



SHOW ME ALL YOUR SCARS

*True Stories of Living
with Mental Illness*

Introduction by

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“Full of COURAGE, RESILIENCE, and RECOVERY—
Show Me All Your Scars shreds the stigma of mental illness.”

—Pete Earley, author of *CRAZY: A Father's Search Through America's Mental Health Madness*

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A Little Crazy

Susie Meserve

I met Will in the summer of 1999 in Northampton, Massachusetts, when we both worked at Thornes Marketplace, a three-story building full of trendy shops and eateries in the center of town. I was in graduate school for creative writing and had applied for a job at the health-food store as a summer gig. I worked with Smith College students and locals who needed the 40 percent discount on their macrobiotic food. I was in a war with an unnamed eating disorder I thought of only as *control*. Earlier in the year I had been bulimic, but by summertime, I had moved on to severely limiting fats and running five miles a day. I hadn't had a period—or much of a sex drive—in over a year. The doctor said I had the estrogen level of a preadolescent girl. But Will, shelving novels at the bookstore when I descended the stairs of Thornes, inspired in me the faintest sexual stirring. He had long hair and a face that seemed world-weary and more than a little mysterious.

Will came into the health-food store while I was working the register one afternoon. He put some vitamins down on the conveyor belt and I nearly lost my nerve. Then I blurted, “You look like Elliott Smith.”

“I do? Cool,” he said, pleased and clearly a little flustered.

I spent the next week trying to catch his eye. There was a back way into Thornes, but I'd take the front entrance so I had an excuse to smile at Will as I made my way down the

stairs. He bought a lot of vitamins that week; I decided there was a book I just had to have. Finally, we made a date. I can't remember who asked whom. I suggested a cocktail, but Will said he didn't drink. This was my first sign that he was not entirely like me. No one I knew "didn't drink"; my friends and I took ample advantage of the free wine at poetry readings and showed up regularly to Thursday nights at the smoky VFW bar. Will suggested dinner, but I didn't want to eat on a first date. Finally, we agreed on tea.

He told me, that first night, that he really shouldn't be dating. "I'm a diagnosed schizophrenic," he said, and without pausing to gauge my reaction, asked, "Does that worry you? Does it worry you?"

Of course it worried me. It shocked me. I had no context for that kind of revelation. Schizophrenia was completely beyond the realm of my experience. I had only recently become acquainted with my own mental illness, something my therapist and I tentatively called *anxiety*, though she admitted that, on the form she would submit to my insurance, she had to write "anxiety" followed by "disorder." I was still processing the idea that the machinations I'd put myself through since I was seven—the hand-washing, the number games I played with the clock—were not exactly normal.

"A little," I said. "Yeah."

I didn't know what else to say. I considered ending the date. Mostly, I felt disappointed. But I walked with him to his place on the outskirts of town. He lived in an efficiency apartment, one room with no kitchen and old carpet. You could hear other tenants through the walls. Will told me he'd flunked out of a master's program the year before because he'd had a major psychotic break. He'd been hearing voices, suffering from paranoia, and having horrible visions; his fear, he said, was "out of control." Eventually, he ended up in a private mental health facility where they diagnosed him with schizophrenia. After six months, because he was in conflict with the program director and sure they would never make him well, he checked himself out. He'd briefly been homeless. He staunchly refused to be medicated. He had moved to Northampton to try to put his life back together. He was on disability and welfare.

I sensed that my reaction to Will's revelation was a kind of

test I did not know how to pass. It was clear the date was over. He walked me back to the well-lit part of town, we said goodbye, and I strode the sad and confused walk up Main Street, to my bright, spacious apartment, alone.

I come from an East Coast family that's politically liberal and reasonably open-minded, but my parents might have freaked out if they'd known I was consorting with a schizophrenic. Part of Will's appeal, in fact—because I realized later that night that I *was* still intrigued by him, despite everything he'd told me, and that I would probably see him again—was that my parents would be terrified. In therapy I was working on separating from my parents, establishing boundaries, learning that it would not betray my love for them if I trusted my own decisions. So the possibility of dating Will immediately represented something risky, something almost out of bounds. That alone, of course, did not prompt me to say yes to a second date; when I waved to him on my way down the stairs the next day, a grin effortlessly presented itself across my face, and there was that faint stirring between my legs.

