A Picture Album

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The grainy picture taken in the 70s looks so innocent—the two of us, looking like sisters, even though your eyes are blue and mine are brown. We have on our backpacking “uniforms”—wool knickers, ski sweaters, wool hats pulled down around our ears, with our snowshoes casually leaning on the railing of the field fence. We both wear our hair long, in thick braids down our backs. In this picture, we surely are as sisters, even though I’m from Texas and you hail from Iowa. We both have come to Fort Collins for one thing—to escape our respective cities and get into the wilderness of the Rocky Mountains. Both of us believe this will be our salvation. What we don’t count on are the realities of living in a dormitory of a huge institutional university. We hitchhike as far as the roads are open, pitching our tent in the snow, eating oranges and chocolate.

Next picture: there is no photograph of this, just my jumbled memory: I’m sitting across the desk from the university psychiatrist. He is staring at me with bloodshot eyeballs and that awful tuft of hair sticking up that should be white but it looks sickly yellow. He's ancient. “You have schizophrenia!” he drably intones. And it is as simple as that, whatever schizophrenia is, I have it, and all I know is that it sounds like a death sentence. The thought bubble over my head says, “He’s not very smart!” But then in the next frame, I am sitting in the dorm, Parmalee Hall, on the edge of my bed, my heart filled with fear and sorrow, wishing I could be on my way out of town down snowy Poudre Canyon. You also are having struggles: depression, feeling alienated and overwhelmed by the demands of a big state university. We understand each other, and even though our battles are not identical, we find caring and comfort in our friendship. We move out of the dorm and rent a room in an old house with a venerable
claw foot tub under the eaves. We take turns soaking in the tub and we build an altar under the window between our beds, adorning it with feathers, pine cones, and rocks that we find on our travels in the high country.

The next picture seems pornographic: I’m in a hospital gown in a hospital called “Graves”- what an apt name, though I’m sure it honors some long-deceased benefactor. I’m lying on the gurney and they are wheeling me into the antiquated, creaking elevator down to the basement where the shock treatment happens. After, all of us patients wake up in the room with the faded green linoleum floor, where we proceed to eat cold scrambled eggs in silence.

Every day I get your letter. But who are you? I cannot quite remember, even though you tell about the snow and your classes and how you have a crush on a boy who is the star of the ceramics class in the art department. Who are you?
I try so hard to remember, while the letter from you faithfully comes every single day.
Months after my release from the hospital, some memories slowly start to trickle back. I begin to remember you, but not much else. You help me. You write descriptions of the experiences that I have lost: our expedition to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, the song I wrote on my guitar about the stars coming out at night, the trip where we stayed in a teepee in the snow next to some hot springs. You help me reconstruct the memories of my life that otherwise would be lost.

In the next picture, it is night. I’m running through the jagged trees in the forest of the Green Mountains of Vermont, where I have come to graduate school to learn how to be an art therapist. I am running from some unseen ghost and from the voice telling me cruelly, over and over, that I have to die. I can’t run fast enough. The scene ends in the room in the student health center. The director of the art therapy graduate program is strangely there, as are some people I don’t recognize.
“You must leave school, “she says, “You can't continue.” I notice that one of the other people moves to stand in front of the window, just in case I suddenly try to jump through it. They tell me I am
going to be sent to the Vermont State Hospital, where just last week I was an art therapy intern, leading art groups for women who don’t know that I have the same diagnosis as they. We draw pictures about our lives. I don’t want to be like them. But deep down, I know that I am.

Next picture: I just want a “normal” life, so I use my psychology degree to get a job in a children’s psychiatric hospital. I’m in the role of a staff person, the person with the keys, the "responsible" one. The only thing I have to offer the ten-year-old boys I’m in charge of is that I draw them pictures—hot rods with huge tires and fins, lions with fierce teeth and claws and dragons spitting red fire. I don’t know how else to relate to them—their pain is enormous, and it spills over into my dreams. Going to work quickly becomes a nightmare. I can’t separate their pain from my own, so my pain grows into a ponderous black weight that is becoming more than I can bear.

Next picture: I’m on the phone talking to my Aunt Laura. My father has gone to Shreveport to live with her after the divorce. He has lost his job because he can’t stop his addiction to alcohol and it has consumed his life. My aunt scolds me for not writing him. "He's haunting the mailbox looking for a letter from you “she says. Her voice is critical, judging. And at that moment I know: I can’t take it any longer. There’s no picture of me emptying out the pill bottles and swallowing handfuls of pills down, down, down, until everything fades into black.

