The Stigma of Her

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There's a saying that people come into your life for a reason, but it took me a while to figure out why She had become a part of mine. I was eighteen when I first met her, in my first year of university about a month in. She seemed to have appeared right out of the blue and She made it clear that She was here to stay. She wasn't a nice person, and that's putting it lightly. She belittled me, made me feel unworthy, and it was clear to me that her goal and purpose in life was to ruin mine. She didn't have a name, not really at least, but She did have an identity. She was depression.

Simply because only I could see Her did not denounce Her existence. It wasn't as if She were an imaginary friend, more like an evil spirit haunting me whenever it was convenient for Her. But because people could not physically see Her, it must have been all in my head; at least that was the assumption. It made me feel like a lunatic, a girl with one too many screws loose, even though I knew definitively that She was real and not some figment of my imagination or some product of my mind's creativity. She was real and whether I liked it or not She was a part of me.

The transition to university can be difficult; it's a lifestyle change and a process wherein you are expected to find yourself, to mold your identity into what it was destined to be. Depression doesn't make it any easier. It's just another stress, another burden, something else to worry about on top of the endless assignments and readings you're meant to complete. In my case, something was off and I wasn't feeling like myself. I went to see a counsellor because I was crying all the time, uncontrollably and seemingly irrationally. I felt like an outcast, an emotional train wreck, because as I looked around no one else was crying at random. I was the odd one out so clearly *I* was the freak of nature.

During my first counselling session, I poured out my life's story, sharing tales of those who had wronged me and how that had made me feel. I discussed my childhood and recalled memories I didn't even know I still had. I spoke about the recent loss of one of someone very special to me and then everything seemed to click into place. I was experiencing symptoms of grief brought on by the death of that person, the death of my grandmother. After a few weeks of trying the coping mechanisms for grieving, they helped to some degree but something still wasn't quite right. I went back to the counsellor who referred me to a doctor for a medical diagnosis. That was the day I was told I had depression. It is a day I remember vividly because this seemingly harmless diagnosis from a doctor made my heart sink for reasons it shouldn't have.

I left the doctor's office and headed back to my dorm room where I curled up in a ball on my bed and cried, and cried, and cried. But these tears were not because I was relieved that my symptoms had materialized in some form and I knew I wasn't just overreacting, but rather because they had manifested in the form of a mental illness. 'Depression' and 'mental illness' weren't words I heard all that often and the only times they were ever spoken, it was as if they were dirty and something not to be uttered. I had internalized society's ignorance and delusion and looking back that terrifies me, because how is someone going through depression, or anxiety, or being haunted by their own ghostly presence that is mental illness supposed to cope? This stigma makes a person feel like a problem, like it's their fault; they have failed at life and they are worthless. But really, the failure is society's inability to properly educate and raise awareness on the subject, therefore resulting in stigma. And what is to happen if someone internalizes that ignorance, that stigma, to a dangerous degree? Catastrophic aftermath can ensue all because of a stupid stigma molded by a society that just doesn't understand.

No one tells you what it's like to be sad and have no distinguishable or physical reason for it. As kids, we are taught how to cope with feelings we have: if you're happy, enjoy every moment; if you're angry, talk it out or take the time to calm down; if you're sick, take some medicine; if you're sad, seek comfort in a loved one or a stuffed animal. But what if nothing helps? What if you can hug and squeeze that stuffed animal until the stuffing is flat and the fabric is torn, but it yields no less pain or suffering? It's in your chemical makeup, your DNA: a switch that cannot be turned off. We don't really associate sadness with being sick and so the notion of taking medicine to help with sadness doesn't initially make sense to us. In the psychology of coping, medicine doesn't seem to align with sadness, so we make the assumption that it's wrong, or worse, that something is wrong with us.

In addition to internalizing this harmful mentality, I feared others' reactions, wondering how they would perceive me. I initially only told a few people: my mother, my aunt, and my roommate. About a week later, I called my best friend to tell her the news. I told her that I had bad news. In retrospect, I feel guilty for the way I must have made her feel. By the shame in my voice, she could tell something was wrong, but the nature of my announcement was a mystery. Surely I had been in a car accident, or was now paralysed from the waist down. Or maybe I had only a month to live. This was the sort of news she was anticipating. I probably scared her half to death. Why was I building it up so much? Sure it was news but it wasn't arguably that big. Yet I was making the situation out to be a diagnosis of some fatal illness that would cut my life short before my time. The irony is, we want to detach mental illness from the discourse of disease, but I had just bound them ever so strongly and inadvertently. Once I managed to get the words out, I was met with two simple though impactful words: "It's okay." After all of the build-up, my announcement had been rather anticlimactic.

