A New Normal: Family Stories of Mental Illness, Resilience, and Recovery

by

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Prologue

When I was a sophomore in high school, my older sister Annie was sent away to treatment after I walked into her room to find her sitting in a pool of her own blood. She had cut herself—had been cutting herself—and none of us knew how bad it had gotten. She had a first aid kit under her bathroom sink and wore strategic clothes to ensure that her scars would stay hidden, but on this particular day, she had cut too deep. She wouldn’t let me touch her. So I stood motionless, terrified, unable to help.

Thirty years earlier, my mom received a phone call from her mother, my grandmother. My grandfather had decided to leave her again after another blowout fight, and now she was in a hotel room in Ocean City, Maryland on the verge of committing suicide. My mom was in her sophomore year at Brown, too far away to help.

Two years ago, my cousin Eli was unwillingly transported to an addiction center by two strangers. This quasi-kidnapping was the only way my aunt and uncle could force their teenaged son to go to rehab.

Then, just last year, I found myself in a doctor’s office with a prescription for Xanax in hand. I had experienced the first of my many minor anxiety attacks the previous day.

In some ways, these moments feel like one single story that has been happening for generations.
When my sister left for treatment, my mom began telling me stories about our family history that I had never heard before. I learned that my grandmother’s shopping addiction led my grandparents to file for bankruptcy. I learned that that same grandmother was sent to treatment for anorexia, borderline personality disorder, and depression when my mom was just a little girl. I learned that my mom and her sister, Jamie, had both been in and out of therapy for years.

So when I started to experience my first notable symptoms of anxiety and depression five years after my sister left for treatment, I felt that it must be an inescapable result of being born into the family I was born into.

When I began writing this thesis, I thought that I had a unique perspective about mental illness because so many people in my family have struggled with their mental health, yet we have all remained relatively close and open with one another. I now realize that my perspective and the stories of my family are anything but unique. Many families are in fact just like my own, and, as I’ve now discovered, my family has just as many secrets as any other.

I set out to write this thesis because I thought I knew a lot about my family members’ experiences and thought others would find our stories interesting or even relatable. But I continued researching and writing this thesis because I quickly learned that I didn’t know as much as I thought I did.
As much as the information I’ve learned along the way has often been difficult to take in, my hope is that learning of and revisiting these stories from a new lens will someday allow my family and me to heal from the past and better navigate the future. As I’ve discovered, many of these stories are often swept under the rug. My hope is that if I bring my family’s experiences to light, anyone who has either experienced mental illness themselves, or has seen a family member struggle with mental illness, will feel less alone.

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As much of my research for this work was interview-based, there was no way to know what I would uncover along the way, or how my family members would react to the questions I asked them. I have been lucky enough to have family members who have been extremely cooperative and have been willing to take time out of their busy schedules to answer my questions to the best of their abilities. I worried and still worry that bringing up past traumas would trigger my family members, and I have attempted to conduct interviews in a way that respects the boundaries of those I am speaking with.

I so appreciate the members of my family who have been interviewed—some more than once. They are the only ones who know their true stories, so learning their perspectives about family stories I already knew, as well as ones I learned for the first time, has proven invaluable. As with any family, there are many moments that are remembered differently by different people, or in which people have different truths. I think that the important thing is not to try to figure out the exact way that everything happened. I’ve realized that these stories can’t ever 100% accurately be
told, as each story is shaped by the biases of those telling them to me. They are however, the experiences and stories of my family and myself, as they have been told to or experienced by me.
Some Backstory

That's a sexy skirt, my friend Anna said. It was black and leather-studded and it reached just below my butt. It wasn’t the kind of thing I would usually wear, and Anna noticed. Where did you get that? she asked.

From my grandma, I replied. It was hers, but she didn’t want it anymore. When I wore it out that night, my boyfriend and other friends all made a point to comment on my new ensemble.

So edgy of you, they said. When I explained that the skirt was a gift from my grandma, they only became more shocked and confused by my outfit choice.

My grandma, who my siblings and I, for some reason, nicknamed Gagi, was not some kind of clothing-hoarder. It's not like she had owned that skirt when she was twenty-something and had kept it stored away until now. She had been wearing it just the week before, probably. And since we wear almost the same size, she sent it to me when she no longer had space for it in her closet. And now it was on my body, sitting on my comparably larger hips.

Over the years, she has made a habit of sending me her unwanted clothing. White skinny jeans with sparkly buttons instead of a zipper. A minidress with black and white polka dots. Four inch heels that I couldn't walk in but that she had discarded after being diagnosed with arthritis. (This no heels phase didn’t last long. At my sister’s college graduation this past May, she was wearing white stiletto patent
leather boots and a black and white striped minidress. At that same graduation ceremony, she pulled out a jar of gummy bears and proceeded to ask me, “do you want an edible, sweetie?” She said she got them for her back pain, but it seemed like she just really liked being high—and who could blame her?).

Gagi is a difficult person to describe. Her mother was a typical babushka—a devout Jewish housewife who cooked huge shabbat dinners every Friday night. I never got to meet her, but I picture her being a little pudgy, always wearing an apron. I have to picture her, because there are very few photos from my mom’s childhood anymore. When my mom was a teenager, she got in a fight with Gagi, prompting Gagi to throw away many of my mother’s belongings, including all of her photos and scrapbooks. I’ve only ever seen one or two photos of my mom as a child. But my mom tells me that her grandmother was an amazing cook and that she spoke in a mixture of English and Yiddish. Going to her grandmother’s house made my mom fall in love with Judaism and cooking. It’s also where she picked up some of her favorite Yiddish words, like schmutz.

I guess my mom’s sunnier memories and descriptions of my great-grandmother have seeped into me—becoming things I thought were objective truths. Gagi’s description of her mother turned that picture into something different, something uglier than what I wanted to believe my great-grandma was.

In a superficial sense, Gagi is the exact opposite of her mother. She’s not the typical Jewish grandmother by any means. She has eyeliner and eyebrows tattooed
permanently on her face. She is about ninety five pounds and has never cooked for me in my life (and my mom tells me that Gagi used to “make” TV dinners when she was growing up). She sustains herself on BLTs and Florida sunshine. And as I recently learned, she’s high pretty much all the time these days, now that she discovered THC gummies. She’s eccentric, and strangers would never be able to correctly guess her age. We both like to wear crop tops, but although she is 55 years my senior, she honestly looks better in them than I do.

She used to talk about how she wanted her belly button pierced. And recently, she asked my mom to get a matching mother-daughter tattoo.

She has a dog, Tucker, whom she treats like a human baby. When she’s not at home with Tucker, she tracks his movements on an app on her phone, which is connected to a baby monitor she had set up in her apartment.

The last time I visited Gagi at her Delray Beach apartment, there was no room in the closet to hang up my clothes. The guest room closet was, in fact, Gagi’s shoe closet.

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When Gagi sent me the leather skirt, I was living in a two-bedroom apartment in New York City for the summer with two friends and my boyfriend. I was sharing one chest of drawers and a tiny closet with my boyfriend, who has more t-shirts than I do. So when Gagi sent the skirt, I had to stuff it in a drawer that contained all of my jeans and some of my boyfriend’s belts.
As I tugged on the back of the leather skirt for fear that it would come up a little too high and show my butt, I realized that, as unconventional as Gagi is as a grandma, it must've been even stranger to have had her as a mother. Gagi is loving, but she doesn’t have a motherly energy. She can be fun and playful and exciting, but other than Tucker the dog, I have never seen her take care of anyone else.
The Resistance of the Next Generation

When my mom was a sophomore at Brown, getting ready to go out one night, she received a phone call from Gagi. My grandfather and Gagi had gotten in a huge fight while on vacation in Ocean City, Maryland. He left her alone in a hotel room, and now she was on the verge of committing suicide. My mom was too far away to help—physically, and probably emotionally. She called her mother’s psychiatrist—a woman named Abby Waltman. My mom says she was “way too intimately involved” in her mom’s mental health and therefore knew Dr. Waltman’s number by heart. Gagi stopped answering her hotel phone, and my mom was frantic. She had Dr. Waltman call the hotel, instructing the manager to let himself into Gagi’s room to make sure she was alive.

My mom's younger sister, Jamie, was still a junior in high school in Potomac, Maryland at the time. At around ten or eleven at night, Jamie and her high school boyfriend drove all the way to Ocean City—a three hour drive—to save Gagi. My grandmother is still alive today, but that was not her first suicide attempt, and I’m not sure whether or not it was her last.

“Things were so different back then,” my mom says of these attempts, “everything just got swept under the rug.”

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My mom then inadvertently informed me that my grandmother attempted suicide a second time. She said it nonchalantly, as if she was telling me something extremely normal. And I guess that this is my family's normal.

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Gagi ‘s life has been filled with tragedies and hardships. After the deaths of her sister, brother, and mother—her orthodox Jewish father cut Gagi out of his life and quickly got remarried. Then, she went through a series of messy breakups with my grandfather—they even briefly got back together after their divorce before calling it quits for good. She suffers from a shopping addiction which landed her in bankruptcy, she struggled (and I think still struggles) with an eating disorder. But through all of this, Gagi has loved her family, even if she didn’t always know how to show it.²

Gagi has borderline personality disorder (BPD)—a mental illness that, in certain ways, explains some of these behaviors. People who struggle with borderline personality disorder typically battle things like body image issues, fears of abandonment, bad self-image, feelings of emptiness, mood swings, and uncontrollable anger.³ Gagi has almost all of these symptoms—something I didn’t realize until pretty recently. Though my mom always wanted my siblings and I to have good relationships with Gagi, I remember overhearing little comments about how being a grandmother came more easily to Gagi than being a mother did. I realize now what this meant. The only expectation that grandchildren have of their grandparents is that they

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² Brown, Katie, and Carol Beale. “Interview with Carol Beale (Gagi) #1.” 31 Jan. 2019.
³ “Borderline Personality Disorder.” Mayo Clinic, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 17 July 2019.
provide fun, good food, plenty of love, and very few rules. Gagi thrived under those expectations.

