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A Beacon in the Dark

Enveloped in the depths of my front porch, I inhaled the crisp night air. I could almost hear the marching band play as the distant glow from the stadium lights in the night sky beckoned me in the dark. It was halftime of my youngest son's homecoming football game. It was only eight miles away, but it might as well have been a hundred. Missing another important event in his life weighed heavily on me. Thankfully my husband was at the game, cheering him on as he juked and jived down the field, dodging tackles and making touchdowns.

Back inside, the house was brightly lit to drive the shadows out from their hiding places. Scenes from the past filled the rooms. Sleeping bags carpeted the floor, wrestling matches and dart gun wars raged. Guitar jams, singing, and laughter bounced off the walls in a joyous cacophony.

Those days were gone, the pause button had been pushed, and our home was now mute and still. No TV shows or radio programs had played in our home in well over a year. My oldest son was downstairs in his bedroom. He was fully dressed as if to go out with friends but instead was lying in bed with blankets completely covering his head. It reminded me of when I was a child seeking refuge under the covers from the imagined Boogie Man. In a way, that is what he was doing, hiding in fear from monsters only he could see.

I twirled the safe dial, listening to the soft clicks as it spun through the secret code. The door swung open; I grabbed boxes and bottles, shut the door, and turned the dial to ensure the contents stayed locked safely inside. The kitchen resembled a pharmacopeia as I spread the numerous bottles across the table. I carefully divvied the pills into two weeks' worth of pillboxes, checking their contents twice.

I got up to use the bathroom, planning to put everything back in the safe as soon as I was done. I had recently started storing all medicine in our gun safe. For the past few weeks, I had been finding notes in our son's room about suicide. The safe was now brimming with steak knives, paring knives, filet knives, and pocket knives. Aspirin, ibuprofen, leftover pain pills, cold remedies, belts, ropes, and various sharp or pointy items were stuffed into the overflowing box.

When I opened the bathroom door, he was waiting. His hair and beard were scraggly. He resembled the homeless men I'd seen standing in line outside soup kitchens. Avoiding eye contact, he quickly darted past me and locked the bathroom door.

On the kitchen counter, the medication boxes stood open and empty. I frantically started digging through the kitchen trash. Believing we were poisoning him, he'd been skipping meals, and suspicious items landed in the garbage. While sifting through the rotting and slimy food, empty cans, and junk mail, I didn't see his medication. I began to breathe hard as my throat became constricted.

I heard the toilet flush, and he came out of the bathroom. My voice cracked, and through the tightness in my throat, I squeaked, "where is your medicine?"

He replied in a monotone voice, "I flushed it down the toilet."

My fear flashed to anger, and I shouted, "now you don't have any medication! These meds can't be stopped suddenly. You could have a seizure or a heart attack!"

My son looked at me with suspicious eyes and asked, "Where is my mother? What have you done with her?" He had begun losing the ability to recognize faces and at times believed we were impersonating his true family.

His face was gaunt, and his skin stretched tight over his prominent cheekbones. He was frozen, motionless like a statue. His head was cocked to the side, intently listening, but not to me. He nodded and chuckled to himself over a joke only he could hear.

I called his doctor's emergency line and explained what had happened. His prescription refills were sent to a 24-hour pharmacy. I did not trust him to be left alone, so he had to go with me. I ran downstairs to get his shoes.

His room looked as if a tornado had swept through, destroying everything of value. My feet crunched pieces of electronics, broken trophies, and childhood memorabilia. The shelves that once held treasured books were empty. The closet stood open with the skeletal remains of what had been stylish clothing. In the middle of the night, quiet as a ninja, he had bagged up his beloved books, clothing, and shoes. Believing they contained intrinsic evil, he had smuggled them outside to the garbage cans. The only items left were a few T-shirts, two pairs of jeans, and old grungy sneakers he had used for mowing the lawn. I grabbed the sneakers and ran up the stairs to the kitchen.

Driving towards the city, I jealously watched the other vehicles happily glide past. They were going to dinner, shopping, or meeting friends for an adventurous and fun-filled night out. But not us; we were destined to silence and isolation. There was no time left for football games or shopping and lunch dates with my daughter. My husband and I would never be empty nesters or take vacations. This purgatory was all that was left, and despite my best efforts, he was slipping away into the abyss of madness.

My thoughts returned to the car as I heard him repeating the mantra, "I am not evil, I am not evil, no I'm not, no I'm not." I reached over and jabbed the radio button. A lighthearted Eagles melody filled the air:

Peaceful easy feelin'

And I know you won't let me down

Cause I'm already standin',

On the ground.

Tranquility floated around me. For a moment, I was transported to a previous fall night when the world was still golden. He had been nominated for Homecoming King. We had naively believed he was destined for greatness with his good looks, intelligence, and work ethic. Those days seemed like distant events from somebody else's life.

My peaceful interlude was suddenly shattered by hysterical screaming. He was rocking back and forth with his hands clamped tightly over his ears, "Shut it off! They can hear my thoughts through the radio!" Desperately he slumped down in the seat, hiding from the other vehicles. I drove on in silence.