Will called me the next afternoon.

"Do you want to go for a trail run?" he asked.

I always wanted to go for a run, though I wondered briefly if being alone in the woods with a schizophrenic I did not know very well was such a good idea. Besides, it looked stormy, and I was not good with spontaneous plans.

"Okay," I said, surprising myself.

After a run in the hills behind Northampton in a thunderstorm—the two of us jostling one another playfully, panting, laughing, mud-splattered, soaked through—we showered separately and then met back at my apartment, where, on the floor of my living room, Will peeled off my jeans and put his mouth on me. The ceiling above seemed to twinkle with celestial bodies, smiling down, and afterward I felt tired, relaxed, hungry, and surprised. I could be inhibited about sex, but perhaps because I knew the biggest thing about Will already—and everything of mine paled in comparison, or so I thought—I felt absolutely no reason to withhold that deepest part of myself. I found myself shockingly willing to just let go. Very few areas in my life permitted me this kind of ease: certainly not

my work, which a teacher had recently told me was *too perfect* (and thus, he said, not very interesting). Not my eating, nor my exercising: in those arenas I could not relax the reins even a little bit. That I might find freedom in this unlikely, mentally ill man, simply because he had no expectations of me and I had none of him, well—that was something.

But Will had no desire to be my boyfriend, nor the skills to be in a serious relationship with anyone. And his vast differences from me soon felt like a liability. I didn't want to tell my mom about him, didn't know how he would behave in social settings, at poetry readings, at a bar. One night, he told me he didn't think we should date anymore but that he still wanted to hang out with me, and I felt relief more than anger or sadness. I had always treated relationships the way I treated exercise or writing or food: with compulsion. I'd check my email every five minutes to see if a guy had written. I'd overthink every glance in the teaching lounge. With Will, it felt like being with him—or not—was my choice, and it was an easy decision to just be friends.

My friend did not seem like the stereotype of schizophrenia that I knew from movies and television. He did not hear voices anymore, at least as far as I could tell, and he was never violent. He was obviously depressed, though—depressed in a way that suggested sadness from some place far beyond the present. Sometimes he became slightly manic, and he frequently became confused. Often, when we talked, I wondered if we were having two separate conversations. He might, for instance, lapse into sullenness, into silence, as though he'd forgotten I was there; then, all of a sudden, he'd brightly ask a question only tenuously related to what we'd been talking about. Some days his veneer seemed so thin he was almost translucent, like the smallest insult or hurt would break him.

When he was up, Will was quick-witted; he could be hysterically funny. He was obviously smart. His decision to live an unmedicated life meant he took a barrage of supplements and carved away several hours a day for yoga, meditation, and acupuncture. His diet was so restricted it made mine seem hedonistic. He didn't eat gluten, soy, eggs, corn, sugar, meat, or caffeine (going out to dinner with Will was like a complicated three-act play). And he could be pedantic, overly direct, critical.

“You haven’t read *Lathe of Heaven*? Seriously?”

“I can’t believe you listen to NPR. Corporate media.”

I accepted his bluntness with hesitation. Many times I wondered if our friendship was worth it: the bad moods, the sudden decisions that our evening was over, the weird outbursts of criticism.

But at other times, Will behaved like an endearing child, entirely genuine. Unlike most of the guys I knew, he did not resort to ironic retorts or mannered responses. He had the laugh of a ten-year-old, this sweet, bubbling peal. One day he invited me over to play a rented video game. It was a Saturday, and I had planned to spend the day relaxing after a week run like boot camp: exercise, teach, fast, write. So I said yes. Will couldn’t handle any hint of violence, and the game was a lush but G-rated fantasy, something about a princess who needed to travel through a maze to reach her castle. We played it on his aging thrift-store television for hours. I remember the day as though we spent it happily, goofily stoned, but we couldn’t have been: Will didn’t put any substances into his body besides chromium picolinate and copious amounts of vitamin C. But being with him sometimes felt like an altered state.