It never dawned on me that Gagi could be anything but perfect. She always had on amazing outfits—and bought me fun clothes every birthday—she always had a smile on her face, and she always made me feel immensely loved, beautiful, and important. I wanted to be just like her when I grew up.

Of course, I remember little things from when I was a kid. Like the time my family and I visited Gagi and Bapi at their apartment in Delray Beach, Florida, and our flight home was cancelled. We came back to her apartment to find her smoking on the porch—after she had bragged to my mom and older brother all weekend about how she had finally kicked the habit. Or when she left my bat mitzvah party early because she was mad at my mom for seating her at a table she didn’t like—even though my mom was only trying to seat her divorced parents at separate tables. But as a child, I don’t think I thought much about it. Her fun side was so fun that it was easy to discount the parts of her that upset my mom. People fight, but Gagi was Gagi. She was probably my favorite family member outside my extended family. I felt special and fun and sparkly when I was around her. She was always buying some new outfit or costume for some glamorous party, and she ate the things my mom told me grownups didn’t eat.

For a grandma, this stuff is cool. But for a mom, it’s embarrassing and even irresponsible. My mom remembers how, when she was in middle school, she wore
her mother’s pants to a school dance. She didn’t think much of it, until one of her friends made a comment about how she could never fit into her mother’s clothes. People who haven’t gone through puberty yet usually can’t wear their mom’s clothes. My mom always thought Gagi had a sensitive stomach because she ate very little and was always running to the bathroom to throw up after particularly large meals. It dawned on her only later that her mother suffered from both anorexia and bulimia.

My mom describes her childhood as revolving around her mother. She knows—has always known—that Gagi loves her, but Gagi still made most things about herself. “Even if they care and love you,” my mom said of people with BPD, “it’s about how that love affects them.” In their relationships, people with borderline personality disorder often fluctuate between intense “hostility and passivity.” For parents with borderline personality disorder, this often entails unstable relationships with their children. Mothers with borderline can be critical of their children, and can often share inappropriate information or behave in ways typically seen as unsuitable for kids. This means that children with borderline mothers are more likely to take on the role of a parent, friend, or spouse to their mother than children of mothers who do not suffer from borderline personality disorder.

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4 Brown, Katie, and Tracy Brown. “Interview #1.”
6 Ibid.
My mom didn’t get to be a child in the typical sense. The first time Gagi attempted suicide, my mom was in middle school, but she was never taken to therapy or even talked to about the incident. My mom says she still can’t get over this, all these years later. “They just didn’t get it,” she kept repeating.⁷

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My mom has always told me that, growing up, Gagi had expectations of her that differed from the expectations that her friends’ mothers put on them. Gagi and my grandfather got divorced—something extremely common for people with borderline personality disorder, since borderline relationships are often characterized by conflict and abuse—when my mom was in high school.⁸ She thinks that in many ways, her mother treated her more like a spouse than a daughter. And like a spouse, Gagi often got irrationally angry at my mom, something my mom felt uncomfortable about when her friends came over. My mom says that more than anything, she was always embarrassed by her mother, who openly smoked weed and had nude photographs taken and displayed in the house. Her parents were “out there,” she says, but they never explained anything to her.⁹ They simply normalized sex and drugs in front of my mom and her sister Jamie, but since they never explained their decisions, my mom felt scared, upset, and ashamed of them.

My mom thinks it never would have occurred to Gagi to explain her decisions, though. She says that Gagi’s world revolves around herself, and those she loves are forced to contort into whatever shape necessary to fit into this world. My mom never

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⁷ Brown, Katie, and Tracy Brown. “Interview #1.”
⁸ “Borderline Personality Disorder.” Mayo Clinic, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 17 July 2019.
⁹ Brown, Katie, and Tracy Brown. “Interview #1.”
got to be her own person in front of her mom. “She doesn’t really know the real me. The inside part. The part you know,” my mom said to me. I know what she means. Gagi knows about my mom’s hobbies and constantly asks about them. She and my mom find common ground talking about shopping, reading, and traveling. But it’s all surface-level stuff. “She loves me so much, but she doesn’t know how I really feel, because I don’t want to be hurtful and there’s no point,” my mom added, noting that people at the age of 77 aren’t typically malleable.

My mom said that, for a while, she was like a goldfish for whom “every trip around the bowl is a new experience.” She means that, until pretty recently, every time her mother acted selfish or irrationally angry, my mom would get upset—as if it were the first time. But she had an “aha” moment at her wedding shower. The party was thrown by my dad’s mother, and Gagi clearly felt uncomfortable that she didn’t know many people at the party. Suddenly, Gagi began feeling faint, making a big show of it. Soon, she had a crowd of women circling her, offering her water and cold cloths for her forehead. Afterwards, my mom’s mother-in-law pulled her aside to tell her how angry she was at Gagi. She had made the whole party about herself—clearly doing it on purpose. My mom says that, in that moment, she vowed that when she had kids, she would make them feel like they were “at the center of the world”—something she was never allowed to feel.¹⁰

¹⁰ Brown, Katie, and Tracy Brown. “Interview #1.”
The Resistance of the Next Generation

“There were times I didn’t want to live. But now I know I don’t wanna die,” Gagi told me. I wondered what it must be like to come to that realization in your seventies.\(^1\)

Gagi grew up in a conservative Jewish household, full of rules and hearty meals. Her own house has no rules and lots of junk food.

I realize now that this—and many other things in her life—is a rebellion. She lives her life rebelling against what she refers to as the hypocrisy of her childhood.

She told me about how her religious father worked on Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest. About how, when she was eleven, her sister urged her to try a cheeseburger. About how her mother would sometimes bring in non-kosher food—saying it was okay, as long as they ate it off of paper plates.

And it wasn’t just the hypocrisy that made a relationship with her parents difficult. She describes her parents—namely, her mother—as being extremely cold and unloving. “She cooked big meals, but she wasn’t a hugger,” Gagi said of her mother. “I think you need to hug kids.” She left Gagi alone in the house often, and until the day she died, she criticized Gagi’s actions and appearance. “I thought I was ugly,” she remembers.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Brown, Katie, and Carol Beale. “Interview with Carol Beale (Gagi) #1.” 31 Jan. 2019.
\(^2\) Ibid.
When I told my mom about Gagi’s description of her mother, she was surprised. And I knew why. My mom describes Gagi in similar terms. She’s told me many times that Gagi always made passive aggressive comments about her eating. Gagi is rail-thin, with A cups and a waist that can only fit into the smallest size jeans in certain brands. My mom is curvy, with double Ds even after a breast reduction surgery. She has always been in shape and healthy, and she says she ate like any other normal kid. But still, when my mom ate burgers and pizza, Gagi would say things like “Do you really need to be eating that?”

I remember how annoyed my mom got when, at my high school graduation, Gagi bragged about her ability to fit into my exercise clothing.

A mother’s criticism of her daughter’s body. It’s something that—like skirts and anxiety—was passed down from one generation to the next.

But while my mom did her best not to pass down traditions of mother-daughter body shaming, my grandmother did all she could not to pass down hypocritical Jewish traditions. She and my grandfather even bought Christmas trees every December, a fact that confused and saddened my mom, who always wanted to know more about her Jewish roots. They only celebrated the holidays when Gagi’s parents invited the family over for Passover seders or break-fast after Yom Kippur. My mom had her bat mitzvah—a coming of age tradition typically for Jewish twelve and thirteen year olds—when she was in her thirties. Maybe this was a rebellion, too. Maybe this is why my mom is so offended when I tell her that I’m an atheist who
doesn’t care about marrying someone Jewish. “No one agrees with how their parents did things,” she decided.\(^\text{13}\) Maybe that’s true—that it’s all just a cycle. But my disagreements with my mother seem trivial compared to the disagreements between Gagi and my mom. There’s a difference between the cycle of dissent of opinionated daughters, and the cycle of true emotional pain inflicted on children. While we might not have the power to stop the former, my mom did a damn good job of putting an end to the latter cycle.

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Gagi has had a hard life. Actually, that’s an understatement. Her siblings died within three weeks from each other. On Thanksgiving of 1973, her sister fell asleep with a cigarette in her hand. Her robe lit up in flames, and by morning, 70% of her body was covered in fourth degree burns. She was only forty one years old at the time. She hung on until New Years Eve, and then she died.\(^\text{14}\) She was my mom’s favorite aunt.\(^\text{15}\) Three weeks later, Gagi got a call. The person on the other end of the phone asked if she was “Carol Blanco”—her maiden name—and she said “no, it's Carol White now.” They asked if she had a brother named Edward and she said “I do.” And they said “No you don’t. We found him dead in his apartment.” They said it just like that. He had taken one hundred sleeping pills and topped it off with a bottle of vodka.

Two years later, a thief came into Gagi’s parents' home and shot her mother in the head. Gagi says she died for thirty two dollars, since that's all they found in her wallet. They didn’t have much else worth stealing.

\(^{13}\) Brown, Katie, and Tracy Brown. “Interview #1.”

\(^{14}\) Brown, Katie, and Carol Beale. “Interview #1.”

\(^{15}\) Brown, Katie, and Tracy Brown. “Interview #2.”
“I think that kind of sadness shapes you,” Gagi said to me.¹⁶

I wonder if that’s true. For Gagi, it certainly has been. But for most people, the pain and numbness that accompany grief eventually fade. Studies show that for people experiencing grief, positive emotions occur just as often as do negative ones as early as one week after their loved one dies.¹⁷ A person undergoing “successful mourning” will, after some time, be able to continue on with their life and even imagine a happy future for themself.¹⁸ Such is not the case for those experiencing what psychologists refer to as “complicated grief.” For these people, the feelings of sorrow and loss don’t improve as time goes on. Those experiencing complicated grief don’t undergo the typical process of grief—in which intense sorrow fades into hope—instead experiencing an impairment of their healing process.¹⁹

The way a person dies can directly affect the way surviving loved ones react to that death. Violent or sudden deaths, as well as suicide, can increase the likelihood of a loved one experiencing complicated grief or depression as a result of the death.²⁰ And considering the ways in which Gagi’s sister, brother, and mother died, I think it would not be too much of a leap to suggest that perhaps, Gagi experienced or still experiences complicated grief. In other words, perhaps Gagi’s sadness has shaped her.

