"Everyone touched by mental illness should have a copy of this slim but extraordinarily powerful guide; there's nothing else like it. This book will change lives."

—Gail A. Hornstein, PhD, *author of Agnes's Jacket: A Psychologist's Search for the Meanings of Madness*

A WAY OUT OF MADNESS

Dealing with Your Family After You've Been Diagnosed with a Psychiatric Disorder

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Chapter 19

Life After Family

by Will Hall

Editors' Introduction: *Will Hall is the co-founder of* Freedom Center, *a free, volunteer, peer-run community for psychiatric survivors in Northampton, Massachusetts.* Freedom Center *supports informed choice and self-determination regarding medication and other treatments, and offers holistic alternatives including support groups, acupuncture, writing workshops, yoga classes, and public education. Will is also a co-coordinator of* The Icarus Project *and host of* Madness Radio *(www.madnessradio.net), syndicated on the Pacifica FM network. Will was hospitalized and diagnosed with schizophrenia in his twenties, and has been medication free since then. He is presently a counselor in Portland, Oregon and is working toward his Master's degree in psychology at the Process Work Institute.*

"...what is usually called hypnosis is an experimental model of a naturally occuring phenomenon in many families. In the family situation, however, the hypnotists (the parents) are already hypnotised (by their parents) and are carrying out their instructions, by bringing their children up to bring their children up...

"I consider that the majority of adults (including myself) are or have been, more or less, in a post-hypnotic trance, induced in early infancy: we remain in this state until—when we dead awaken, as Ibsen makes one of his characters say, we shall find that we have never lived."

-R.D. Laing, *The Politics of the Family*

In 1979, when I was thirteen years old, my mother volunteered at one of the first rape crisis centers in Florida. She was on-call and they gave her a pager, one of the early kinds, so they could contact her whenever a woman came to the center needing help. I had never seen a pager before. It was about seven inches tall and didn't do anything except glow with a steady red light until it was activated. Then it went off with a loud electronic whoop. When Mom went to bed she put the pager on the center of the kitchen counter, and it sat there all night, like a small ticking bomb.

It wasn't until years later that my mother's pager took on a special significance for me. I always loved science fiction and secret agents, and here was an advanced technology hinted at in movies that had taken up residence in our family. It waited until some unknown moment came, listening electronically for a distant invisible signal. And then suddenly it exploded our entire house into a panic—one moment quiet and still and the next screeching like a siren with its message that we were in the midst of an emergency.

When I was finally hospitalized in my mid-twenties and given a diagnosis of schizophrenia, the alarm was sounding for me.

Growing up was a slow motion, silent crisis. Both my parents are trauma survivors, and by that I don't mean they lived through one incident of violence, I mean they endured lives of repeated brutality. Dad is a veteran of the Korean War, and he was shot and beaten, killed strangers and watched friends die, spent time in prison, and underwent torture. He is such a complicated man that no sketch could outline his personality. Without warning he became friendly and kind, then brooding or enraged. He berated my mother, brother, and me cruelly, then praised us for our accomplishments. He allowed us great freedom in one moment, and demanded complete control the next. He taught independence and resilience, but wasn't there when we needed him. He lashed out, then gave us gifts, talked about books and movies, then put us down for having opinions of our own. He kept his psychiatric history and electroshock treatments hidden, then told me one day, "I was in mental hospitals. You knew that." We were never sure if he was at war or peace.

My mother had her own, more hidden weapons. She cut with a look in her eyes, silenced us with a tone in her voice, turned cold when we sought warmth. She was orphaned as a little girl, then survived sexual mistreatment that also included torture. She didn't know how to give me, her first son, privacy and independence, and turned to me for the intimacy she didn't find in her husband. Mom's

inner strength at being mixed Choctaw Indian earned some respect from my dad, and my brother and I were taught to be proud of our indigenous ancestry, but she was also ridiculed for expressing her own intellect and feelings. Dad would sometimes say, "Your mother is very special," and I could hear, faintly, an echo of the time he was in love with her.

I wouldn't call what my parents did fighting, because he crushed her so utterly. But I also saw her venom scar and burn him. They circled each other, scraped and clawed, shouted, and then fell silent for days. When my dad and mom met and started a family, they found in each other a shelter from their violent pasts. Then the shelter collapsed around them.