When I exited the highway, I glanced over and noticed he was asleep. His head was leaned back against the headrest, and his mouth was open and slack. I nudged him and told him we'd be at the pharmacy soon. There was no response, only spittle that slipped out of the corner of his mouth and down his chin. Confused, I pondered how quickly he had fallen asleep. Without pills and sedatives, mania and adrenaline were his nightly companions. He could go days without sleeping.

The realization slammed into me that he had not flushed his meds but had taken all of them at once. Panic shot through my body like a lightning bolt. Incredulously, I was driving past the hospital entrance at that very moment and careened into the ER parking lot. I sped straight to the entry doors. With my car door hanging open, I ran inside, wild-eyed and shouting that my son had overdosed.

They placed his limp body on a gurney and rushed him into the intensive care unit. They pumped his stomach, but it was too late; the medication had been absorbed into his bloodstream. His organs were shutting down, and his heartbeat and respiration were dangerously low.

I stood sentinel by his bed as they quickly hooked him up to life support equipment. The myriad of tubes, cords, and machines resembled appendages. He was suspended comatose like an octopus out of water with monitors and motors whirring and beeping a dark symphony. My husband and I prayed until there were no prayers left.

Late one night sitting at his bedside, alternating between studying the squiggly lines from his vital signs monitor and looking out the window, I experienced deja'vu. To my horror, I realized that I had seen that parking lot view before. He was in the same ICU room as my dad had been in years prior. While in that same room, my father looked at me and said, "please can you call my daughter Angela and let her know I'm here? I don't want to be alone." He didn't recognize his own daughter. I had been angry then, believing my father was drunk even though the nurse assured me his lab results proved otherwise. I had no comprehension that serious mental illness causes brain degeneration, much like Alzheimer's when it's not effectively treated. I remembered my dad saying to me numerous times. "You don't understand what I am going through, and I hope you never do."

I understood now. Schizophrenia had robbed me of my father, and it was trying to steal my son as well. I understood that I had failed my dad, and I couldn't fail my son. I understood that I had to educate myself and learn everything I could about this brain disease to help future generations of my family.

I had no petitions or pleas to God left in me; I had already poured them all out. There was emptiness where the eloquent words of prayer used to be. The only words I had left for the Creator were bitter and angry. "Why?" Why did he allow this to happen to my father and my son? They did not ask for this affliction, and they did nothing to deserve it. I could not fathom the purpose of life created only for suffering.

As the toxins slowly cleared his body and his organs resumed their duties, he finally woke from his coma. He explained that the voices he was hearing had commanded him to take all his medication at once. Crying, he told me he was in torment, and his life was not worth living. I promised I would never give up on him and that he would get better. He would not end up like his grandpa. He was going to have a good life.

When he was transferred out of ICU, a few of our extended family members came by the hospital. When I say "a few," I mean it literally. People don't come to visit when you are hospitalized for schizophrenia or mental illness. They don't bring flowers and gifts. They make a wide berth and stay as far away as possible. Somehow, they believe it's your fault that your brain is sick, or maybe they think they can "catch" it. A few people from our church thoughtfully reached out. They kindly told us they were praying he'd repent of his sins so that God would heal him. I bet a million dollars they didn't say that to our pastor when he had a heart attack.

After he was released, we followed up with his doctor. I'd been asking him to prescribe the "Gold Standard" medication for psychosis disorders for months. I had found several success stories of people that were in recovery. They all took the antipsychotic clozapine, and I believed it might be the answer to our prayers.

After thirteen useless antipsychotics, four hospitalizations, and a suicide attempt, his brain function had deteriorated dramatically. His doctors said to forget about college, a career, or marriage. The recovery stories I'd found were exceptions, and for his safety, I should consider institutionalizing him. I fervently pleaded that he be allowed to try the statistically proven most effective medicine for his illness. Stubbornly I insisted that if others could recover, so could he. The doctor nervously argued that it was too risky with potentially dangerous side effects. I passionately replied, "I am willing to take that risk. Depriving him of this medicine is risking his life!"

He started clozapine shortly after. From the very first day on the lowest dose, he slowly improved. Searching online, I found an internal medicine doctor in New York whose son was also diagnosed with schizophrenia. Out of desperation like my own, he educated himself about psychiatric medicines and became a clozapine expert. He now has hundreds of patients with serious mental illness in meaningful recovery. He agreed to be my son's doctor, and the rest is history.

My son is enjoying his life again. He is in college, working part-time, and has dreams for his future. He plans to be a social worker and help others living with mental illness know that there is hope.

My husband and I are empty nesters now. The boys recently came home from college for the weekend. The four of us met our daughter and grandson for lunch. We drove to the city and sang along with the radio as our vehicle happily glided down the highway.

I still don't have an answer to why. For now, I see things imperfectly, like looking in a dim mirror. I only know what is partial and incomplete. But one day, I will see God face to face and know everything completely, just as he knows me completely.

I have learned that doctors are just people. They are fallible. They are not all-knowing; they get discouraged and sometimes make mistakes. They can also be caring, compassionate, and determined. Some choose to be heroes who don't give up on their patients.

Schizophrenia altered our course and catapulted us down a road we didn't want to travel. Nevertheless, we traverse on, determined not to go forward unchanged. We will use our experiences to spread hope and be a beacon in the dark.