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¹⁶ Brown, Katie, and Carol Beale. “Interview #1.”
¹⁸ Ibid.
But such is not the case for all who have experienced grief or acute stress—the result of exposure to one or more traumatic events.²¹ For most, while the immediate responses to these events are often intense, these extreme feelings of sadness and anger lessen over time—shaping a certain period of their lives but not their life in its entirety.²²

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If sadness has shaped the lives of so many people in my family, why do I still think of my childhood as being such a happy one? If our story has been carved around a history of grief, how did joy still sneak its way into the crevices? My mom experienced intense trauma and acute stress at age thirteen, on the day of Gagi’s first suicide attempt. She was asleep in her bed with her then-best friend Robin, when they heard loud, chaotic noises coming from below. When my mom went downstairs, she saw her dad sitting next to Gagi, along with two medics. She learned that her mother had tried to overdose on pills, and she was now refusing to leave with the medics. When the medics finally got Gagi to come with them, Gagi handed my mom a letter that she had written to my mom and Jamie, explaining why she had to leave them. In the note, she said that she was sorry, and that she loved them very much, but that she had to go.

When they walked outside to the car, my mom saw a charred mattress sitting on her front lawn. My mom never found out if Gagi lit the bed on fire on purpose, or if she had fallen asleep holding a cigarette like Gagi’s sister had. But she remembers

²² Shear, M. Katherine. “Grief and Mourning Gone Awry.”
feeling embarrassed—worried of what their neighbors would think of the barbequed bed. The next morning, my grandpa woke my mom and Robin up and took them to their school trip at an amusement park called Kings Dominion, never discussing the events of the night before.23

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Of course the sadness shaped my mom, just as Gagi’s sadness shaped her. But my mom thinks it shaped her in a positive way. “It made me value good relationships, family, and people who are there for you,” she said, noting that her mother’s multiple suicide attempts felt like a breach of trust. She wanted to know that she had people in her life that would never try to leave her.24

But she didn’t let the sadness become her. It will always be there, influencing her decisions and reminding her of what’s really important. But she thinks it’s all a matter of choice. “My whole life became centered around not letting the sadness ruin my life,” she told me. All the things that shaped her became a road map for what she didn’t want her life, or her childrens’ lives, to be. She was extremely careful to never fight with my dad in front of my siblings and me, and she would always make sure we knew she was really there for us 100% of the time. “I was able to write a new story for myself,” she told me. And this story—though in many ways shaped by sadness—would be a happier one. “It’s not in my DNA to be miserable,” my mom says. So even when the bad things happened, she was able to maintain her naturally

24 Ibid.
happy outlook on life. She says that if anything, her childhood tragedies taught her what kind of friend, wife, and mother she wanted to be, and she's grateful for that.\textsuperscript{25}

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
The Resistance of the Next Generation

III

On the night after Thanksgiving, I sat in my room in my parents' Colorado mountain house with my Aunt Jamie, asking her the same questions I had asked my mom the week before. I had expected Jamie’s answers to match her sister's—I was mostly interviewing her to confirm my mom's accounts. But Jamie's answers made it clear that their childhood experiences with their mom had been vastly different.

They described the same general behaviors from Gagi—the mood swings, the little comments that made them feel that their bodies were too big, the need to walk on eggshells to avoid angering her. But Jamie was closer with Gagi than my mom was when they were growing up. When Gagi divorced their father, my mom blamed Gagi, pushing her away. But Jamie was younger, and she clung to Gagi. She described nights when Gagi would fight with my grandfather and sleep with Jamie in her bunk bed, venting to Jamie about her father.

By the time Gagi began dating her now-husband, Joe, my mom was out of the house. Jamie was still in high school and living with Gagi. The summer before Jamie went to college, when she was eighteen, Joe molested her while Gagi was sitting in the same room. He tried to do it again another time, but Jamie pushed his hand away. Jamie says that Gagi did nothing about it, though there was no way she wouldn’t have seen it happen. When Jamie would come home from college, Gagi would periodically suggest that Joe rub her neck or put sunscreen on her back, though Jamie always said no after the incident. When Jamie tried to confront Gagi
about it, though, Gagi blamed her, telling her that she was dressing too sexy and that she shouldn’t have allowed it to happen.

Jamie remembers feeling so freaked out by it all that she stopped eating. On a trip to New York with Gagi and Joe, Jamie ate nothing but a fruit plate. Gagi, who was in and out of treatment centers at the time for various reasons, including anorexia, told her that it was okay if she wasn’t feeling hungry. Jamie developed anorexia around that time and attributes these behaviors to her feelings of fear and panic after being molested.

When Jamie was 20, Gagi disowned her. “I don’t remember if I said something about Joe... I don’t remember,” Jamie says, but she remembers that her mom didn’t call on her 21st birthday after telling her they couldn’t have a relationship anymore and that Jamie was a bad daughter.26 She was disowned and re-owned by Gagi at least four times, and their relationship never fully recovered.

Twelve years later, in 1995, Joe was arrested on two counts of indecent exposure while on vacation in Ocean City, Maryland. Gagi still stayed with him, never apologizing for brushing off her daughter’s clearly legitimate concerns about Joe. Jamie felt even more hurt after Joe’s arrest, remembering the pain of her own experience and the fact that her mother did little to stop him from doing it again.

“She chose him over me,” Jamie concluded.27

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27 Ibid.
Joe went to therapy after getting out of jail, and Gagi tried to re-establish a relationship with Jamie. Jamie never forgave her mother but she did allow her back into her life, seeing her at family events but not talking often.

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This was all very hard for me to wrap my head around. I have fond memories of being with Gagi and Joe (who my siblings, cousins, and I call Bapi) when I was a kid. When I was seven or eight, my sister Annie and I flew from Charlotte to Potomac, Maryland together. Back then, Jamie and her husband Rob lived there with my cousins (Justin, Eli, and Olivia), as well as my mom's dad and stepmom, known to us as Grandpa and Niny, and, of course, Gagi and Bapi.

When we got there, Annie had an anxiety flare-up that led her to stay with Aunt Jamie and Uncle Rob the whole time (I think because Jamie looks and acts a lot like our mom). I was psyched—not because my sister wasn't coming, but because now, I got all the attention when I visited our grandparents. When I stayed alone at Gagi and Bapi’s house—the one with no rules—I got to eat donuts for breakfast every morning, play in the pool and eat ice pops all day, and have chocolate mousse for dinner. It was a kid’s dream come true.

But as I learned the truth about my step-grandfather, those memories became tainted. I now know that before I went on that trip, my mom called Gagi to tell her that I was never allowed to be left alone with Joe, and that if I ever was left alone with him, Gagi could never see my siblings or me ever again. I now know that my mom grilled me with questions upon my return to make sure they had kept their
promise, and that they did. I now know that the person I thought was safe as a kid was actually dangerous.

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Gagi has never used the words borderline personality disorder when we talk about her history of mental illness. She never uses the words bipolar disorder, either. I only know that she has BPD and bipolar disorder because my mom and grandpa have told me. But when I talk to her, I make sure not to use those words to avoid offending her. Though Gagi is fun, energetic, and loving, she is also prone to getting easily angered—something I’ve both heard about, witnessed, and experienced first hand. In fact, my mom and Aunt Jamie were both surprised when I told them that Gagi agreed to be interviewed in the first place. Jamie even assumed she would cancel on me after I told her we had a date set.

At first, I thought they might be right. On the day we originally agreed upon, Gagi asked if we could postpone the interview, as she was feeling sick. I wondered if this was just an excuse. But the following week, Gagi was feeling better, and she answered the phone when I called her. I thanked her for agreeing to talk, and she said “I want to do this for you.”28 She told me that she was so proud that I was writing a thesis, and she wanted to help me if she could. I knew that she would not talk to most people about her past, and I therefore decided to tread lightly, asking her questions that I felt would not be perceived as offensive and would not be too difficult to answer. While during interviews with my mom and aunt, I asked questions like “Tell me the story of when Gagi attempted suicide in Ocean City,” I

kept things more general with Gagi, asking things like “How would you describe your current relationships with your two daughters?”

I had planned the questions for all of the interviews weeks in advance and had read and reread them to ensure the interviews would go as smoothly as possible. But as I interviewed Gagi and asked her the questions I had prepared, I felt angry. My interview with Jamie had only been a few days prior, and I now knew information that I wanted explained. So now, I had questions for Gagi that would never have made my original list. I held my tongue throughout the interview, knowing better than to ask Gagi anything that would anger her—perhaps she would disown me just as she had done to Jamie at my age.

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Maintaining your sanity and your joy in even the worst circumstances is a true rebellion. It’s a rebellion against the sadness, a resistance to letting the cycle of grief and anger and lying and not talking and not knowing continue on. And for that, I am grateful. If Jamie and my mom have found ways to maintain love, understanding, and compassion for their mother, which I believe they both have, then I should be able to do the same. I can join their revolution of empathy, resilience, and happiness. After all, these are not my stories, and though they have made me question the way I feel and have felt about my grandma, perhaps they shouldn’t. The question is: Is it wrong to let the truth of Gagi’s past alter my views of my own memories with her?

