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Pink Lemonade

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Love. Sacrifice. Devotion. People wander through their ordinary lives believing these things don’t exist; but, as your final breath escapes your lips you realize they do. And like that, you are saved.

A marriage ripped apart by countless hospitalizations and numerous suicide attempts is transcended by a primal instinct to survive. The relationship between my grandmother and grandfather has been my single greatest influence in life. The moment that defines their impact on me occurred twenty years before I was born.

High school sweethearts, Bill Allen and Evelyn Kidwell married at the age of eighteen in an apple orchard a week before he shipped out with the navy. Through the course of the next sixty-five years, the marriage would produce seven kids, ten grandkids, and countless pets. It would seem this true blue American family was living the dream. Too bad nightmares are dreams too.

The events that unfolded in the fall of 1972 changed the course of the family’s life. Two years prior to the horrific events, my grandmother was hospitalized after a major psychotic episode and diagnosed with manic-depression (more commonly known as bipolar disorder). For decades, the story was told through a scar that is deeply carved into Evelyn’s arm.

I was seven when I first noticed the thin, pink flesh that ran up my grandma’s arm. Being the curious little kid I was, I asked my mom about it, and after four or five tries, she finally told me the awful truth.

It was fall 1972, and my mother was in the third grade, my uncle one year ahead, and my aunt one year behind. They would walk home during lunch every day. Yet, unlike any other day, this day would change their lives forever. They got home and my mother and her brother immediately went to fix lunch. My Aunt Leslie went to find my grandmother.

When Leslie entered the bedroom that day she saw something that no child should ever see. She found her own mother in a pool of blood with her stomach ripped open by a gunshot.
My mother describes the next twenty-four hours as a blur. My uncle took charge of the situation and moved her and my aunt to the neighbor’s house. He called 911 and stayed with my grandmother until the ambulance arrived. Word spread like wildfire, but my grandfather was one of the last to get the news. He immediately went to the hospital.

It is here that the defining moment of my grandparents’ influence can be found, not only in the actions of the day, but in the actions that took place as the years went on and they struggled with a new, unpredictable life.

My grandfather was an alcoholic, but when this terrifying gift came into the family, he realized his selfishness and quit drinking. Forty years he has sacrificed for my grandmother, and she to her best ability has tried to live a normal life as a loving mother and grandmother. Actions like these are the air in the lungs of the animals that seek to break down the walls that restrict and define us. An action that chooses love, regardless of a condition or diagnosis.

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During my sophomore year, my world turned upside down. For sixteen years there had been a sickness growing inside of me. One that made a heaven of hell and a hell of heaven. It was first diagnosed as major depressive disorder. It was a misdiagnosis, but that’s what my dumbass doctor said when he put me on a little blue pill called Zoloft. Soon after, I started to experience delusions and hallucinations, also known as psychosis. I made impulsive decisions that I’m still regretting, like quitting the drama club and joining debate. Smoke alarms began to talk to me. In my head, everyone was out to get me.

Turns out I’m bipolar, and unfortunately, it often takes a period of psychosis to discover this. I have an unseen and unspoken connection to my grandmother and what happened nearly forty-five years ago. While she and I are in different mental states, we both know that there is no such thing as a normal day. But I, being myself (and that self beholden to medicine, therapy, and the choice to love unconditionally), can say better us than you.
Life is hard. Mental illnesses suck, I’m not going to lie, but like everything else they cannot be defined by stereotypes or stigmas. I have ventured to the limitless corners of the mind, the place where you draw your last breath. Deep. Slow. Realizing that what goes unseen—love, sacrifice, devotion—is worth living for, and what you see is not.

And like that, you are saved.