

In the late 1950s, in a lush rural community in central Minnesota, words like mental illness and grief were not commonly used. Our community understood the sadness of losing someone in death, but there was no recognition for the anguish a family endured while watching a loved one succumb to mental disease. My family was alone, adrift at sea, victims of the pitch and toss of the waves we would come to know as schizophrenia.

Today, we still know little about mental illness, why it strikes, and why it often takes the brightest star from a family. My oldest sister Nancy was my hero, my champion and role model, until fate and nature conspired against her. She was tall, slim, a green-eyed beauty like our mother. There were ten years and two siblings stood between us. When I was very little, Nancy would scoop me up and bring me to our old wooden rocker. There she celebrated my toes and serenaded me with her own made-up songs about a special girl named Cathy.

During those years, I followed her like an admiring puppy. I can still see her holding court in our front yard, sitting regally in a lawn chair while a classmate with a crew cut performs handstands for her. She smiles, nods, and he is happy to be her court jester.

This memory is in sharp contrast to the nightmare scenes that follow. When Nancy is 18, she becomes moody, troubled, and often isolates herself from the family. She looks at us with disgust and other times as if she is afraid of us. Before this, our home vibrated with hearty laughter and the musical tones of the Mills Brothers and the Andrew Sisters. Now, as if someone stood our home on end, it becomes a house of shrieks, brisk movements, slammed doors, and shrill voices in the middle of the night. Sleep is tumultuous as Nancy often skulks through the house, smashing portraits and professing she will kill us as we sleep.

I don't know why, but somehow I think this is my fault. If only I was a better child, more obedient, not so slow or chubby, surely Nancy could

be restored to us. I often try to sit with her in her room as we did in the past. Her room is also changed. It had been immaculate, with throw pillows and rugs strategically placed. Now there are piles of dirty clothing everywhere, dishes with dried food, her bed is unmade, and she sits in the midst of it like a rumpled shirt. She flashes me a cross look as she sees me standing in the doorway, waiting for permission to enter.

“What do you want twerp? Can’t you see I have better things to do than talk to you? This whole family is so disgusting!”

I gulp on a breath that is caught by her words. “I just want to be with you... Are you going to draw something today?”

She looks at me with dismay and says, “I need to be happy to draw... Shh, did you hear that? Did you? I heard someone whisper.”

I didn’t hear anything...

“Be quiet and listen. I think it is a man’s voice. I can’t make out what he is saying. If you can’t hear it, get out so I can listen.”

Soon my parents’ lives resemble an assembly line of appointments: doctors, priests, counselors, and finally a judge. Nancy is committed to the Anoka State Hospital. The natural rhythm of our family is broken. It now sounds more like the thump of a flat tire rather than the normal turning of life’s gears.

Mom and Dad are away during the week for evening visits and part of the weekend is also devoted to Nancy. Her illness extracts a huge toll, simultaneously removing my parents and Nancy from so many of the important events of our lives. The comforting sounds of a busy family are silenced. Our home becomes painfully quiet. At times, I feel I hear the whispers Nancy has talked about, and I fear I might also fall under the wave of schizophrenia.

Much of the first year that she is hospitalized, my siblings and I are not allowed to see her. We wait with great anticipation for our first visit. We still believed that the old Nancy would be restored to us. The night before that visit I lay awake in my bed. My body was electric with excitement. I envisioned seeing Nancy in a lovely floral dress with a large smile walking toward us. I practiced this scene and its joyous outcome over and over again. We all anticipated seeing some of the old spark that we knew to be Nancy.

What we found instead was Nancy in a dirty community bathrobe, hair uncombed, chain smoking Marlboros. She now had a pronounced tremor in her left arm and leg; we learned it was due to the heavy medications. Still, through her fog, she was delighted to see us. Seeing her siblings, she took it as a sign that she was going home. She ran from us to her room and threw her clothing into an old brown paper bag. Indelibly etched on my heart is the sight of my sister being hauled away by an attendant. Nancy is crying and her limbs and face are all that I can see beyond the large frame of the nurse. She extends her hand toward us over the shoulder of the nurse and screams, "I want to go home! I don't want anymore shock treatments!"