My friend was comforting and empathetic, something for which I am eternally grateful. I'm sure as my best friend, she would have supported me regardless of what I told her, but the fact that she saw me as myself and not as a stigma was more heartwarming and relieving than I can even put into words. I think I was hesitant to share my struggle because I hadn't really been witness to others with similar issues, so I felt like this was my issue and mine alone. But I couldn't have been more wrong, for there is bravery in admittance. By acknowledging that something wasn't right, I wasn't admitting defeat, but rather admitting that something was not right and I needed help fixing it. Society is built on the doctrine of mending that which is broken. If you get the flu, you have a medical problem that you need help fixing and you go to the doctor for a solution. There is no shame in this, so why does needing help with mental illness get treated any different?

There is an assumption that someone is just shy, nervous, or sad; that a legitimate issue is nonexistent. These issues we are encountering are merely underestimations of ourselves and the logic behind this mentality is highly dismissive. We are told that people get sad, nervous and stressed and that it is normal, which is true. However, the implication that self-proclaimed sufferers of mental health are merely seeking attention is where this attitude strays from validity. These feelings we experience cannot be simplified to the same degree that everyday emotions are capable of. These feelings are heightened to the extent that they are recurring and become a detriment to the functioning of our lives.

You can't always tell how much suffering is behind a smiling face. For instance, I can laugh at your jokes, and have fun with my friends all with a smile on my face, but there's still a war waging within me. I am only muffling the battle cries with my laughter and concealing the pain, wounds, and agony of my battlefield with my smiles so that no one else knows they exist.

But why do I feel as though it is my battle to fight, my burden to bear alone? Surely I would have the support of the armies from those close to me. No, *Her* army has an unfair advantage over mine; She has stigma on Her side. And perhaps I'm hesitant because I am the cause of all the suffering. Who would want to fight a battle with someone who doesn't belong and who is surely overreacting? I am a lost cause beyond assistance and remedy; I deserve to suffer alone. So, I continue to fight this war with Her in the hopes that someday the stigma won't be there to conquer my being and finally I may have the upper hand. It's tiring putting on a show and it is just as tiring to suffer.

I remember when I heard about Carrie Fisher's passing. Being a massive Star Wars fan, it hit close to home and I remember being in a state of disbelief and shock. I didn't want it to be true. Sure, I knew her as the rebellious space princess with a pair of buns atop her head, but I knew her almost as notably for providing a voice and being an advocate for the mental health community, though I don't recall ever telling anyone that. Even though I didn't know her personally, I lost someone very close to me. "Life is a cruel, horrible joke," Fisher said, "and I am the punchline" (2011). In a mere eleven words, this incredibly remarkable icon managed to hit the nail right on its head and deliver a statement that I found all too relatable and poignant. Life and the cruel companion it had delivered to me had a sick sense of humour: a humour impossible to understand with seemingly no higher purpose other than to make my life difficult and unbearable. But being life's punchline meant one thing: that the demon within me was merely using my body as its host. *I* was not synonymous with mental illness, I was simply the place that it, that *She*, had decided to reside in and consume: some apartment that had been rented without my knowledge. I was channelling Her. She was a separate entity and not

something that clung to the existence of who I am. She was within me but that didn't mean that

She *was* me; She didn't make up the entirety of my being. She was just there.

I remember one day at work I was helping a customer and made a mistake. Despite

acknowledging it and offering an apology the man grew angry. Emotion swelled within me and a

lump formed at the back of my throat as I held back the tears. True I didn't deal with

confrontation well; it made me uncomfortable. But today was different; I hadn't taken my

medicine. In the rush to catch the bus on time, I had forgotten it on my nightstand. I felt a hot

breath on the back of my neck. Feeling the hairs stand on end, I knew She was standing right

behind me, basking in my discomfort with the most sadistic smile painted across her mouth. The

customer continued to raise his voice, his girlfriend now chiming in. My heart sank and I felt

low, like a tiny, miniscule human being, shrinking as he towered above me. Any other day I

could take it, could manage the discomfort but today the struggle had been greatly intensified.

After the conflict was resolved with the help of my manager, I excused myself to use the

bathroom, with *Her* following my every step, trailing closely behind. I closed the door, locking

Her out and leaned my back up against it. I looked into the mirror before me, tears forming in my

eyes. Then She poked Her head out from behind me and glared into the mirror with a grin from

ear to ear. My tear filled eyes locked into Hers, bright and wide and filled with contentment.

What was I thinking? I couldn't escape Her. I could hear Her voice echoing in my head. Nice try

but did you really think a door would keep me out? I often look back and reflect on that day. The

confrontation and the way that customer had unknowingly made me feel weren't his fault; he

didn't know my internal struggle. But it made me think, if he had would it have made a

difference? That is the power of stigma. If people acknowledged the often invisible mountain

that people are climbing and assumed its existence then maybe people would be more kind to others and stigma would have less of an impact and hold on society and its actions.