In these ruins my brother and I kept our heads down. We weren't very friendly, and spent most of our time together mistrustful and competitive. When we did challenge our parents it just erupted into vicious and overwhelming scenes. My brother was able to stand up and yell back; I just collapsed and froze. I don't know which was better. There were no other witnesses to what was going on, and it was only years later as adults that we could reassure each other that, no, we didn't imagine it, and yes, it was that bad.

The pager knew something about our family. It watched and listened, and when it sounded its alarm the crisis wasn't just out there in someone else's life; the crisis was here at home. We lived our lives in a trance, showing up for school and sitting in front of television and going to the mall, all while hypnotically induced to believe that the tremors and smoke of conflict surrounding us were normal. When in the middle of the night we heard the shrieking pager, it was us it was trying to wake up.

Even fleeing to the West Coast for school I couldn't escape. I struggled with what I called my depression, but it was much more than that. I would fall silent for days, hide from others, hear voices in my head attacking me, feel malevolent entities tracking me down. My mind became so unmoored that I climbed in and out of the window to leave my apartment, afraid my roommates were trying to hurt me. I saw crowds watching from the rooftops, heard whispered conspiracies on the other side of the wall, froze in terror when the devil called my name. I walked again and again to the Golden Gate Bridge and stared at the water below, and I stood in traffic holding a torn sign inscribed with coded messages. I spiraled deeper into my own madness.

In the locked ward of Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute I

underwent tests and interviews, observations and questionnaires. At a solemn meeting with the psychiatrist it was finally announced that I had a severe psychiatric illness. It was another spell, another trance, this time cast by doctors. Your genes are faulty; your brain chemistry, your biology. You will never recover. You will always need medication. You cannot regain control of your life: give up your dreams, give up your ambitions. I felt perversely relieved, as if by becoming a patient and being diagnosed as mentally ill I was fulfilling an elaborate suicidal wish.

At the news that I was in a mental hospital, my father blamed recreational drugs while my mother blamed my father. A psychiatric diagnosis is a blame sponge: guilt is gathered up and put on a disordered brain or predisposed genes, guilt no one wants spilled on themselves. I don't blame my family. I don't blame any family. Trauma and violence sprawl across generations and extend out into the world. I don't know if blame would really help anyone at this point.

My mother was in therapy and she realized my father's violent past was taking a terrible toll on our lives together. But she couldn't see her own role and was helpless to change it, to talk, to break the spell we were all under. To this day I have never had a conversation with my father, mother, or brother about being diagnosed with schizophrenia. Years of trying to speak only led back into my worst mental states. And so at different times in my life I've broken contact from them entirely. When I do make plans to visit I hope for a snowstorm to cancel the flight, or some other reason not to go. I live in a kind of exile from my family, and a silent and unbreakable taboo is still in place against who I am. We continue trapped in the codes and dramas of our past. The alarm keeps going off.

I spent a year looking for help in the public mental health system before I began, slowly, to look within myself. My freedom and recovery eventually came through trusted friends and support groups, holistic health and acupuncture and nutrition, meditation and spiritual discipline. I stopped taking psychiatric drugs, and I stopped believing in the diagnosis I was given. I've gained enough clarity to make a fragile but lasting peace with madness, and live with my wild mind, voices, and altered states of consciousness. I now trust that when the demons come, the angels will soon also have their turn.

Recovery for me has also meant leaving my father, mother, and brother behind. I do know many people who have confronted their

family, heard the alarm and shaken themselves awake from the trance, and finally found in their parents the warmth and strength they needed to come back to life. My family still exerts a diabolical hold over me. When I am in contact with them it's as if I leave my present self and return to the past. The power of that generations-old trance remains. My family has never woken up, and might not ever wake up.

Today I work as a mental health advocate and counselor, and I get calls and emails from people searching for an answer different from what they've been told by doctors and TV ads. When parents contact me, desperate to help their sons and daughters, I do hold out the possibility of change. I believe these frightened and traumatized fathers and mothers can grow and become a source of freedom for their children. I tell them that families can heal and that people can recover.

For me, my family is still something I protect myself from. The pager sits there in the middle of the kitchen counter, waiting to sound its alarm.