The tricky thing is that many of the things that made Gagi a fun grandmother—her reckless attitude, the clothes she couldn’t afford that were fun to play dress up
in—were also symptoms of the same mental illnesses that saturated my aunt and mother’s childhoods with fear and trauma. They, too, were the things that could have potentially put me in danger as a kid, had my mom not been so stringent with her rule that I never be alone with Joe. It’s hard, then, for me to separate my own positive memories and associations with these behaviors from my mom and aunt’s negative ones. The once sunny images in my mind are now clouded by a thick fog, and I don’t know if that’s fair.

Maybe someday, I’ll once again clearly remember the fun, eccentric, glitteriness that is Gagi, and know that that part of her can exist alongside the sadness and the pain. Because when you know all of someone’s complications, flaws, and wrongdoings, and still manage to see the good parts of them clearly and fully, that’s love. And perhaps loving Gagi will be my ultimate act of resistance.
Recovery

“When it rains, look for rainbows. When it’s dark, look for stars.” Silver and baby blue ink on black construction paper. “Rain” drawn in large bubble letters. My sister followed the ROYGBIV pattern meticulously when she wrote “rainbows.” She pasted it to her door. She felt inspired. She looked for the rainbows. For the stars. It was pitch black that bright summer day, and she found nothing.

Annie tried again.

“Let your smile change the world, but don’t let the world change your smile.” Pink paper this time. New gel pens in a pack so big that she could use a different pen for each letter. This pleased her. She liked the feeling of striking long straight lines across the page. The gel pens gilded effortlessly. This, she could control.

“Just because your path is different doesn’t mean that you are lost.” She didn’t believe this. She knew this was not the type of lost that her iPhone GPS could get her out of. Heart pounding, she pulled out a piece of yellow paper. It was a happy color. She used a green, glow-in-the-dark pen.

“Even the darkest night will end. And the sun will rise.” Was this one not obvious? I teased her. She hated being teased, especially by me. The heat of her red baby face radiated onto me often. Her tiny mouth scrunched up into nothingness, her freckles hiding beneath the creases crowding her nose. I liked it when this part came first.
She looked kind of cute, though if I had told her that, she would have launched at me. I never won our physical fights—my bony body was no match for her athletic stature, and pinning me down was a breeze.

But I knew that the nail marks she often left on my arms and the strands of hair pulled out of my scalp were nowhere close to the violence I inflicted on her. “Psycho” was a common one. I called her “fucking crazy,” and she searched everywhere for that goddamn rainbow.

Mom cried when we did this. Dad told me I ought to know better. I should feel lucky. I had found the rainbows.

But I counted ten fingers and toes. Her breathing, normal. I waited for chunks of hair to fall off her head. I waited to discover the sick person I knew was underneath her working limbs.

Hers was not an illness I could see.

I was angry at her for ruining our family trip to Mexico with her emotional outburst and refusal to put on a bikini. She stayed in the dark hotel room. We soaked up the sun and our own guilt.

I hated her for putting me in headlocks between third and fourth period when the cute senior boy on my track team walked by. We must’ve looked crazy.
And she made me dress her every morning.

I woke up an hour early in those days. Hair needed to be perfectly straight. Eyeliner took eighty tries—I liked a sleek, artful line as much as she did. I watched Family Guy while I made myself become what I thought was more beautiful. This was my “me”-time. The one hour of the day that I didn’t have to be perfect. I didn’t have to navigate getting perfect grades without being known as the nerdy friend. I didn’t have to read up on the latest food trends or eat my planned-out, non-processed, vegan meals for the day. I didn’t have to put on the outfit I had so meticulously laid out three days earlier, though I did have to lay out the ensemble I would wear in three days’ time—there was a method to the madness. I didn’t have to think about what my spikey-haired track coach would say when my workout times weren’t fast enough—they never were. I didn’t have to be the peacekeeper of my friends when they fought about boys, or the wiper of Mom’s tears when Dad was away on business and Annie was mean to her. I didn’t have to hide the fact that she was...the way that she was. This was the me I got to be when no one was looking. The same one that would come back from practice and cry black mascara tears into my pillow, hoping no one would hear.

She was the one who cried.

We were different.
And then she intruded. Just as things were getting good. Just as Stewie found the uranium to make his time machine work, just as I had perfected my right eye.

“Can you pick out my outfit for me?” Annie would ask. Or worse: “Does this outfit look good?” I would tell her just to get ready on her own—to put on one of her cute shirts and maybe a different pair of jeans. She asked me to help her, but I wouldn’t. I wanted my last ten minutes of freedom, and I wanted her to get dressed on her own.

But how could she have done that? When ungluing her shrinking body from underneath the safety of her pile of comforters every morning was a bigger accomplishment than my perfect grades and makeup skills, how could she think about what looked good?

Just pick out a goddamn shirt for her, Dad would say. Or just tell her the outfit looks good.

But he didn’t understand that my mornings were the time for authenticity. I couldn’t let that be taken away from me, too.

And then Dr. Smith called and Mom answered on speakerphone because she couldn’t figure out how to work the Bluetooth in her Mercedes and she started crying because Annie had used her disposable razor blades to cut herself.

Sleek and perfectly straight lines, I supposed.
She started wearing long sleeves. She told people that she fell into a thorn bush. That our dog scratched her. That those scars had always been there.

Mom and dad took away her razors, but she was crafty. She found a way to take the tiny blade out of a mini pencil sharpener. How did she think of that one?

I cried when I thought about it.

I didn’t like feelings that weren’t perfect. And I didn’t like the family therapist we video-chatted a couple times who wore bows on her head and acted like she knew Annie better than we did.

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Dad didn’t like feelings that weren’t happy. He is the kind of person who always says “never better” when asked how he is. He has a permanent indent in his cheeks from his dimples, as most of his life is spent smiling. When he was seventeen, he didn’t cry at his dad’s funeral.

Mom didn’t like that Dad couldn’t act unhappy when she wanted him to feel sad for Annie. For her.

Sometimes, I would peer into their room and hear their hushed arguments about how to handle things. During those months, they were so focused on her, that they often forgot to parent me. When that senior boy on the track team invited me to his
house, they never even thought to ask if his parents were home. They were, and so was his little brother, and we watched Sharknado in his living room, and he said I seemed distracted. “Just some family stuff,” I said. And he kissed me. Our first kiss. I wanted to tell Annie when I got home, forgetting momentarily that I hated her. I told our dog instead.

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Because they want attention, it told me.

Because they want their outsides to match their insides.

To release tension, anger, or stress.

To punish themselves.

I tried to understand it. I grazed my wrists with the eraser side of a pencil, wondering how she could ever draw blood from her own body on purpose. Just a week before, I skinned my knee at track practice and felt woozy watching the thick red liquid drip from my kneecap to my ankle, staining my sock and making me think about Annie, though I wanted to do anything else.

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Then one day, Mom and Dad went to the Lee’s house for Chinese New Year. Every year, Betty Lee made a five course Chinese meal for all of her friends and family.
Mom and Dad looked forward to it every year—and so did we, since it was a Chinese tradition to give money to the children of their friends. I couldn’t wait for them to come home with a doggie bag of veggie dumplings and a twenty.

Then, at around 10pm, my phone rang. I recoiled to see that it was Annie. *Ugh, I thought, she’s literally in the bedroom next to mine. Why can’t she just come in here if she wants to talk?* I answered the phone reluctantly.

“Katie, Mom wants you to come to my room.” A dial tone.

Assuming that Mom had gotten home with leftover spring rolls, I rushed into Annie’s room—only to find it empty. I called her name. She replied with silence. Finally, I noticed that her bathroom light was on. I turned the metal knob, wading into a small pond of blood, finding a half-naked and withered Annie.

For a minute, I just stood there. Hands to my mouth. A few rogue tears that somehow won the fight against my ducts. I’m bad in emergencies, but it was just Annie and me, and Annie was covered in blood and she looked so small and so pink and so scared. And there was nowhere to run.

I watched Annie instinctively take out a first aid kit that she already had stashed in her cabinet. Some gauze, tape, Band-Aids, antibacterial spray. This was not the first time she had done this. Or the second, or the eighth. Her hands shook, but she had this down.
“Stop fucking staring at her and do something!” my insides screamed to my outsides. But the sticky redness held my feet in place. The best I could do was open my mouth.

“Wh..What should I do?” I stumbled upon my words. The only injuries I knew how to heal could be solved with frozen peas and Advil.

“Nothing,” Annie whispered stubbornly.

But as I finally willed my feet to shuffle towards the crime scene, she surrendered. her arms raised, latching onto me. Our first two-armed hug since before we wore bras, probably.

I brought her into her bed. Her athletic stature gone, I could actually pick her up and place her on her mattress. I wrapped her in a towel. I found out later that she weighed around 90 pounds—a poisonous concoction of depression and anxiety had made her more weak and less hungry.

We sat silently in her room, surrounded by color. A blue “Don’t worry, be happy.” A gold, glittery “Live as if she were to die tomorrow.” A splatter painted canvas reading “Hope.” A pair of blue lips. Red footprints on the floor.
The Mystery of Me

I was on the grass. Maybe my head was between my legs, or maybe I was lying down with my eyes closed—I can’t remember. All I know is that I was scared and my parents were so confused and I couldn’t stop crying. I remember that before I was in the grass, I was in a van. We were in the van because we were on vacation in Ireland and we were going to a cooking class and someone who worked for the hotel we were staying in drove us there. I felt nauseous that day and I didn’t know why, but I sat in the passenger seat of the van because I didn’t want to get carsick. I remember that even though my parents were right behind me in the back seat of the van, I felt very afraid and very lonely. I remember I wanted to look behind me to remind myself that they were right there, but I was so nauseous that I kept my eyes locked in front of me. I remember that my brain filled itself with images of things that scared me and I tried to make the images go away but I couldn’t, and this made me even more afraid. The images were of things like darkness and blood and rape and I was afraid but didn’t know how to explain why. I just knew that I needed to get out of that van.

