

Excerpts from “The Genetic Lottery: A Novel Look at Schizophrenia

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INTRODUCTION

Every morning when I first wake up I wonder and I worry. Before getting out of bed, before registering my full, aching bladder, before remembering what day it is and what responsibilities await—I assess myself for signs of the disease. I roll my eyes around the room, looking for phantoms that may have appeared while I was sleeping. For odd, moving sights, like my dresser transformed into a rolling automobile or roaring lion. To make sure that the clock radio on my nightstand or the framed photos on the bookshelves haven't cloned themselves overnight and morphed into twins or even triplets.

Then I listen carefully. I hear Jason snoring lightly beside me. I hear the ticking of the living room clock. I hear the jangle of Rosco's tags as he rolls over on his bed in the corner of our room. I hold my breath and listen for mysterious voices or alien noises. Then, once I'm sure I'm not hearing any unusual, strange sounds, I ask myself—silently so not to wake my sleeping husband—a series of questions.

Who am I? What's my address? Where do I work? How old are my children? What's my husband's name? Who's the president? Only after the correct responses to the first five pop into my mind, and I chuckle to myself after answering "Calvin Coolidge" to the sixth question because I know good and well that Barack Obama currently resides in the White House, do I know I'm safe for another day. If I still have my sense of humor, and apparently my faculties, I've still escaped it.

Escaped the mental illness that afflicted and consumed my mother, my father and my brother. Escaped the schizophrenia that robbed them of their minds and me of a childhood.

I know that at 32 my chances of developing schizophrenia are miniscule and keep shrinking with every passing month. Despite that, I'm still obsessively terrified of developing the devastating mental illness that was an ever-present part of my formative years. It's shaped who I've become, and I've worked for more than half my life to recover from its impact. My father, mother and brother all lost the genetic lottery, and their misfortune continues to ripple through my life even today.

My name, at least the name I go by now, is Caitlin. That's the name I chose for myself 18 years ago when I fled my childhood home. I cast off the name on my birth certificate for the new one in hopes of casting off the madness that was my family.

CHAPTER ONE

There are a lot of popular misconceptions swirling around about schizophrenia. Some people, especially those who are fortunate enough not to have had first-hand experience with this devastating, disabling mental illness, think schizophrenics suffer from a split, or two vastly different personalities. I imagine they picture someone like a benevolent, beloved school teacher who bakes cookies for the neighbors in her spare time turning into a vicious profanity-spewing crone who butchers small cuddly animals with her bare hands during episodes. Others, who are steeped in popular culture,

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believe all schizophrenics are geniuses, like the Nobel Prize-winning mathematician John Nash. These kinds of misconceptions are annoying, but not surprising, considering there are so many mysteries about schizophrenia that have yet to be solved. Despite billions of dollars worth of research, scientists have not yet pinpointed the causes of schizophrenia; although, they believe a combination of genetics, brain chemistry and brain abnormality are involved. They do know that there is a hereditary basis for the susceptibility of the disease, meaning that schizophrenia often runs in families. Unfortunately, it runs in mine.....

CHAPTER FIVE

"What are you looking at?" I demanded, shouting angrily at the girl about my age who was staring, drop-jawed at my mother as the two of us walked down the street. Dad was finally out of the hospital following a nine month stay, and we had moved out of The Dinosaur and into an apartment near the hardware store. Jon and I were thrilled when Dad returned The Dinosaur to Joan and her husband and excited to have Dad back in our lives.

"Nu, nu, nothing," the girl stammered, perhaps stunned by my venomous tone, or shocked by my mother's outfit.

"Then beat it," I snapped. "And don't you dare laugh."

If I hadn't been so angry and so humiliated by Mom's appearance, I would have laughed. In fact, I had laughed when I saw what Mom had put on. It was a warm, sunny, summer afternoon, and Mom was wearing a bright yellow slicker and dark green rubber rain boots as she clomped down the street. She held an unfurled umbrella in one hand and had a firm grip on one of my hands with the other. A fluorescent orange sou'wester on her head, Mom was prepared for either a deluge or a circus tryout. Unfortunately for me, neither situation was in her immediate future. Instead, she was headed to the grocery store with me, reluctantly, in tow.

I was mortified to be seen with Mom. But I was also hungry, and, as usual, there was nothing to eat at home. Jon, Dad and I had learned the hard way not to let Mom go shopping by herself when she was ill. Jon and Dad were both out, and I needed help carrying the groceries home, so reluctantly I tucked the food stamp booklet into my pocket, and Mom and I began walking to the market two blocks away.

