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She Never Did Anything Wrong

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Kristen Jensen

She Never Did Anything Wrong

“Kristen tells me that Bipolar Disorder runs in your family” the psychiatrist said while still looking down at her clipboard. My dad, sitting on my right stayed silent. In sticky situations he always seemed calm; I could never tell if that’s how he actually was or if it was just a façade. My mother was sitting on my left anxiously shaking her leg. “Yes, my little brother has it” she answered. My mom kept her rough fingers intertwined with mine throughout the entire meeting. Every few minutes she would give my hand a light squeeze, it was her little way of silently telling me everything was going to be okay.

The doctor had actually told me prior to the family meeting that I was bipolar, but I wanted her to be the ones to tell my parents. Although I was 19 and had no legal obligation to tell them, I wanted them to know so they could have some sort of explanation for my fucked up behavior. The doctor explained to them how Bipolar Disorder works and how the right medication could make me seem almost normal. “How long does she have to take the medication for?” my father asked. His side of the family never really struggled with mental disorders, so he didn’t realize that there was no cure. I guess at the time I didn’t think too much of it either. I didn’t realize that every morning for the rest of my life I would have to take medication so I didn’t have to feel everything so intensely. “Well we always said she was just like my brother” my mom tried to joke but tears still filled her eyes.

My uncle Michael was all sorts of messed up. He was always the topic of discussion at family gatherings whether he was absent or present. Although he was told by multiple psychiatrists that he was Bipolar he still insisted that they were full of bullshit. He had been to 9

different mental hospitals in 20 years including the one I was currently sitting in. I would later come to find out that the hospital use allow the patients to eat with plastic knives until 2004 when a manic patient figured out a way to slit his wrists with one. If you haven't already guessed it, yes that manic patient was my uncle Michael. Despite his long list of arrests, ex-crystal meth addiction, current alcohol addiction, and Bipolar Disorder he was still a millionaire. So I guess there were worse people to be compared to.

I had spent a total of 8 days in the hospital. The first day was at Houston North West Hospital where I got my stomach pumped. My mom sat at my bedside holding the suicide note I had never intended on seeing again and she asked "where did I go wrong?" That was the worst day. The next 7 days were at Bellaire Psychiatric Hospital which was an hour and a half drive from my house. My mother drove all 7 days to visit me when she got off from work. Visiting days were only on Monday and Wednesday but the doctor made an exception for me because of how often I cried. When my mother visited we never said any words to each other. We just sat in silence pressing our foreheads against one another's letting the tears roll down our cheeks. We only had thirty minutes with one another and with every second that passed more and more dread consumed me. Every night when it was time for her to go my silence would break and I would beg for her to take me home with her. My soft tears would turn into wailing sobs and my pleas to go home came out between my gasps for air. Although my mother and I both knew there was nothing she could do, she still tried every night. She would go to the nurse in the room next door and try and talk her into letting me check out early. "She seems to be doing better today, is there any way I could just take her home tonight?" my mother would ask. The nurse would peak her head through the door way and look at me. She would see a 19 year old girl sitting in the fetal position on the floor gasping for breath with snot and tears flowing down her red puffy face. I

would try and smile at her in between gasps to try and prove to her that I was mentally stable enough to go home now. It clearly didn't work. I had to stay the full 7 days just like the rest of the girls.

The 7th day was my family meeting day. The doctor had to make sure that I had a good supportive environment when I got home. She didn't realize that I was different from the rest of the girls in the hospital. I did have a good supportive environment at home, I always have. It wasn't my family that made me want to die, it was me. Although I lived in a house with 5 other people that I constantly interacted with, my brain somehow still made me feel alone.

When the meeting was over I was able to go pack my things and say goodbye to the rest of the girls. Although I was only there for a week, my mom brought me my entire closet of clothes. I had 4 pairs of sweat pants, 2 sweatshirts, 6 pairs of leggings, 1 hoodie, and 12 pairs of underwear. This is all because I had mentioned to her that I was cold my first night at the hospital. I still have no idea why she packed that much underwear though; maybe she had some odd feeling that I was going to pee myself twice a day. I also mentioned early in the week that between therapy sessions the other girls and I just sat around and did nothing. She brought in coloring books and word search puzzles for all of us. She gave the girls 4 regular packs of Crayola markers, but gave me the deluxe 48 pack.

It's funny how those markers and coloring books brought us all together. Instead of mindlessly sitting around the couch flipping through TV channels we gathered around the table and intensely focused on coloring in-between the lines. Our conversations started off slow, but always unraveled into a small back story of our lives. Slowly but surely I learned the reasons they were in the hospital, but I also learned the things that them happy. Eventually downtime

became a therapy session of its own. In a way it was more helpful than actual therapy because there were no awkward silences or any pressure to pretend we're happy. Together we listened, related, and healed.

My roommate's name was Rachel. She was around 40 years old and had a gold front tooth. She always wore a cap because they didn't allow weaves in the unit. She snored in her sleep but I never minded it, it always masked the sounds of my crying. She was very religious, I watched her pray to God every night and swear to him that she wouldn't touch another bottle when she got out. She left on my fifth day, but on my last day I passed her in the cafeteria during lunch. Within 2 days she had relapsed and wanted to die again. Her story was the saddest to me. A few years prior to meeting her she was at a family barbecue when their neighborhood gang did a drive-by shooting. Her only son died right in front of her. She said she held him as he took his last breath, she said no mother should ever have to out-live their child. Although I've never had a child, I understand. The pain and sadness I saw in her made me realize that no mother should ever have to watch their baby lowered into the ground.