After we played the video game, we pushed aside the controls and had sex on his bed. We had this implicit understanding: that we would still have sex. Not always; months went by when we were simply platonic friends. But then we’d fall into bed together again. I welcomed this. I had no compunctions about it, no hang-ups. I didn’t care or know if he slept with other people. I didn’t possess jealousy or longing where he was concerned. For the first and the last time in my life, I didn’t equate a sexual relationship with love or the pursuit of partnership.

Not that I didn’t love Will, in my way. We shared a rare kind of intimacy. We made gluten-free toast in his kitchen at 2:00 A.M., eating it, giggling, in our underpants. I saw him through a fractured, dissociated breakdown in my apartment after a thunderously loud Lucinda Williams show, the only time I saw him approach behavior I might call aggressive, though all he did was yell. We wrote an article together once. (He insisted I take the whole byline, though he had paced around my apartment feeding me lines like I were his secretary: “No wait,

write this, write this...”) I watched him engage with the world as if he were doing everything for the first time: trying out a job, losing a job, finding a new apartment, beginning a new project. Because Will’s life had once shattered to pieces, he didn’t care what it would take to make it presentable, defensible, *normal*. For me, every venture felt like an obligation, a step on a ladder that led somewhere I was supposed to want to go. With my anxiety and my stupid eating disorder, I spent all my time climbing, and climbing, and climbing. What was at the top? I don’t think I knew.

During my final summer in Northampton, Will and I made the ultimate intimate gesture: we shared a community garden plot.

Recovery is not linear, and Will had gone from a relatively good period to a bad one. Months earlier, I’d thought he might be “cured”; he had moved into a bigger apartment and taken a job at a better bookstore. He’d gotten off welfare and started various community organizing projects. He had introduced me to some new friends. But when summer hit, back into the depths he went. He stopped calling, and when I stopped by he’d answer the door with a faraway look on his face, like he wasn’t sure who I was. In those periods we still saw one another, but he was not, it seemed, really there.

My problems were less serious but no less consuming. I had defended my master’s thesis to very little fanfare or praise and left my MFA program with the sense that I might have blown it. I had plumbed the depths of my anxiety in therapy, which made me jittery around my family and jittery by myself. Most of my friends had graduated and left the area. I was hanging around the Pioneer Valley only because I had been offered a teaching fellowship for the fall.

So when Will asked me to share a garden plot, I said yes before I really thought it through. We drove up to the allotment on a May evening to check it out. It was not lost on either of us that we stood in the shadow of Northampton State Hospital, a psychiatric facility that had operated until 1986. With broken windows, rusty fire escapes, and rumors of hauntings, its presence across the field of plots felt comical, sinister, and a little too apt.

“What do you think?” Will asked of the dirt rectangle in

front of us. A lone mullein plant held court in the center. In my imagination, the plot flourished with more colorful fruits. I could see neat rows of tomatoes and basil, maybe a cucumber.

"It's great. I'm excited."

"Me too."

We must have hugged, though my memory is that we were awkward with each other that night.

The summer is short in New England; most gardeners take advantage of the brief season by planting in May. But we waited until the beginning of July to return to the garden. The mullein, ragged and graying, towered smack in the middle—the only living thing in that six-by-nine-foot desert. Coaxing a garden into shape in a month or two seemed like a real ambition. Around us, people happily tended their early peas, the first of the herbs, the tiny green orbs that would one day be edible tomatoes.

But in our plot, we bickered. Will sat on the sidelines with his head in his hands while I turned over dirt with some sense that I had to rush and resent the work. Will couldn't do any shoveling or heavy lifting because he said he wasn't up to it, but he did not spare telling me what to do. I did not feel kind toward him and soon turned martyrish and annoyed, wielding the spade, grumbling inwardly about the ridiculous proposition: What the hell had we been thinking?

And then I took the spade to the mullein. It had to be moved. The starts waited in their plastic pots to be planted in its place.

"Don't!" Will cried. "*Please*. Don't kill it."

"It's right in the middle of everything," I said. "I'm just going to move it so it's in a better place."

"Don't," Will said again. "*Please*."

"Come on!" I hollered. "Don't be ridiculous. I want things to be orderly. It's in the way!"

"If you kill it, I'm going to be really upset," he said. I thought he might cry.