We were told to leave. In less than a ten minute span, our first visit to the Anoka State Hospital was over. We had to turn around and head for home without even being able to say, "Good bye, we love you!"

My family spent years visiting Nancy, our reunions often accompanied by an overwhelming sense of loss and a deep conviction that we had somehow failed her. Those years reflect an incredible depletion of our family's energies, countless hours of driving, money for clothing and toiletries that inexplicably disappeared at the state hospital within a week's time. There were numerous attempts to reinstate her to a normal life, attempts at jobs, Beauty College, and St. Cloud State College, all ending the same way. She would begin with enthusiasm,

but as soon as she felt somewhat normal, she would start hiding her medication and the wave of delusions would return.

Eventually, my parents saw the importance of preserving themselves and the rest of the family. My family lovingly stepped back from my sister. We took back our lives; the music that used to fill our home was replaced by the drone of our television, my parents took up golf, the laughter returned to our family outings.

Yet below the surface, there lay an undertow of feelings that had no means of expression. Those feelings stood like a stagnate pond.

In my 30s, I suffered from a recurring nightmare about someone breaking into my home and threatening my life. My husband was working the night shift during that time, making those images even more threatening. In my dream, the door of our home stood unlocked, or the corner of the house was ripped open as if by some giant hand. Each time the intruder would step in through the gaping hole in the side of the house or through the unlocked door. Although I was asleep in my dream, I always knew someone had entered. I would struggle toward consciousness, like a deep sea diver far below the surface, aware of a threat. I was swimming, willing myself through the dark water trying to break the surface and save myself.

The dream continued to haunt me for nearly 9 months until one night the intruder was revealed to me. As the dream ended, I saw it was Nancy standing over me. Nancy, my sister, who climbed on my bed and crawled by my side. I heard my own voice say in the dream, "Nancy would never hurt me," and from that point on the dream ceased to return.

Not long after the dream ended, a powerful message followed in the form of a sermon. While visiting a friend's church, I was moved by a message of forgiveness. This message was not new to me, but this time I felt as if it was directed at me. Yet I couldn't understand how it

applied to my situation. I was only aware of a deep longing to see my sister again.

I began by making a commitment to visit Nancy monthly. She was now a ward of the state and resided at the Willmar State Hospital. It was a 200-mile round trip for me, which gave me plenty of time to prepare for our visit and decompress afterward.

Also during this time, I was lead to a book called “Love is Letting Go of Fear” by Doctor Gerald Jampolsky. Three principles were emphasized in the book: live in the present, accept what is, and forgive. I wrote these principles on a recipe card and carried them with me whenever I visited Nancy.

Although our visits together were getting more relaxed, after spending time with her, I would experience fits of rage. How could she threaten us as she did? How could she treat us so shabbily? How could she take so much from our family? How dare she leave us? In the privacy of my own basement, I shouted and screamed at a chair I labeled NANCY. I was dumbfounded by the things I said, the things I felt. The words were not the language of a 30-year-old woman, but the language of an eight-year-old child. I felt waves of shame for the feelings that had been stored in my consciousness for decades. I continued to vent to an empty chair in my basement. Finally there was nothing more to say; I was able to let go of our history.

Nancy has been diminished by years in state hospitals, shock treatments and medications. In a recent testing it was determined that my once brainy sister functions at an age level between 6 and 16, depending on the subject matter. She is no longer violent and lives in a group home. I am deeply grateful for the connection we now have. I am her conservator. We go shopping as sisters do and often we sing “Girls Just Want to Have Fun.” She wears a perpetual grin these days. I know she feels loved and accepted.

My decision to rekindle my relationship with my sister helped me reclaim parts of myself that I had long abandoned. Though my sister suffers from mental illness and has been in and out of state hospitals for nearly 30 years, I have come to know that Nancy is not lost to me; she is merely in a form unfamiliar. When I stay present to her, I find much of my sister's wit and wisdom is still intact. What is required of me is that I stay free of judgment. I must stay calm, unflustered, and attentive and then the old Nancy pours from her eyes and from her smile. It is as if we both must feel safe to let her come out. And when I give her permission to be who she is - all of who she is - I am given that same freedom. I am liberated to be the many facets that are me.