At the time, I was about to begin my semester abroad in London, so we decided to take a trip to Ireland before my classes started, since none of us had been and my mom had always wanted to. We had seen a lot of beautiful things, like castles and sunsets and a butterfly farm and my friend Annalie, who was studying there that semester. But there was a dark cloud over me the whole time and there was no explanation as to why. I thought I was excited to study abroad. And I wasn’t nervous about making friends, since I was living with two of my best friends from Brown. I wasn’t really sad about leaving Brown, either, since the majority of my close friends
had also left that semester. I had always loved traveling, and I was excited to see places I had always wanted to visit, like Marrakech and Copenhagen and Budapest. I wasn’t sad about being alone with my parents for almost two weeks straight, since we were all really close. So why was I feeling like this?

I sat (or lay) in the grass crying, trying to understand. My parents had seen this before, but not from me. They had seen it from my sister Annie many times, ever since she was a little girl. But I was always the easy one. The one who could go anywhere and do anything with anyone and they rarely had to worry. I remember wondering if they were thinking “not another one.”

At the time, my worst nightmare was becoming like my sister. She was the one with the issues, and was the one always complaining. I didn’t want to be anything like her. I didn’t want to make my parents worry and talk in hushed tones and fight and cry. I wanted to be different.

But in the grass, I felt like we were the same. Or, maybe, I felt like I wasn’t me at all. I was becoming her—my life melding into hers in a single, conclusive moment. I saw Annie in the tiny little mirrors of my parents’ eyes as they stared at me. I wondered if they were as afraid as I was.

I remember my mom trying to ask me what was wrong and I remember not knowing what to say.
I remember I told her I was feeling anxious and didn’t know why. An unfazed expression reminded me that she had heard this many times before.

I remember that after a while, they helped me get up off of the grass and I walked like a zombie to the cooking class and I wasn’t hungry and my mom said I probably needed a glass of wine so I poured myself a big one and tried to stop shaking and tried to stop worrying and tried to be hungry for the food we were making.

I remember the cooking instructor being confused and wondering why I was openly crying as I sliced the vegetables, laughing intermittently because I knew I must have looked crazy.

I remember telling my mom that this wasn’t the first time I had felt like this, but that it was the worst yet. I remember she asked me why I never told her.

I remember my dad loved the food we made that night and I remember the wine helped me feel less shaky. My mom always knows how to fix things like that.

I remember feeling like things would get better and they did, and then a few days later, they got bad again and I went to the doctor because I thought something was really wrong with me.

The night before I went to the doctor, I stayed up all night because I felt like my throat was closing up. I felt like I couldn’t breathe and there was so much dryness
and no matter how many bottles of water I drank, nothing helped. This wasn’t my first time feeling this way, but it was the worst yet.

I watched movies on my laptop—or, listened to them—while, in another window, I Googled my symptoms. After hours of Googling, drinking water, peeing, and telling myself I was crazy—that I would really be fine if I just blocked WebMD from my laptop—I decided that I had Sjögren’s syndrome, an autoimmune disease that causes dry mouth and dry eyes. I had dry eyes, sometimes. I wore contacts, so this was normal, but I wasn’t using logic. I had Sjögren’s syndrome. I was sure of it.

But the next morning, a nice elderly Irish doctor told me, after examining my throat, that nothing was physically wrong with me. He had kind eyes and a comforting accent, and something about him made me cry. He asked me why I was crying. I said I didn’t know. He asked me if there was anything new happening in my life, and I told him that there was—that I was living in London for a few months. I kept crying.

I walked out with a prescription for Xanax in my hand, still crying, wishing there was some explanation. For a moment, I wished there was something really wrong with me. At least then, I wouldn’t feel crazy.

The Xanax zonked me out. I sucked on throat lozenges to relieve the dryness. And by the next morning, it all felt like a dream. It was probably just a fluke—a bout of nervousness for the coming months that wouldn’t return.
I was, of course, wrong. After my parents left and I was alone in London—albeit surrounded by close friends—the scared, lonely feelings returned. I stayed up during the nights and slept during the days. My roommates Olivia and Karina told me they were jealous of how easily I could take naps. But the truth was, I had never been able to nap before I got there. I just felt exhausted by my own thoughts and worries.

I remember the first time I traveled alone while abroad, a couple weeks after my appointment with the Irish doctor. I was flying to Copenhagen to visit my boyfriend who was studying there. We had been together for around two years at that point and he felt like a slice of home. I was used to spending all my nights next to him. His face was the first thing I saw every morning, and I still wasn’t used to having a bed all to myself. I remember how Karina would take photos of me sleeping at the edge of my mattress in London, my foot hanging out of the covers. I was excited to spend my weekend with him. I was about to explore a new city and eat at all the vegan-friendly cafés he had scoped out for me and sleep in his big tee shirts. But then, on the night before my flight, my anxiety flared up. What if I slept through my alarm? What if I got lost on my way to the airport? What if my sketchy RyanAir flight got delayed or cancelled? What if it crashed? What if my passport fell out of my bag or I left my phone on the Tube?

I shook silently all the way to the airport in a hazy confusion. I had traveled alone many times. I wasn’t afraid of flying. But this time, I held tight to my bags and tried to breathe. I thought of my mom as I bought a half bottle of red wine from Duty Free
and drank it on the plane. As I later found out, this is illegal for multiple reasons. But no one ever said anything to me about it.

Every trip I went on that semester went something like that. I would be looking forward to my travels, then so anxious that I couldn’t even feel my excitement anymore. That’s when I swapped out the half bottle of red wine for half a Xanax, telling myself that the anxiety I had been feeling was just a product of my international solo travels. I still pushed myself to travel as much as possible—when else would I have the opportunity to visit all these places for so little money?

Most of the time, once I got to wherever I was going, my anxiety slipped away—though I always kept my lozenges on hand. But then, when I would return to cold, rainy, quiet London, my fears crept back in. I blamed the weather. I blamed the fact that I only had a few real friends there. I blamed the air quality and the lack of accessible weed.

When I packed up to return to the States, I threw away the bag containing my lozenges and Xanax, deciding that I wouldn’t let myself need them ever again. This problem would never exist outside of Europe, and that was the end of that.

But I was wrong. When I got back to school, things were just as bad. Only this time, people noticed. When I was abroad, though I was living with friends, we were all so busy traveling and going to classes and meeting new people, it was difficult to truly keep tabs on one another. And when my friends who were studying in other cities or
who had stayed at Brown called me, I never mentioned how I was feeling. There were too many amazing, exciting things happening that I wanted to share. Plus, they were far away and couldn’t help even if I had wanted them too. So why make them worry for no reason?

But now I was back, and I had thrown away my safety nets, and I had no more excuses left for feeling the way I was feeling.

Back at school, I slept a lot and ate a little. I felt overwhelmed by stupid friend dramas and class responsibilities that usually felt manageable. My friends were used to me being the one who always wanted to go to parties, but now I had little energy and usually left early from every social interaction. I opened up to my boyfriend, until he suggested that I see a therapist. Then for a while, I tried to hide my feelings and make them go away so I didn’t have to deal with them.

Once I realized that this anxiety wasn’t a fluke, I became frustrated and scared. Maybe I was tied to the genetics of the family I was born into. Maybe I had no choice in the matter—I was finally becoming the person my genetic makeup was telling me to be the whole time. Either way, I realized that my perceptions of mental illness—my sisters, specifically—were way off. It took my own brain chemistry knocking me down a few pegs to truly understand the terrifying feeling that maybe it will never get better. I only wish I had realized it sooner.
Before Annie left for treatment, I didn’t know anything about mental illness—and I especially knew nothing about self-harm. After my sister was sent to the hospital and then to a treatment center in Houston called Menninger, I tried not to think about the marks she had left on her arms and legs. Though my family and I often talked about her depression and anxiety and panic disorders, I always felt like we talked around her self-harm.

It’s obvious why. It’s not fun to think about—no less talk about—someone close to you hurting themselves on purpose. For people who have never felt or have successfully suppressed the impulse to harm themselves, the practice is almost impossible to understand. Of course, the same goes for any form of mental illness—I had no idea what an anxiety attack would feel like until I experienced an anxiety attack. But with self-harm, the hurt is physical as well as mental, making it impossible to ignore yet even more difficult to face.

This lack of understanding from the inside is mirrored by a lack of understanding on the outside. How often do we see instances of drug abuse, suicide attempts, and alcoholism in the media compared to instances of non-suicidal self-harm? Studies show that there are many misconceptions about Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) that color the way the general public views self-harm. I remember that in high school, when I was addicted to Family Guy, I watched an episode where the main character asks how to “slit” his wrists, to which his teenage daughter responds “sideways for
attention, longways for results.” This misconception is the most prevalent way that the media portrays NSSI—that it is primarily a problem for adolescent white women seeking attention. But people of all ages and genders struggle with NSSI, and the majority of those who self-harm do everything they can to hide their injuries. When my sister used to cut, she did so primarily on her upper arms and legs, where she knew they could easily be covered by short sleeve tee shirts and shorts. I wonder if these misconceptions were part of the reason we never knew how to talk about self-harm in my household, or if the problem is more cyclical. Perhaps, the less we talk about self-harm privately, the less it’s talked about openly, and the less it’s talked about openly, the less prepared we are to discuss it privately.

When I recently called my sister to interview her about her experiences with self-harm, I asked her if she remembers the first time she cut and what led her there. We spent a couple of minutes nervously laughing until she finally explained how weird she felt answering the question. My sister and I are pretty open with each other about everything nowadays—including her anxiety and depression—but when it came to this particular question, I felt the old wall building back up between us. Finally, she said: “For some reason it makes me uncomfortable because I know that it hurt you personally … It’s just interesting because you’ve never asked me in, like, normal life.” I hadn’t realized it, but I think she was right. The first time we had ever really talked about self-harm—something extremely pivotal in her mental health journey—was during a pretty formal, over-the-phone interview.