Once inside, I managed to lose Mom when she became enthralled by the colored packages in the laundry aisle. I pushed the cart away, leaving her giggling at the displays, and tried to remember what groceries Jon had told me to buy earlier that day. Peanut butter, bread, grape jelly, cereal, macaroni, soup and milk. I counted my stamps, then tossed cans of chili, Spaghetti-Os, and tuna into the cart. I was headed back towards Mom when I remembered Jon's admonition. "Do NOT come home without coffee," he had said by way of reminding me how impossibly grumpy our parents were until they had caffeine in their bodies. I looped back across the store to the breakfast food aisle and looked on the shelves for Mom and Dad's preferred brand of instant. I spotted it on the top shelf and had to wait for someone to come by and reach up and retrieve the jar for me. Then I went looking for Mom.

I heard her before I spotted her, laughing loudly, maniacally, at

something no one else could see or hear. Shoppers were avoiding her, turning around and backing out of the aisle to avoid going past her. I could feel people's eyes on me as I marched up to her and took her hand.

"Come on, Mom," I told her. "It's time to go."

Mom was giggling to herself, but came with me willingly. I had to drop her hand to push the cart, but she followed me anyway to the check stand. The clerk looked nervous, ringing up our purchases, and avoided meeting Mom's eyes. She relaxed visibly when I counted out our food stamp coupons, handed them to her and accepted 43 cents back in change. The clerk bagged our groceries, set them back into the cart and told me to "have a nice day."

"Yeah, right," I said, and Mom and I pushed the cart out of the store.

Mom was slipping deeper and deeper into her own world, while Dad was struggling to regain his equilibrium and adapt to life outside of the hospital. He wasn't talking to or arguing with people nobody else could see, but he was often confused. He'd spent nine months in the Behavioral Health Unit of Cumberland's Community Hospital, where all his needs were taken care of. Meals arrived regularly, his bed was changed, dirty laundry would disappear from his room and return as clean, folded clothing. He met with a psychiatrist daily, attended regular group therapy sessions and watched TV and smoked cigarettes the rest of the time. He was ill-equipped for running a household, especially one where his wife was acting stranger by the day....

CHAPTER SIX

School started up again, and Jon and I were at our third elementary school. I was in second grade, and Jon was in fifth. A month or so after classes started, Dad stopped going to work at the hardware store again and started spending more and more time pacing through the apartment, talking to someone neither Jon nor I could see or hear. The discussions grew more heated as the days passed, and Dad would frighten us as he argued with his demons, repeatedly, and loudly, insisting that they leave him alone.

Mom, on the other hand, was actually doing pretty well. Her doctor had her on a new medication, and, although, it made her gain some weight, it seemed to leave her healthier than she'd been for a long time. She was painting steadily, and she started picking up dinner shifts at a Mexican restaurant nearby. She was bringing home money again, along with leftover chips and burritos that Jon and I would take to school for lunch.

Mom was at work, and Jon and I were in our bedroom, trying to do homework while Dad was stomping around the apartment yelling that we had to hide. Suddenly, the door to our bedroom was thrown open, and Dad barged in. "Come on," he shouted. "Come quick."

He grabbed my arm and pulled me off my bed, my schoolbook and papers flying off my lap. "We have to get out of here. They're after us."

Jon's eyes widened. "Dad, calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down," Dad shouted. "This is an emergency. We have to get out of here. NOW!"

Dad was dragging me out of the room. My feet went out from under me, and I slid on my side as he pulled me towards the living room.

"Help me, Jon," I screamed. Jon rushed over and tried to knock Dad's arm away from me to loosen his grip on my forearm. Dad lashed out with his other arm and knocked Jon away. Jon's legs went out from under him, and he crashed onto the floor. By the time Jon got back on his feet, Dad and I were out the front door. Jon ran after us.

"Get in, get in," Dad screamed as he pulled me to the car. I was

screaming, too, and Jon was yelling "Stop it," at the top of his lungs. "Both of you get in. They're coming to get us. We have to get out of here now."

Jon could have made a run for it while Dad was struggling to shove me into the back seat. I would have, if I had been him. I would have run as fast and as far as I could have from Dad's maniacal delusions. But my loyal, protective, older brother didn't abandon me. He climbed in the back seat behind me and pulled me close.

