, but the scene played itself over and over in my mind: opening the car door, taking off my seatbelt and rolling out onto the road.

Splat.

I shuddered and crossed my arms quickly, mentally pushing down the button to lock the car door, checking my seatbelt, holding onto it tightly, then seeing ... the car door opening ... and rolling onto the road ... splat ... dead ... or maimed.

No, no, no ...

Mum looked at me expectantly, obviously waiting for a

response to something she had said.

'What?' I said, dragging my thoughts back to the present.
'WHAT?'

When I was fifteen

To all intents and purposes I was a normal teenager, and superficially I functioned normally. I ate meals with the family, did what I was told, went to school, completed all my homework and worked at my part time job.

I went through the motions, but I felt dead inside. I was numb. A glass wall surrounded me. There was no way in and no way out.

I felt nothing, not happiness, sadness or anger. Not pleasure or pain. Not love or hate. I was adrift. Isolated and desolate. I never cried and I never felt overtly sad or depressed, but I withdrew socially. I was totally disconnected from everyone and everything.

It was severe and unrelenting and I suffered terribly because of it.

I thought I had done something to cause it, and that I deserved to feel this way. I believed I was being punished for things I had done wrong, for being a bad person. I didn't consider it might be depression and neither did anyone else.

My parents knew something was wrong and took me to see a social worker. He talked to me, but we never got below the surface.

My mother took me on a holiday to Bali to see if that would help. It was lovely, but I was still not right.

After about two years, for no apparent reason, the fog began to lift. Slowly the numbness went away, and my life became normal again. I was well and happy.

For the next thirty years I was fine but I always wondered what had happened to me when I was fifteen.

At the age of forty-five, when I was diagnosed with late onset bipolar disorder, I read a brilliant book called *An Unquiet Mind* by an American author and academic, Kay Redfield Jamison, who wrote about herself and the pain and despair that depression caused her when she was a teenager.

I was amazed by her story. She could have been talking about me. I finally understood what had happened to me when

I was fifteen. All the feelings she'd had, I'd experienced as well. The way she wrote about her teenage years and the course of her bipolar disorder struck a chord deep within me.

My feelings of disassociation and isolation, my belief that I didn't have any friends, my separation from others by an intangible barrier, my inability to look people in the eye, my feelings of guilty and my reluctance to socialise suddenly made sense.

What had happened to me hadn't been something I had made up or done to myself. It hadn't been my fault. I was not the only one to have experienced it. Many other teenagers had (and still do). It had a name. Depression.

When I was seventeen

Life was good. I did all the things that normal seventeen year-old girls at that time did (which was nothing much). I had permed hair and wore flared jeans and satin blouses. I listened to ABBA and Rod Stewart. I was average academically at school and had some nice friends.

I worked part-time in a small supermarket and I loved being on the till, counting out the change and packing the groceries neatly into paper carry bags.

One Easter weekend my friend Melissa and I were on holidays at the South Coast with our respective families. She and her boyfriend were going out with his best mate and she asked if I wanted to go with them.

I met her boyfriend's mate and he was nice. I remember thinking at the time that he looked pretty good with his shoulder-length hair and brown eyes, dressed to kill in flared jeans, a tight light-blue collared body shirt and desert boots.

When I was twenty-one

I was married. My wedding day was perfect. My new husband and I beamed at each other throughout the church service. Melissa was my bridesmaid and her boyfriend was the best man. The children's choir sang beautifully. It rained as we came out of the church, a sure sign of good luck. I had everything I'd ever wanted and was blissfully happy.



Rainy Days - Oil on board 380 x 500 mm

The perfect mother

'Insanity is inherited – you get it from your children.' (Samuel Levenson)

I didn't go mad because I had children (although some women suffer terribly from post-natal depression). For me, the madness came much, much later.

All parents go a little stir crazy from time to time and I was no exception. Parenthood is hard. I had a few challenging times when my children were young (as we all do), but I was never really crazy. In fact, for a while, I was the perfect mother (or tried to be anyway).

Baby M

I had always wanted to have children, and when I became pregnant with Baby M, I was really excited. I read all the books and went to all the classes and prepared myself as best I could. I was determined to be the perfect mother. Baby M was fed according to a strict routine. Other people could nurse her, but no one could settle her or look after her as well as I could. My

mother was given copious pages of notes about what to do if I had to go to an appointment and she was babysitting. I gave her no credit for having successfully raised five children of her own.

Baby M wore cloth nappies because it was so much better for the environment. When she dropped her dummy I picked it up, boiled it in water for ten minutes, then sterilised it in a special solution. She was introduced to solid foods in the exact order and timing suggested by the baby health clinic.

I cooked all of her food and put the excess into small Tupperware containers for when we went out. I bought fresh fruit and vegetables, chopped, peeled and gently boiled them, then mashed them into the perfect consistency.

As she got older, she never ate junk food, or drank soft drink or went to McDonald's. I read to her and talked to her, stimulating her brain to allow her intellectual potential to develop. I signed her up for baby swimming classes, baby music lessons and kinder gym activities.

I started toilet training her when she was one, and became very frustrated at her apparent lack of progress, compared to the boy next door.

I recorded every exciting detail of her progress and took albums full of photos. I wrote down what her first words were and when she said them and how tall she was at frequent intervals. Not only was she beautiful but she was very bright for her age.

Baby A

When Baby M was twenty months old, Baby A arrived. Another beautiful daughter. Of course I didn't have as much time as before but I still managed to cook the fruit and vegetables and wash the cloth nappies (double the quantities now as the toilet training with Baby M hadn't gone quite as I had planned). When Baby A dropped her dummy, I sat it in a cup of boiling water for a few minutes.

I couldn't give Baby A as much attention as I had given Baby M, which meant that if she cried for a little while, she was usually asleep by the time I finished what I was doing to attend to her. I couldn't understand why Baby M was such a bad sleeper and Baby A was such a good one.

My life was going according to plan and I was happy and content. I was raising my two small daughters, one with big hazel eyes, a happy smile and brown curls, and the other one with pale blue eyes, straight blonde hair and an easy-going personality. They complemented each other beautifully and life was good.

When my girls were four and two, my husband and I decided to have another baby. I wanted a boy this time, but told myself it didn't really matter as long as it was healthy.

We lived in the same street as a place called Sylvanvale. I had a vague idea it was some kind of educational institution, special school or sheltered workshop for 'mentally retarded' (as I thought of them) young people and adults. I didn't really know much about it and, to be truthful, didn't really want to know.

One day I was sitting on my front lawn, playing with my daughters and chatting to my next-door neighbour. A group of young adults from Sylvanvale approached with their carer. It appeared that they were learning how to cross the road. It wasn't a very realistic setting though, as we lived in a cul-de-sac and there was very little danger that any of them would be hit by a car.

I observed the group more closely thinking how awful it would be to have a child like that. Any other disability would be better than an intellectual one. A sensory impairment such as vision or hearing loss wouldn't be too terrible. Spina bifida or cerebral palsy couldn't be that difficult.

I could even cope with a child who had a life threatening illness. But having a child who was 'mentally retarded' was something I knew I simply could never deal with. It was a hypothetical train of thought anyway, as it was incomprehensible that any of these things could touch my life.