This is all meaningless though unless we understand the roots. Why don't we or society understand? I've said it before; it's ignorance. People don't understand because they don't know how to. They haven't known someone with it, or if they have, they've never had to deal with it before. I'll be the first to admit that before being diagnosed, mental health wasn't something I focussed on or worried about too much because I didn't feel like it related to me. Something can be false or irrelevant until an individual is subjected to it themselves. It is only then that something becomes relevant. Many people, particularly in older generations, have grown up in a time where mental health was just simply a taboo; something synonymous with heresy or mania. The word lunatic appears frequently. The visual of that meek woman being dragged away by stalky men in white scrubs to an asylum or institution comes to mind. It seems outdated, archaic even, yet its applicability continues to reign; if it were so archaic, why did I feel this way? Why was I sitting alone, drowning in my depression and waiting to be dragged away to some asylum for the insane? Amidst the woman's screams of terror and her ongoing testament of being anything but crazy, this act is harrowing, and after reading journal excerpts of psychiatric patients from the early 1900s it is clear that this insight is an eerie stain of truth on the history of mental health, because the word illness denotes something wrong: an abnormality or something negative that needs to be cured.

While it would be an undeniable benefit to help alleviate the strains of mental illnesses, there are still devastatingly negative connotations. Newscasters use mental illness as an excuse or rationale for the actions of murderers and shooters mass, all the while unknowingly binding mental illness to the dangers of stigma and societal ostracism. There never appears to be a

positive story involving mental illness. It seems that as long as mental illness has existed, a

stigma has been tethered to it by an apparently unbreakable chain. This is a trend that needs to be

smothered in order to stop it from prevailing and to rid it of the potential to cause further harm.

Individuals who are part of younger generations don't know how to cope as well as older

ones. We're complainers who are handed everything in life. We don't know the meaning of hard

work and when faced with one small challenge or problem, we make a mountain out of a

molehill. While this can be valid in some instances, this simply does not apply to the

circumstances of mental health. Rather, we've learned so much and made an immense amount of

progress so now we are able to understand mental health better. But we still have miles to go

before we reach an era of total acceptance, and for the sake of those with mental illnesses, this is

something we must do.

Sometimes, we do stupid things; things that we go on to regret. For me, this is one of

those things. It was about six months after my diagnosis and I thought I was doing the right

thing; I stopped taking my pills. I'd like to think it was because I was fed up with my depression

and thought that I had been strong enough to overcome it without medication, but for all I know,

She could have been whispering in my ear convincing me to stop through some crazy

unrecognizable brainwashing. However, I can't say for sure. It had been nearly two weeks

without my medication and I felt fine. I noticed no difference and thought I was cured. I saw the

light at the end of the otherwise dark tunnel and started walking towards it, then running. Then

with a laugh She appeared out of nowhere, took a baseball bat and swung hard, shattering the

flickering luminescent light bulb that had once hung overhead illuminating the tunnel. It was

gone. It was as though it had been some kind of practical joke where She was leading me on,

getting my hopes up. She was a bully and She laughed as She shattered that bulb, so proud of the

havoc She had wreaked. All that remained was the glass lying in jagged pieces on the floor by my feet as a painful reminder of what had almost been. And once again, I was alone in the dark, unsure of where to go or what to do next.

Bell Let's Talk: a day those with mental illness look forward to. It's our version of a pride parade; wearing those blue and white toques acts as our rainbow flag and we wear them with pride. On a day like Bell Let's Talk, the gray clouds of stigma that constantly hover overhead disperse and are replaced with an endless, refreshing ray of light and support for the mental health community across the country. The blue and white merchandise provided by Bell is paraded across campuses, city streets, and the large-scale forum that is social media. On that one day, people want to help and they try to understand. On that *one* day.

It's like a news story broadcasting the world's latest tragedy. Everyone seems to care and embrace mental health for a day or two, thinking that posting a few messages online is enough to be considered activism. Then things die down and the world seems to go back to its ignorance and lack of empathy in order to accommodate the next big story, the next campaign to rally behind for a day or two. Mental health gets put on the backburner for another year until the next Bell Let's Talk day and suddenly those toques are sparse across the country; they become taboo. And in the span of that year, while we wait for the chance to wave our figurative flags proudly once again, the clouds return accompanied by darkness and a rainstorm and our parade plunges back into the depths of the sea and goes back to drowning; drowning in this rain brought on by the lack of care and concern from a society who has turned a blind eye. The Bell Let's Talk campaign is fueled by the power of potential, yet it dilutes the message they wish to spread. It implies that activism can be limited to a single Facebook post or message on a banner, thus molding a false sense of empathy. Bell Let's Talk is a single day of proposed activism and

awareness that limits the acceptable time and place to try and make a difference. It then becomes important to ask, "What is the lasting effect?" or more importantly, "Is there one?" The campaign undoubtedly has benefits that help so many people, but perhaps it is time to examine a more effective way to battle the stigma so many now face.