And I’ve lost track of you. I know that you’re back in Iowa and that you have married the boy—the man—who turns clay into beautiful pots. Then a package comes: you have made a stunning lithograph of Linder Forest, your favorite place, in shades of grey and black, and you send me the artist’s proof. How far we have come from that innocent picture with our snowshoes, expecting great adventures in the snowy heights. Our letters are less frequent now, but occasionally I venture out to visit you. We spend hours in your exquisite, profuse garden, which is where you have found solace. We do not need to talk, understanding each other beyond words.
The next pictures are all out of focus. I’m now in Oregon, and the same scene repeats: nurses and doctors in green scrubs call me “a frequent flyer.” I don’t know what they mean, but the ambulance brings me to their emergency room again and again, after each overdose, and each time they bring me back from the dead.

Time-lapse photo: years pass, I’m going in and out of the hospital, you’re raising your kids. Then, there are scenes of me getting on and off the plane to Los Angeles. I’m going there every month to be in the clinical trial for a new medication. The voices in my head grow quiet, the trips to the hospital cease, and I’m starting to dare to ask the question, “Is it possible for my life to get better?”

The next picture is different. It is not a photograph—it’s a painting. I’m holding the thick brush, laden with cadmium red paint. The image on the canvas is a flaming lotus, with the passionate red blossom surrounded by rich umber, organic mud. This picture is the crux move, as they say in mountain climbing when you have to dare to make that final thrust over the impossibly rocky overhanging ledge onto the summit. I have made the inexplicable, but crucial decision to throw my energy into the flow of the Life Force. It was either that or certain death. Now the lotus is the image that speaks of life to me. I make versions of this picture over and over. Sometimes the lotus is white with golden sparks, sometimes just black and white; in others, it is rich and warm, with yellows and greens. In the lotus paintings, I am making the Life Force rise inside me and strengthen into a beautiful bloom. It symbolizes to me that life can arise from the mud—beautiful life, flowers that cannot live without their roots solidly in the mud. My life’s pain has become that nourishing mud.

And you, with your experience in your garden, you understand the importance of the soil; you celebrate the significance of my discovery. You know that I have turned the corner; you know that hope has entered the picture. You affirm me, encourage me to keep going. I feed myself with these images and hope wells up inside me.
The next picture is in sharp focus. It shows me with a half-smile, with my dog, Iris, sitting regally beside me. I’m on the back porch of my Oregon cottage, next to the koi pond that I have built with my hands. And you sit next to me, stroking Iris’ fur and we both still look like sisters, although not so young now. We’re nearly thirty years older than the days when we were fleeing into the mountains. You’re no longer with the potter, and I’m just struggling with making art, but here we are: we are friends, sisters, despite everything life has thrown our way.

The final picture is one I haven’t painted yet. But it will show two sisters, two dear friends, who have made a dangerous journey together. This is the picture that we will show to people we care about and say “we made it.” The canvas will take up the entire wall. It will be shades of grey, white and gold, with curving emerald and cerulean blue lines climbing across the surface in a fertile dance. And the joy it conveys will be startling. And as I find my refuge in my painting, your garden is your art form. Both of us revel in these compositions of life and abundance.

We have found our authentic voices, and neither of us could have done it alone.

Still, there are times when that faint, dark voice tugs at my ankles, trying to pull me backward and downward, into despair, but now I have cultivated resilience. It pushes back and feeds my commitment to my lotus flower, my life.

We make half-serious jokes about how someday when we are both very old ladies, we will sit together on the porch in our rocking chairs and swap stories about how we have survived and then thrived over the years. And what a fine picture that will be!

A Few Final Words

My suicidality is not unusual. The statistics are grim for those of us who have this diagnosis of schizophrenia.
Among those of us who have this diagnosis, approximately 20 percent to 40 percent attempt suicide. Of those individuals from 5 percent to 13 percent complete the act. Compared to the general population, we have more than an eight-fold increased risk of dying this way.

I wish I could say that I am now immune to this risk, but it is not that easy. I will continue to share my story and serve on task forces that serve to address this issue. But there are no guarantees, only that I am committed to finding a way forward through the pain of this world and being a support to my peers who also struggle.