Dad fired up the engine and peeled out of the parking lot in reverse. The tires shrieked as he slammed the car into drive while we were still backing onto the road. He floored the gas pedal, and we took off.

"They're after us, Jon; they're after us. You have to help us get away."

Jon must have realized arguing with Dad was futile; so he took the only other option available and pretended to cooperate. "OK, Dad. What do you need me to do?"

"Keep a look out the back window. See if you can spot 'em while I try to lose 'em."

"OK, Dad."

Jon turned and knelt on the back seat, peering over the back dash and out the rear window. "I think it's clear, Dad. There's no one behind us."

"They're too crafty, son. They're still there. Keep looking."

I strapped on my seat belt, certain we were going to crash and gripped the armrest on my left hand. I was still crying, but more quietly now, more confident that Jon would be able to reach Dad and get us out of this nightmare. That confidence began leaking away as Dad sped up, blasted through stoplights, took turns without slowing down, while continuing to rant. "They're after us," Dad yelled. "They're trying to catch us."

Jon was gripping the back of the seat, but was unable to hold on when Dad abruptly turned to the left. He fell towards me and landed partially sprawled on my lap. We both yelped in pain.

The noise distracted Dad for a moment. He looked into the rear-view mirror and began yelling again when he realized Jon wasn't in position to watch for our tail. "Get back up there, son. You can't quit. They'll get us if you do."

Dad turned his head to see if Jon was complying, and the car began veering to the right. We screamed. "Watch the road," Jon shouted.

Dad turned his head back and jerked the steering wheel to the left. We were inches away from sideswiping a minivan. Then suddenly we were racing into oncoming traffic. "Look out," Jon screamed again, as horns blared. The other driver swerved in time, somehow, missing us by inches. Dad corrected and swerved back into his lane. Jon slide down onto the seat beside me and belted himself in.

Flashing blue and red lights filled the car. "Oh, shit," said Dad. "It's a trick. They've got the cops in on it now, too."

"No, Dad," Jon said. "I can hear them on my radio. They're here to help us. Pull over."

"It's a trick," Dad repeated and sped up again. "I'll lose them at the light."

He raced towards the intersection, where the traffic light signaled red. "They think I'm going to stop," Dad said and started to laugh. "I'll show them."

The last thing I remember was Jon screaming "NOOO."

CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

Katie graduated from college with a degree in business and moved down to Cumberland to work at Granddad's hardware store. Granddad was delighted. Neither Dad nor Beth were interested in taking over the family business when he retired, so he had hoped at least one of his grandchildren would. Katie wasn't making him any promises, but she was eager to give it a try.

"How do you like it so far?" I asked her on the phone after she'd been in Cumberland for two weeks.

"It's OK. I like working with Granddad, but I'm getting tired of doing the janitor stuff. I'll be a lot happier when he lets me wait on customers."

"Be patient. He made me do the same thing when I started out. Then I had to work as a stock clerk for months before I got to the cash register."

"I know. He's told me all about it. And all about how he made your brother do the same thing. And your dad. And how he would have made my mom do that, too, if she'd been dumb enough to work for him. And he told me all about how his dad made him sweep and mop the floors for months when he first started."

"So, you get the idea, then."

We both laughed.

"At least it will give me time to get familiar with the store and everything. I don't know much about hardware. We didn't study that in college."

"How are you getting along with my dad?"

"OK. I think. Well, kinda OK. But..."

"But he freaks you out?"

"Sort of. Not really, but I don't know what to think. It's hard to understand him some of the time. He kind of mumbles, and I can't tell what he's saying."

"Welcome to the family. I'm not even sure if my dad understands half of the things he says."

"How do you deal with him?"

"I don't. Remember, I moved to Washington state. But my dad's pretty harmless these days. He may be a little strange, but he's got a good heart. And Granddad deals with him pretty well."

"Yeah, it's amazing. Granddad seems to be able to communicate with him really well."

"Yeah, Granddad knows his cycles."

"Cycles? What do you mean?"

"Dad's on a couple of different medications. Most of 'em he takes every day, but he also gets an anti-psychotic injection every 21 days. He's usually pretty pissed off right after he gets his shot, because it makes him feel that he's losing his grip on reality when it starts working."

"Losing his grip? Isn't it supposed to give him a grip?"