She was seventeen—maybe sixteen—the first time she cut. She had recently suffered from a debilitating concussion which took her out of school and away from softball and field hockey. She had always struggled with some anxiety and depression, but without sports—which served as her outlet for these feelings—she felt lost. She says she just didn’t know how to talk about what was going on with her and what she was feeling.

“I can’t remember if someone had told me about cutting or, like, why I decided to do it,” she said. But she says that she remembers thinking “I’m crazy, and this is what crazy people do.”

“I was always picking at my nails”—a nervous tic that I also have. She kept a cuticle cutter next to her bed to try to kick the habit, and when she decided the cut, this cuticle cutter was the nearest sharp object to her. She used it to cut her arm. She chose a spot where she “knew a short sleeve would cover.” She says she barely even broke skin the first time. “It felt like it numbed the pain that I was going through,” she concluded—saying that it felt nice to focus on physical—rather than emotional—pain for a while.\(^{32}\)

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When I first found out that my sister had cut herself, I was in the car with my mom. We had just pulled into our neighborhood, and my mom had just gotten a new car and she hadn’t figured out how to work the bluetooth. When my sister’s

\(^{32}\) Ibid.
psychologist called my mom, the call was accidentally on speakerphone the whole time, and I heard every word. Annie had cut herself on her upper arm. She told her therapist about it, who was obligated to tell my parents for fear that my sister—who was not yet 18—would further harm herself. I remember how my mother and I sat silently after we heard the news.

But Annie didn’t know that I had heard the call, and when my parents first talked to her about her self-harm, she specifically told them not to tell me about it. They didn’t have the heart to tell her that I already knew, so they instead told me not to mention it to my sister. Maybe I became so good at pretending I didn’t know, that I never actually figured out how to talk to Annie about it. But at least we were talking now.

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Like drugs and alcohol, self-harm can be addictive. People who self harm often do so in search of relief from negative feelings—whether that be from a desire to feel better after a disagreement with a loved one, to relieve boredom, or to simply induce a positive feeling from within. I always saw Annie’s cutting—and the lying, hiding, and relapses that went with it—as an addiction, rather than just a physical manifestation of her mental illness. But despite its clear similarities to alcoholism and drug addiction, self-harm is treated in society and in the media as something completely separate from other addictive behaviors.

And in certain ways, this makes sense. Most addictions are reinforced both positively and negatively. In other words, behaviors such as alcoholism and drug abuse cause

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33 “Self-Injury (Cutting, Self-Harm or Self-Mutilation),” Mental Health America, 2020
addicts to feel pleasure as well as relief from negative feelings—and addiction to these substances often stems from the desire to reproduce such pleasurable experiences. However, NSSI stems primarily or perhaps entirely from negative reinforcement—the desire to alleviate negative emotions, often without the production of positive emotions.\(^\text{34}\) But in other ways, NSSI behaviors are not so different from other addictive behaviors. So why don't we ever talk about them?

A lot of people who engage in NSSI also struggle with addictions to drugs or alcohol.\(^\text{35}\) But those were never my sister's vices. As she says, she liked to think of herself as a “goodie-goodie”—rarely drinking in high school and never experimenting with drugs.\(^\text{36}\) Even so, one of her therapists made her go to a few Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings to deal with her own addiction—where she says she heard the stories of a bunch of “old white men” whose stories she couldn’t really relate to. There was never a place for Annie to really talk about her cutting. Most of her other therapists told her not to focus on the behavior itself, but rather the anxiety and depression that led her to that behavior. She told me that she wished that these professionals would have allowed her more space to talk about her self-harm.

I was surprised to hear this. Weren’t those programs meant to help her? Aside from the fact that talking and thinking about cutting makes most people—perhaps even professionals—uncomfortable, why would those in charge of furthering Annie’s


\(^\text{36}\) Brown, Katie, and Annie Brown. “Interview.”
treatment intentionally stop her from talking about the very thing that she was sent there to figure out?

“They used the term ‘war storying’ a lot in treatment,” Annie explained. “Basically, people come into these places are like ‘here’s all the fucked up shit I got away with. Here are all the drugs I did when I was home.’ … They get this adrenaline rush from sharing their shit but, like, in an intense and unhealthy way.” At Menninger, the first treatment center Annie went to, they didn’t stop patients from war storying. Annie says this allowed patients to connect in unhealthy ways—bonding over the very habits they came to treatment to kick. But all the other programs Annie went to did everything they could to stop patients from “war storying”—potentially to a fault. Annie says they often shut down a lot of conversations that weren’t examples of ‘war storying’ as much as they were patients simply opening up about their pasts. This made it so that people—including Annie—felt they couldn’t be “real” about what they went through. Annie thinks that this is why she was never fully able to open up about self-harm while in treatment—it was written off as war storying.

Psychologist Audrey Alton says that part of the reason that many treatment centers forbid “war storying” is that, when people talk about the harmful behaviors they engaged in before coming to treatment, others are intrigued by these behaviors. And in group settings such as residential treatment centers, these types of behaviors can be contagious. When people tell their war stories, they take over a group session,

37 Ibid.
talking about their own past destructive behaviors, and this can take away from other peoples’ opportunities to engage in these group sessions.\textsuperscript{38}

LCSW Mary Beth Osoro, who has worked in two wilderness therapy programs and a residential treatment center (RTC), says that all the programs she has worked for have been against war storying. She says that a story would be classified as “war storying” when a patient is seemingly telling a story to glorify destructive behaviors rather than to work through them. Osoro says that this can be a nuanced concept, and every patient is different. Oftentimes, war storying is a patient’s way of trying to connect and share their experiences with others, so Osoro has always felt it important to replace war storying with other ways to connect. Of course, some stories toe the line of war storying, but in programs working with big groups of people, a staff has to make black and white rules that can apply to everyone. Though this could, in turn, impede some constructive stories from being told, it also ensures that problematic behaviors are not glorified.\textsuperscript{39}

Dr. Alton says that she understands how this can hinder patients’ abilities to fully open up. When not openly discussed, these behaviors can begin to feel like “secrets.” But she says that there is also something to be said about the theory that by allowing a patient to continuously talk about self-destructive behaviors, therapists may give too much energy or designate too much meaning to these harmful behaviors.

\textsuperscript{38} Brown, Katie, and Audrey Alton, Ph.D. “Interview.”
“Psychology is more of an art than a science,” Dr. Alton says. “It’s an imperfect art,” and there’s no one right way to work with a specific patient or a specific disorder.40 When it comes to cutting, some psychologists believe it to be a symptom of a larger problem, namely, depression. But others, like the therapist who sent my sister to AA, seem to see it as an addiction that can be treated just like any other.

But perhaps the reason my sister felt stifled in her ability to talk about self-harm is simply due to the aforementioned discomfort it elicits. Maybe it’s really as simple as the fact that my sister’s former therapists, like most people, didn’t like thinking about someone intentionally hurting themselves—perhaps finding it easier to talk about Annie’s depression than the bloody behaviors that accompanied it.

And, as Osoro pointed out, self-harm is a less widespread behavior than alcoholism and drug use, so it’s logical that more people misunderstand it or are made uncomfortable by it.41

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Cutting isn’t the only type of self-harm, though it is the most common. Some people who self harm bang their heads, hit themselves, or burn their skin.

Cutting is probably the most obvious form of NSSI—that is, when someone is a cutter, you know. Annie and I both agree that, since we are both now hyper-aware of what cutting scars look like, we notice them on a lot more people than you’d think. Annie says this is one of the hardest things about her mental illness. “I still have a lot

40 Brown, Katie, and Audrey Alton, Ph.D. “Interview.”
41 Brown, Katie, and Mary Beth Osoro. “Interview”
of scars, and I think that, in general, my scars can feel triggering.” People with other forms of mental illness or addiction might have reminders in their daily life that feel triggering, too. But for people like Annie, those triggers are inescapable. “It’s on my body,” she kept saying to me. “I have to see them when I go pee, or whatever,” referring to the scars on her upper-thighs.\(^\text{42}\)

Annie also tried burning “a little bit” when she was at Fulshear, a transition program. She wasn’t really cutting anymore, but had relapsed a few times. She used a lighter a couple of times to burn her skin, describing the action as “very ritualistic.”

“When I went to treatment the first time, I had barely really cut before, but in treatment, there were so many people that were kind of encouraging of it.”\(^\text{43}\) She recalls other patients telling her how to continue cutting, even when she had no access to knives, blades, or other obvious cutting tools. One person told her that if she broke a Silly Putty container in a certain way, it was perfect for cutting. “It was their way of bonding,” she said.\(^\text{44}\) She came away from that treatment center knowing how to cut more easily, even under tight surveillance.

And she didn’t just learn how to cut with new materials. “People cut words and shapes” into their skin. Annie says she found this quite odd, but on a particularly bad day, she wrote “fuck up” on her arm.

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\(^{42}\) Brown, Katie, and Annie Brown. “Interview.”
\(^{43}\) Ibid.
\(^{44}\) Ibid.
These patients had addictive mindsets. They didn’t realize they were facilitating each others’ illnesses—that they were keeping each other sick. Annie doesn’t seem to blame the other patients for giving her the tools that worsened her behaviors.

“When you’re really, really stuck in this addictive mindset,” she said, “you think that this thing [that you’re addicted to] actually helps.” They weren’t simply too sick to realize that they were hurting each other—they even thought that they were helping each other.

“I haven’t cut in, like, four years,” Annie told me, reminding me how far she’s come. But still, “it feels like no matter who I meet in my life now, they’re gonna know that I’ve had a hard time at some point,” she explained to me. Her scars are constant reminders of the trauma of her past, but she doesn’t want people to think that her past problems are her current problems. “Me having scars doesn’t mean that I’m fucked up now,” she said.