More carefully than I had planned, I uprooted the mullein and moved it to the corner of the plot. I replanted it, went for the communal hose, and gave it a long drink.

When I came back from returning the hose, Will still sat in silence. I wanted him to leave, but I had driven him there and would drive him home. We were sharing a community garden

plot at the top of a hill a mile outside of town, and only one of us owned a car.

Finally, he lifted his head from his hands.

"The schizophrenic and the obsessive-compulsive attempt to garden," he said wryly.

I did not laugh, but I was not too far gone to see the humor. I had missed Will's wit and lightness. I had missed being able to laugh at myself. I wasn't sure what, exactly, I was mad about. The mullein had not needed moving. We could have worked around it. We could have worked around many things.

We drove home in silence.

"Bye," I said when I dropped him off.

Several months later, I left Northampton and met the man who would become my husband.

I have often thought about the comment Will made. He equated us that day, diagnosed us, put us on the same plane, in the same handbook. At the time, I was angry and thought, *No way. You're the crazy one.* But if I was honest with myself, I'd spent much of our friendship noticing the ways that he and I were, to my great surprise, not so different. I'd never known a schizophrenic before I met Will. I never knew that someone with a diagnosis like that could play a video game, have sex, discuss politics, hold down a job, care about someone, hope. I know now that Will, despite the immense difficulty of his life, was one of the lucky ones: he overcame the worst parts of his illness. He was able to live, with challenges, in the same world I did.

Before I met Will, I thought being crazy was a binary: you were or you weren't. But Will and I were both at once, functional and dysfunctional, happy and sad, free and not free. We all live with this dichotomy. We are all at least a little bit crazy. The guy gardening in the plot across the way, staunchly pulling every last weed—maybe he heard voices too. The woman with the beautiful organic garden—the herb spiral in the middle, the sweet peas stanchioned up by bamboo stakes, the lettuces scattered just so—maybe she was a recovering alcoholic, bipolar, or just a little bit depressed. Maybe, like me, she suffered from anxiety and spent her life trying desperately to hide it. It was enormously freeing to realize I didn't have to

hide anymore, that the things that went on in my head probably went on in someone else's. We were not bad people. We were not so beyond the pale. We were all just working in the shadow of the insane asylum, tending our desires and fears, our neuroses, our sadness, the strange things our brains did to make us suffer.

Will and I kept in touch. He left Northampton eventually, a year or two after I did. I visited him in Portland, Oregon, once with my husband and son. He started a nonprofit, got a master's degree, and now has a private therapy practice. He no longer believes in diagnoses like schizophrenia or anxiety. He's well known in certain circles for the work he has done around the possibility of treating mental illness without medication and without those kinds of labels.

He's still a pain to eat with. I know because he came to town recently and we met for breakfast. He brought his new partner and her two kids, and I brought my husband and son. He and I sat across from one another, and again, I felt like our friendship transcended expectation and normalcy. Will laughed his ten-year-old laugh. I teased him for reminding the waiter three times that he didn't eat cow dairy. Our spouses chatted; our boys shared pancakes. It was awfully good to see him. I thought that Will's decades-earlier self wouldn't recognize the put-together man sitting across from me.

I'm much happier than when I lived in Northampton. I'm still anxious, but I no longer have an eating disorder. My husband, thank God, is barely crazy—and patient. I anxiously watch our son for signs of anxiety. The irony is not lost on me. Maybe, like me, he'll grow up to have anxiety, but of course I hope he won't.

And maybe someday, I'll tell my son about the efficiency apartment and that strange first date with Will. I'll tell the story of the garden plot and that awful summer that ended with me harvesting ten bags of basil by myself at sundown on a September evening, in the shadow of a mullein that had survived its uprooting. Resenting Will, resenting being the one who thought she always had to manage things, I drove home to make pesto and, I'm sure, left tomatoes dying on the vine. Because I never went back there, and I doubt Will did either.

SHOW ME ALL YOUR SCARS

Susie Meserve grew up outside of Boston and was educated at Tufts University and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Her poetry and essays have appeared in the New York Times, Salon, Elle, Indiana Review, Cimarron Review, and elsewhere, and she recently finished writing a memoir. She currently lives in Berkeley, California, with her husband and son.