"Yeah, it quiets all the voices in his head, but that kind of freaks him out initially, 'cause it changes his own unique view of reality. Then a couple of days later, he gets used to being so-called normal and likes it. He's usually happiest then until the shot starts wearing off."

"How do you know when the shot is wearing off?"

"It's easy. It's when he starts talking louder and louder. When the medication starts wearing off, the voices in his head start getting louder and louder, so my dad starts talking louder and louder to try to drown them out. Kayla and Taylor call it "when grandpa is talking

speaker phone" because he gets so loud when he's talking to me on the phone, they think he's on speaker. A couple of times they tried to talk back to him, not realizing he wasn't."

"Wow, that's a bummer. I guess he's about ready for another shot then, because he's been talking pretty loudly for the past couple of days. Granddad's got him working in the stock room, so he doesn't bother the customers."

"That sounds about right. If he hasn't already, he'll start getting depressed next. That'll go on until he gets another shot and gets pissed off again."

"Poor guy. What a horrible thing to go through."

"Yeah, it sucks. But believe me, my dad's better off with the shots than he was before. At least it allows him to have more of a life."

"Well, thanks for the info, Caitlin. Now that I know more about what's going on with your dad, it's, it's, um..."

"Not so weird?"

"Well."

"It's OK, Katie. I know what my dad's like. He's pretty fucking weird, but I still love him. I'm just glad I don't live with him anymore."

"He's lucky he's got the family."

"Yeah, I don't know where he'd be without Granddad especially. Probably out on the streets or in jail."

"Wow."

"Yeah, I guess they didn't teach working with a schizophrenic uncle in business school did they?"

"No, they didn't. But that's OK. I'll learn. Besides, he may be sick, but he's still family."

For information about Schizophrenia

Genetic Lottery is a work of fiction, but schizophrenia is a very real disorder that affects one out of every 100 people across the globe. That means just about everyone has a family member, close friend, or close friend with a family member who is living with schizophrenia. And everyone who loves someone who lives with this devastating mental illness, as the protagonist of my novel illustrates, is affected.

Despite that, many people feel like their situation is unique because of the stigma surrounding mental illness. Even in this day and age when people go onto television and share their innermost secrets with the world the stigma prevents many people from talking about schizophrenia and other mental illnesses like bipolar disorder and depression and sharing their experiences. That in turn prevents many people from seeking the help they need.

I hope my novel has shed a little light on schizophrenia, and prompts readers to start talking about mental illnesses. By encouraging conversations, hopefully more and more people will recognize that mental illness is a disease, like cancer or diabetes and that it's nothing to be ashamed of.

There are a lot of great people and great organizations that mental health consumers and their loved ones can turn to for information, resources and support. I've listed the ones I found most helpful when researching schizophrenia and the impacts it has on people along with their URLs. Many of these organizations have local chapters that offer support groups, meetings, and face-to-face conversations, and many address all types of mental illnesses.

The great thing about the internet is that you can access information from any part of the globe. The not-so-great thing is that web addresses, as well as organizations and associations, can and do

change. While these addresses were current in May, 2014, if you find a link no longer works, please email me at terri@terrimorgan.net so I can update this information. If you know of an organization that's not included, please send me information as well.

NOTES

- National Alliance on Mental Illness <http://nami.org>
- Schizophrenia Society of Canada www.schizophrenia.ca
- Sane Australia www.sane.org
- Rethink Mental Illness www.rethink.org
- Mental Health America www.mentalhealthamerica.net
- National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression www.narsad.org
- Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America www.sardaa.org
- Embracing My Mind www.emmnc-recovery.org
- Psych Central online resources <http://psychcentral.com>
- Mental Health Association Australia www.mentalhealth.org.au

- International Schizophrenia Foundation www.orthomed.org/isf/isf.html
- SZ Magazine www.mentalwellnesstoday.com
- Compeer www.compeer.org
- National Institute of Mental Health www.nimh.nih.gov
- <http://.schizophrenia.com> An online community providing information, education, support and forums
- Bring Change 2 Mind (working to end the stigma and discrimination) www.bringchange2mind.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terri Morgan is a longtime freelance writer, author and journalist from California's Central Coast. She has written or co-authored nine books. *The Genetic Lottery* is her first novel. She can be reached at terri@terrimorgan.net.

An advocate for reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness, she shares information about new research, treatment methods, discoveries and medications on twitter: <http://twitter.com/soquelterri>

She also blogs about mental illness at <http://terrimorgan.net/terris-blog.html>