My mom, my aunt, my grandma, and—let’s face it—the rest of the world’s population, all have scars from their past. Annie and I do, too. My sister’s scars are just physical ones. But she’s a survivor, and her scars are also a reminder that everyday, she wins in her fight against mental illness. She is the same person she always was, with the same brain chemistry. But she has come a long way since the days of discrete bandaids on bloody bathroom floors. She, too, has joined the revolution, choosing to look for the joy and happiness in a brain that often betrays her. And she

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
has chosen to forgive an imperfect sister who often failed and judged and
couldn’t—or chose not to—understand her pain.

Some of Annie’s scars are now covered in tattoos of succulent plants, a constellation,
and flowers, so that the past can remain in the past, and the bumps in the road can
become part of something beautiful.
Recovery

III

Last winter break, Annie asked me if I wanted to go on a trip with her. The question sort of surprised me. We had been getting along better than we ever had before, but the idea of spending days on end alone together made me feel a bit wary. Things weren’t always easy between us. But I hadn’t gone on a camping trip in years—since my high school teen tours—and was itching to get back outside. Plus, there was a huge part of me that wanted to see up close what Annie’s life really looked like these days. We used to fight a lot as kids, but now that we were older and no longer living in the same house, we weren’t physically or emotionally close enough to argue. I worried that living in close quarters again—even for a few days—would bring back old habits and dynamics. Would we get along the whole time? Probably not. But would it be fun? Probably. We decided we would drive six hours from our parents’ house in Vail, Colorado to Moab, Utah, and camp there for three nights.

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I was in high school when my Annie was sent away to various psychiatric hospitals and therapeutic programs for depression and anxiety. I suddenly became an only child in a large, suddenly quiet house. My brother Sammy had left for college a year before, and I was still not used to the emptiness of his baseball-themed room. But Annie’s absence stung more—and not just because the circumstances were sad and confusing. It was the fact that I knew Sammy never needed me. He was almost five years older than me and switched between the roles of annoying big brother and cool uncle, depending on the day. But with Annie, it was different. Even though we fought often as kids and teenagers—both physically and verbally—I felt like there
was a kind of synergy in our relationship that was always there but never acknowledged. Every time I walked by her empty room, I couldn’t help but wonder how she was doing without me.

Before Annie left, we would sit at the dinner table, and I would hold my breath because I was always angry at her and I knew I wasn’t allowed to be. Anything I said would stir the pot and cause her tiny feet to stomp right up the stairs into her uncharacteristically girly room. But now, I didn’t have to hold my breath. Before Annie left, my dad used to make me wake her up in the mornings because he was afraid to. Nobody wanted to be the one to disturb the bear, but my dad knew that for some reason, Annie was pretty nice to me right before her eyelids flicked open for the first time.

I often felt like I played the role of a big sister to Annie, despite the fact that she is two years older than me. Aside from helping her with her hair and reluctantly picking out her outfits in high school, I also had my first relationship before she did, prompting her to ask me prying questions about dating and sex.

But every now and then, I felt like the little sister. Sometimes, Annie would pinch my cheeks or playfully tell me how cute I was—though people often told us that she looked younger than me. The mornings were like this. The morning version of Annie was incapable of being mean to her little sister. She usually woke up easily—seeming to prefer my gentle rubs on the shoulder to the sound of ten intermittent iPhone alarms. Five or ten minutes after the initial wake up, I always returned to her room to
make sure she had really gotten out of bed. I knew I would somehow be blamed if she overslept. I wondered if she ever overslept at whatever program she was at.

I remember that when Annie was at Menninger, a clinic in Houston, Texas, my parents and I traveled from Charlotte, North Carolina to visit her. I was a sophomore in high school then, and Annie was a senior. Back then, when people at school would ask me where my sister had mysteriously disappeared to or where those marks on her wrists came from, I had to make up lies—she was sick, or our dog had scratched her. She didn’t want people at school knowing where she really was and gossiping behind her back.

Menninger was way too clean and clinical and it creeped us all out. When visiting hours were over, my mom and I went to the mall to get our minds off of things. When we stopped in my favorite store, Free People, I spotted a long black cotton dress with a million layers of ruffles. I decided to try it on, and when I did, my mom said she liked it but didn’t know where I would wear a dress like that. I told her that I could wear it to prom, since I knew that my boyfriend, Nick, would take me as his date. My mom made a face. She said something like oh right. She mentioned something about how she had been expecting to buy Annie a dress for her prom that year. I remember thinking that Annie probably wouldn’t have wanted to go to prom, even if she was at school. She hated dancing and wearing dresses and makeup and probably would have turned down whoever asked her. I, on the other hand, loved any excuse to dress up and talk to boys. But still, it felt like the wrong sister was buying the dress.
During my junior year of high school and what would have been her freshman year of college, my parents and I went to visit her at Eva Carlston Academy (ECA)—an all-girls therapeutic boarding school in Salt Lake City, Utah. We went to the Olympic training facility in Park City, where we got to waterski on man-made jumps that Olympic skiers and snowboarders trained on and we tried to do flips and 180s, and afterwards, as we all browsed the gift shop, Annie pulled me aside and whispered, *Have you and Nick had sex yet?* I had been awkward about this recent development, only telling my closest friends. And at the time, Annie wasn’t one of them. Instead, she was a distant stranger who knew next to nothing about my life. When I occasionally got to call her, I asked her about what her life was like in the program, and I told her about the surface-level things happening in my life. Things with Nick were still good, my friends were still good, but one kissed the guy the other liked. School was boring. Mrs. Henrickson, the assistant to the dean of students and Annie’s makeshift guidance counselor, asked about her often and sent her love.

But Annie didn’t know anything about my life, really. She didn’t know how nervous I was that Nick was leaving for college next year and she didn’t know that SATs and AP classes on top of cross country and track (and, of course, winter track) were draining me and she didn’t know how lonely the house felt without her. So when she asked me this simple question, I was taken aback. I nodded, probably. I remember how her face changed. Her little sister had had sex. Before she did. As she asked me things like “how much did it hurt” I prayed that one of my parents would walk a little too close so she would be forced to stop with the questions.
After Annie graduated from ECA, she went to a transition program called Fulshear for a while. These programs were for kids like Annie, who had spent months or years in treatment programs and needed an in-between place before going straight to the “real world.” After that, she went to college—still a year before I did. She stayed in Salt Lake City and made friends with lots of hippies and spent her time camping, climbing, and mountain biking with them. When I got to Brown, I realized that even though we were both finally in the same place in our lives—both in college, both in pretty good places mentally—we were still leading such different lives. My days consisted of reading books under trees on the Main Green and sipping matcha lattes in coffee shops while I typed up papers and spending lazy weekend days in bed with my boyfriend. Hers consisted of waking up under the stars and cooking eggs on camping stoves and biking full speed down steep hills—her giant black lab bounding behind her.

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On our dark drive through a narrow, icy, winding road that led to our campsite in Moab, Annie drove nonchalantly while I visibly panicked in the passenger seat. I worried that maybe our entire trip would be as tumultuous as these roads were. Mom and Dad would’ve been so pissed if we died, I told her afterwards. She laughed a laugh that meant you’re such a drama queen.

When we arrived in Moab, we had a car packed with every snack we thought looked good at the Safeway in Vail (we had made the mistake of grocery shopping while high), lots of blankets and comfy clothes, Annie’s camping stove and propane, and
Ollie, her black lab (whom she swore would protect us from any dangerous people, but whom I had never seen so much as bark at another dog or person. He thought everyone was his friend). Since the entire area was dusted with snow at the time, we couldn’t stay in tents, so Annie used a website called glampinghub.com to find us a cabin.

In the end, we found a tiny hogan—a hut built years ago by the Navajo. It was made of dirt and had a tiny space heater on the inside and was perfectly cozy. We set up our sleeping bags on top of the comparatively luxurious mattress pads that were already inside the hogan. The hogan was located on a bearded man’s property. He lived in the middle of nowhere by himself and—as he later told us—his ex-girlfriend, who stopped by from time to time. The property was vast. It consisted of the man’s home, four hogans, and two cabins—all of which, besides the man’s house and our hogan, were empty, since it was in the middle of a freezing cold winter. The whole weekend, we never even left the property. We hiked for miles and miles and couldn’t believe the fact that we never once saw another person, other than our hermit-like host.

Throughout the weekend, Annie gave me her flannels and sweatshirts and puffers, even when I insisted that I really was warm enough. When I looked back at photos from the weekend, I realized how alike we looked: both only five feet tall with pale freckly faces and long, brunette braids down our backs.
After we hiked over boulders and looked at the snow capped red rocks, Annie continuously tried to feed me—just like my Jewish parents always did. She made sure I packed plenty of vegan yogurts and trail mix and constantly reminded me to drink lots of water, even if I wasn’t thirsty. At night, we fell asleep next to each other, with Ollie as the only barrier between us. It reminded me of when we were little and one of us would have a nightmare and climb into the other’s bed.

But this was also different than it was back then. Because we weren’t scared. We were in Annie’s element—and I trusted that even if something bad did happen to us out here, she would know how to handle it. When we were younger, we fought about everything because we were different, and to me, this meant that one of us had to be right and the other had to be wrong. I wanted to be right, so I didn’t try to understand her. That weekend, though, I was glad that Annie wasn’t like me, because she could be calm in moments I felt uncertain. And that made me feel at ease.

When the strange proprietor gave us a hilarious hand-drawn map to show us a hike he made up—complete with the instructions STRAIGHT, DOWN, LEFT, UP, VEER RIGHT, SKINNY LEFT—Annie confidently led us through it (without any phone service).

And on the last day, Annie pulled out a tiny bag of shrooms, and told me that if I was ever going to try them, this was the best place to do it. As I looked around at the land around us, I couldn’t think of a reason not to. It looked like we were on Mars, if it
snowed on Mars. Giant reddish brown arches that made us feel small in a good way. Huge boulders piled on top of each other that looked like drip castles. Spindly trees growing out of dry desert sand. Caves of which we were the only dwellers. Annie and Ollie were the only people nearby, the views were beautiful, and things with Annie couldn’t have been better. I chased a couple with some Oreos.