Alexandra was only there with me for the first 4 days but I considered her a friend. She was neighbors with Rachel and I. She was very short and had a cleanly shaved head. She is from Maryland but came to Houston to visit her dad for a week. Her one-week vacation extended when she got a breakup text from her girlfriend of 2 years, which ultimately led to her psychotic breakdown. She once mentioned to all of us in our group therapy session how she never believed she was supposed to be a girl. She said she thought God made a mistake by not making her a boy. Before she left we exchanged Instagram handles and promised we would stay in touch. We never talked again but I still look at his page every now and then. He goes by Al now, and he seems a lot happier because science was able to fix the mistake God had made.

Brittany was my closest friend, she was also the newest. She had only been there for 3 days but we gravitated towards one another like magnets. She was 25 with long blonde hair. She was beautiful and kind and always smiling trying to make the best out of her stay. Every now and again I would catch her slipping into a depressive moment. She would just tune out of our group conversations and float into her mind. Her eyes would look down and she would just stare at the floor or her shoes. I think she was thinking about her daughter. She had just recently had a baby and postpartum depression consumed her. After the hospital I never spoke to her again, but on some nights when she crosses my mind I pray for her. I pray that she found her peace and that she fell in love with being a mother.

Brittany was the only girl I said goodbye to. I didn't want to make a big scene so I quietly packed my things and slipped out the doors. My parents were waiting for me in the next room. My mom ran up and hugged me. She hugged me like she hadn't seen me 20 minutes earlier during the family meeting. She then made my dad carry the paper bags filled with my wardrobe so she could hold my hand when we walked to the car. When we got to the car there was a Quiche Lorraine waiting for me in the back seat. It was from La Madeline, it was my favorite dish from my favorite restaurant. "It's probably a little stale, we bought it before we drove to the hospital" my mom said. Tears started to blur my vision "it's perfect" I whispered.

During the car ride home my dad drove while my mom sat in the passenger seat staring back at me. I stared back at the hospital; I watched it shrink into oblivion. When it disappeared I started to cry. I had no reason to cry, I hated that place, and I've begged to go home for 8 days. So why was I crying? My mom started to cry when she saw me crying. I knew what she was thinking. I knew that she would somehow believe this was her doing. She would think that it's her fault that she couldn't make me happy. I hated myself for making her cry. I hated myself for

making her feel pain. I hated myself for not being normal. I didn't say anything for the hour and a half long drive home. I silently cried while eating my perfectly stale Quiche Lorraine. With each bite I made sure to chew exactly 12 times. I thought that counting would distract me from my unknown reason for crying. It did help; it's a technique I still use to this day.

When I walked through the door to my home I made sure to inhale deeply. I wanted to remember the smell of my home. It's rare to recognize the scent of your own home because you're constantly there. You can only smell it when you're gone for long periods of time, and even then it doesn't last long. I thought maybe somehow when I walked through the door I could capture the smell and remember it forever. I thought I could write about it and describe in perfect detail the scent of the Jensen household, but I can't. The smell lasted for a few minutes before fading away and the scent of nothing filled the house. The closest (and cheesiest) way I can describe it, is by saying that it just simply smelled like love.

My sisters had cleaned my room, and my father had installed shelves in my closet. I didn't need shelves in my closet at all. I had never in my life mentioned wanting closet shelves. It left me really confused but I smiled and thanked my dad anyways. Later in life my sister told me that our dad installed the shelves just because he missed me. She told me he would cry in my room while I was gone. I think that maybe him installing the shelves gave him some sort of higher purpose for being in there. So he could be productive while missing me at the same time. After my sister told me that I framed a picture of my dad and I and I put it on one of the shelves.

The next couple of weeks were hard. I was still experimenting with different mood stabilizers so I could find the right fit. Which lead to me being moodier and crazier than ever. I would lash out at my family for little things and then apologize 20 minutes later. They

understood it was the medication, but it didn't make me feel any better. For the first two weeks my mother slept with me every night. She would cradle me while loudly snoring in my ear. After the second week our sleepovers grew far and fewer in-between. On the nights she didn't sleep over I would see the glow of the hall light click on around 1am. My door would crack open and I would close my eyes and pretend to be asleep. I knew it was my mom checking on me trying to quietly make sure I was still alive, so I would exaggerate my breaths so she could see my body rise and fall and go back to sleep.

One night weeks after the hospital she was doing her routine 1am check up and I acknowledged her. I sat up in bed "mom" I said. She opened the door all the way and stepped in "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you, I thought I heard a noise downstairs and I wanted to make sure you were okay." I gave her a soft smile "I'm okay." She nodded, "that's good, I'll go back to bed now" she turned to shut the door. "Wait!" I shouted. She stopped and looked back at me. We stared at each other in silence for a couple of seconds because I was trying to find the right words to say. "Mama" my voice started to crack "mama I'm so sorry" tears started to fill my eyes. She knew exactly what I was sorry for. She walked in my room and sat on my bed next to me and started to cry with me. "Kristen where did I go wrong?" she choked. I cupped my hands around her face and leaned my forehead against hers. "You never did anything wrong." I whispered. She shook her head not believing the words coming out of my mouth so I said it again "you...never...did...anything...wrong" I exaggerated each syllable trying to make her believe me. I repeated it over and over while her cries turned into sobs. I said it fast between her gasps for air. I said it louder when she cried louder. I said it until my voice hurt and even then I said it some more. I needed her to know it wasn't her fault. I needed her to know that she did everything right as a mother. I needed her to know how much I loved her. I needed her to know I

was sorry. She laid down in my bed and I cradled her. I squeezed her tight wishing I could hold onto her forever. Her loud wails turned into quiet sobs and her gasps for air turned into tiny hiccups. Eventually all of her little noises faded into snores and she drifted into a much needed sleep.

Death was something I never feared so the saying “I would die for you” seemed too easy for me to say. “I would live for you” always seemed so much more powerful to me.

I would live for my mother.