Sometimes, the tides flow in our favour and the odd parade float rises back to the surface to be a part of some day's news story, but not for the reasons one would hope. It's not to celebrate mental health or acknowledge a breakthrough in societal perceptions. No, it's to announce a suicide or some other tragedy that has claimed the life of someone who couldn't conquer the demons that had consumed them. But suicide is a dirty word and one that tends to be paraphrased to lessen the feeling of taboo, but never the act's ramifications. Someone lacked the support they needed to cope and so their story is broadcast for the world to see, framed as a warning of what can occur when someone's mental health is trivialized. But these are just words: things you're supposed to say even if you don't intend to act on them. How many deaths do we as a society have to endure before the message is actually heard? It's infuriating how the call to action, the words "we have to come together to do something about this" can be tossed around for a split second before they lose their spark and burn out, leaving only embers and ash of a fire that had so much potential but was never given the full opportunity to roar. So the world gets their story for another day or two, and then back into the depths goes the float to drown.

At one point in my senior year at university, my mental health was at an all-time low and I knew I needed help; I never imagined it would be so difficult to obtain. It wasn't the asking for help that was the challenge, but rather the process of trying to find someone that would listen and even more so, someone who would care. After waiting for weeks only to see a counsellor for a single session, I felt alone. I was told about resources that could help me but it took nearly two

months to actually receive them, at which point I had found other options on my own, fearing for

my safety and feeling abandoned by the very people who were supposed to help me. If I had

waited for that counsellor to fulfill her promises, I likely wouldn't have been around anymore,

and that's a horrifying thought because that could happen to someone else. Even when tragedy

strikes the university campus, counselling services are promoted but are never actually available.

In addition, professionals can recommend group therapy workshops but when you know your

mental health won't make attending easy or will worsen the problems you face, you become a

prisoner in your own mind. You feel as though there is no one to help you and you are left to

face your mental health, to face Her alone. The world turns a blind eye to those who need help

the most and this suffering in silence can never lead to anything good.

Most people have a favourite movie and there are certain kinds of people who have a

favourite Disney movie. One of mine is *Peter Pan* because I've always liked the idea of

Neverland, of having that place to escape where you can throw your worries away and focus

only on life's simple pleasures; a place where believing in someone is both magical and

powerful. A place where good can conquer evil. In a sense, Neverland is a sort of metaphor for

mental illness: a place those who suffer seek to find. For me, writing was my Neverland. I could

write a happy ending for those who deserved it and punish those who were cruel and unworthy. I

could channel my pain, unleash my imagination, and take control of everything. For me, writing

gave me the control that anxiety deprived me of and allowed me to regulate the emotions of a

given scene that my depression stole from me; it provided a much needed escape from my hellish

reality. I was creating in two senses: a work of literature, and a balanced state of existence. It's

actually rather fitting how one of the fictional land's mottos seemed destined for my current

situation: "Think happy thoughts" and you can accomplish the impossible. Maintaining eternal

youth and taking flight above a world of mermaids, pirates, and fairies seems more than feasible, and if it only takes a single happy thought, then maybe eradicating an archaic stigma that is the foundation for the ever so common 'pandemic' of mental illness is not so difficult after all. I don't pretend to be an expert because mental health is different for everyone. In one person's brain may live a man arguing with himself at every waking moment; conjoined twins, one sad and one happy but seldom are they awake at the same time; an old woman telling stories of both truth and fiction though not distinguishing between the two.

  I haven't gotten rid of Her; She is still with me. She is my seemingly-permanent roommate but the kind you cannot stand to be around. At the end of the day though, I have to think, people always look back on those annoying or even horrible roommates they have had at some point in their lives and think about what they got out of that situation; about what they learned. I cannot say if She will always live with me, but I know She will always be a part of my life either in body or memory. Through the scrutiny and the ignorance, I endured. Through the taunting and the lowest moments, I overcame. Sure, She was a part of me, and I'm almost certain that She always will be but I won't despair. Though She is a bully, She has strengthened me, thickened my skin and hardened my bones; She made strong what had been weak. She is a part of me but She will never define me. And in fighting this battle, I take a nod from Carrie Fisher: "I am mentally ill. I can say that. I am not ashamed of that. I survived that, I'm still surviving it, but bring it on" (Satel, 2016).

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