But once they started to kick in, I felt nauseous and nervous. Annie calmed me down, reminding me that this was normal, and that it would pass. I laid in my sleeping bag, petting Ollie, until my stomach stopped hurting and all of a sudden Ollie looked even cuter than normal and Annie and I started giggling. We explored the property even more and found a cave-like structure carved into a rock that appeared to be someone’s former home. It had a tiny mattress in one “room,” and it was even complete with a makeshift kitchen, including shelving and a working sink. We wondered who once lived there and where they were now. When it got dark, we climbed to the top of a hill outside our hogan, looking out at the stars that popped into the sky like popcorn and talked about how perfect our temporary home in the middle of nowhere was.

That night, Annie made sure I was still feeling okay, before we faded into a peaceful sleep (with very strange but definitely not scary dreams). I knew she asked not because she needed to, but because she wanted to, and I realized that’s probably how a lot of sisters are—advising and dressing up and boosting up because they want to help each other do life. And that’s what we were doing, maybe for the first time. We were living our lives, side by side.
The next morning, as we packed up the car, I realized that I never had to wake Annie up the entire time we were there. We woke up together, cooked our meals together, hiked over big boulders and ate apples on top of the world together. She dressed me up in her clothes—not the other way around. And for the first time in a long time, I felt like a little sister.

We started calling each other a lot more after the trip to ask for advice about friends or to vent about our parents. When we go home for the holidays now, we take long walks together with Ollie and whisper secrets to each other at the dinner table—things we never would have chosen to do as kids.

It's still not perfect. Annie still gets on my nerves, and I know I get on hers. She still calls me to ask for outfit advice every now and then, but she has her own, distinct style—now complete with a light pink buzzcut (she shaved her head soon after our trip) and giant hoop earrings made of snake vertebrae. She still oversleeps every now and then, but I don’t worry about that anymore because usually, Ollie's wet nose greets her in the morning when he starts to get hungry. It feels like—because she no longer has to spend all her time and energy focusing on healing herself—she's figured out how to tend to others. We both know that we are capable of hurting one another. But everyday, we choose not to. We choose to look for the best in one another, to let go of past judgements as much as we can.
I don’t think Annie needs me anymore. I never really worry about her, and I don’t think she worries about me, either. But it’s nice to know that, when necessary, we can take care of each other.
Recovery

IV

Two years ago, my cousin Eli headed to what he thought was the orthodontist with his parents, Rob and Jamie (my mom's sister). When he got to the parking lot, though, two large men called “goons” shoved him into a car. It was the only way my aunt and uncle could force their sixteen year old son to go to rehab.

“‘Gooning’ is a colloquial term that refers to the controversial practice of nonconsensual transportation of adolescents to addiction or behavioral treatment centers.” It's typically a tactic used by desperate parents when they feel they have no other choice—when they feel that their teenage children need psychiatric help but would never get it voluntarily. Such was the case with Eli. Gooning was a last resort for Eli's parents, who were desperate to help a child who did not want to be helped.

But for these adolescents, gooning can often have lasting psychiatric effects. Many adolescents who have been “gooned” report that they have trouble sleeping—fearing that people will break into their rooms at night and take them away again. And even more common are reports that getting gooned breaks the trust between the adolescent and their parents. One adolescent who was gooned in the middle of the night said during an interview that she felt her mother was dishonest with her when she needed her most.

But others report that they are now thankful that their parents chose to send them to treatment centers. Some say that they know they would have never gone on their own volition, so they understand why their parents chose the tactics they did.\textsuperscript{48}

My sister never needed such seemingly harsh treatment. By the time she was sent away, she was worn down—tired of fighting with herself and others. She went away by choice, having the ability to pack her bags with all the essentials before descending into her “Wilderness” program—a typical first step in most treatment journeys. “Wilderness” programs are basically Outward Bound for troubled youth. Annie’s Wilderness center was called Pacific Quest (PQ for short). When my parents first told me that Annie would be going away to Hawaii, I was almost jealous. But when I first saw photos of her at PQ, I became more and more thankful that I was not there. She wasn’t on a beautiful beach, drinking Piña Coladas out of pineapples. She was in the middle of the woods, spending her days harvesting bananas and wearing what looked like adult onesies. All patients had to wear these blue, itchy outfits and could wear none of their own clothes (though Annie fought hard to keep her bras, since she was a size E, and the little cloth training bras the treatment center provided weren’t going to cut it).

Jamie says that sending Eli to treatment via gooning is one of her biggest regrets. She did it because professionals told her to, but she knows how much it broke her son’s trust in her. Still, she knows that Eli never would have gone to treatment on his own. When his addiction was at its worst, Eli became very manipulative. He

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
convinced therapists to up his dosages of various medications—such as Xanax—and he “fired” every therapist who told him that he had a drug problem, telling his parents that they didn’t “get” him or that they weren’t helping anymore.49

Though treatment saved Eli’s life and changed him for the better, he still feels resentment towards his parents for how it all went down. Rather than having the option of going on his own terms, he describes going to treatment as getting “sent away” by his parents. He knows that they did the right thing, but he can’t help but feel that they cheated him out of his high school experience.

So although everyone including Eli agrees that he needed treatment, and that he wouldn’t have gone if he wasn’t forced to go, going still felt like the wrong choice. Eli resented his parents for forcing him to go, and Jamie and Rob felt the immense guilt and shame that comes with sending your child away.

It helped that they decided to get treatment as a family—mending the relationships between Eli and his parents. Jamie thinks that Rob, in particular, benefitted from the family therapy, as he decided to continue his therapy alone in order to better his relationships with his family and himself. Now, they feel grateful to have each other and have an extremely open line of communication. Eli talks to Jamie about everything from girls to his mental state, and Jamie feels grateful that the days of lying and manipulation are over.

49 Brown, Katie, and Jamie Blume. “Interview with Jamie Blume #2.”
For my family members in my generation, the mental illness in our DNA has resulted in open communication. Rather than making us feel more distant from one another, my siblings, cousins, and I were encouraged to talk about our feelings and struggles with our families. And although for most of us, it sucked at times, I do feel that we've had unique opportunities to open up about the very things our parents and grandparents were forced to hold in. Through all the heartache and lying and fighting and uncertainty, our family has become a close-knit one.
The End?

As the world begins to shift towards a better, less stigmatized understanding of mental illness, the mental health services available to those who need them have increased. When Gagi was treated for her mental illnesses, the only options available to her were hospitalization and institutionalization. Now, community options are widespread—keeping patients out of hospitals and allowing more people access to psychiatric care. Annie and Eli are just two examples of people whose lives were changed—perhaps even saved—by such programs.

But they are some of the “lucky” ones, as their privilege allowed them access to some of the best psychiatric care possible. RTCs and wilderness programs are often huge financial burdens for patients and their families, thus many people are unable to receive treatment at these programs. As some of these programs cost more than a college tuition, they are typically not an option for low-income families. Sometimes, parents are put in positions where they must take money out of one child’s college fund to send another child to treatment. And though financial aid is available to some, private community treatment centers remain a luxury for those who can afford them, rather than a right for all who need them.50

Still, we are moving in the right direction. As the stigmas surrounding mental illness have significantly decreased over the past few generations, more people feel safe publicly discussing their mental health and utilizing psychiatric services. If this trend continues, I am hopeful that someday, the right kinds of programs and services will

50 Brown, Katie, and Mary Beth Osoro. “Interview.”
be available to all who need them. And though stigmas surrounding the mentally ill remain strong even today, we have moved towards a more open dialogue and public acceptance of mental illness as a legitimate issue.  

When I think about how, just a generation ago, my mom witnessed the aftermath of her mother's suicide and was never talked to by her parents or a therapist about it, I am reminded that we have already come a long way. Instead of sweeping mental illness-related incidents under the rug, we have learned it is better to discuss them and work through them with professionals and as families.

Studies show that mental illness is worsening in children and teens, as more parents seek treatment for their kids. But while it is, of course, worrisome that adolescents seem to be suffering more than they did in the past, perhaps these numbers should actually give us hope: The increase in people asking for help may simply be due to the increase in acceptance of mental illness in our world today. I constantly wonder how Gagi’s story would have been different had she been born just a generation or two later. Would she have felt safe to speak out about her inner struggles? Would she have found the help that she needed and deserved? Would her family have worked through their differences? Or would it not have mattered at all?

While I’ll never know the answer to these questions, I know one thing: While suffering from mental illness is not a choice, the way we approach it is. Of course, no

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51 Mechanic, David. “Mental Health Services Then And Now.” Health Affairs, Nov. 2007.

matter how much a parent may try to shelter their child from sadness or harm, they cannot stop them from experiencing the effects of mental illness. My mom made it her mission to protect my siblings and me, but still, she could not prevent the pain that we have experienced—no parent could have. But if my family’s past has taught us anything, it’s that healing is only possible when problems are faced head-on. Instead of allowing feelings to be swept under the rug, we must encourage one another to voice them—no matter how difficult this often is.

I don’t know if I want to have kids, partly because I prefer dogs to babies, but partly because I worry that their stories would resemble those of my family members. With so much mental illness in my DNA, would it be fair to bring a child into the world, knowing how much they might suffer? If I ever do become a mother, though, I’ll look to my own for guidance—because when all else fails, an abundance of love never hurts.

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How can there be a true end to stories that are still unfolding? For better or for worse, my family’s history seems to be a bottomless pit of stories and secrets; memories both beautiful and painful. The process of writing these essays was not what I expected, as I have continuously learned new information about the family I thought I knew so well. I have come to terms with the fact that these stories are likely incomplete—filled only with the facts that people chose to share with me. Perhaps I’ll keep learning new information. But these are the stories as I understand them now. And for now, that’s enough.
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