

OMEGA

The onset of my severe, treatment resistant Bipolar I Disorder occurred during college. Although I had always been a moody kid, the catatonic depressions and psychotic manias didn't surface until I was in my early twenties.

But once the disorder did surface, I found myself going through dozens of unsuccessful medication trials, going in and out a revolving door of psychiatric hospitalizations due to suicide attempts, self-harm behaviors, and psychotic episodes when I saw people's faces melting like atom bomb victims on the street, or dead cows hanging from telephone poles on a deserted Kansas highway.

Over the years, I was in some private hospitals, such as New York Hospital or Lennox Hill. But I also wound up in public hospitals such as Bellevue and Beth Israel. Although some of the psych wards were cleaner or had better food, ultimately most of them were similar. Warehouses for lost souls who had nowhere else to go.

Every hospital had the same intake routine. A staff member patted me down for contraband, and perused my luggage for banned items such as razor blades, mouthwash, or shoelaces. Then my belongings were put in a cardboard box, and I was escorted to a ward, usually with a sign on the door that read, "Elopement Risk." At first, I thought this meant that patients might get married.

But after a couple of hospitalizations, I began having difficulty functioning outside a hospital setting at all. I became so accustomed to sitting around in Day Rooms in my pajamas and slippers, eating packaged graham crackers and standing in line for medication, that taking care of myself in the "real world" became a challenge.

After almost twenty years of this, just when I was starting to accept the fact that I would never have a “normal” life, that I was doomed to be in and out of hospitals forever, until I finally succeeded in killing myself, my doctor found a medication that worked for me.

It has made me gain weight, like many psychiatric drugs. It makes me drool, and it takes away my sex drive. But I take it faithfully, and have the monthly blood tests required for the pharmacist to dispense it to me. Because I finally have a shot at learning how to live in the “real world” again.

I have gotten married, and have a successful relationship for the first time. I have found my calling working in the animal shelter field. And I have begun writing about my journey.

Ten years after starting on the Clozaril, ten years after my last hospitalization to date, I registered to go to the Omega Institute in upstate New York for a writing workshop.

I carefully packed my bag, leaving out items I was used to having confiscated such as razors or shoelaces.

“You’re not going to a psych ward,” my husband laughed. “They’re not going to take that stuff away from you.”

Still, despite his opinion, I wasn’t convinced. When I got off the bus at Omega, I brought my bag to the hippie yoga chick in the welcoming office and expected her to look through it.

“Welcome!” she said, and she put my bag, unopened, on a cart to be taken to my dorm.

I wandered around the grounds. Gophers munched on lettuce in the organic garden. Rabbits hopped along trails. Deer were at the edge of the woods.

I changed into my swimsuit and put my toe in the lake. It was cold, but I dove in and swam out to the middle of the water to warm up. I lay on my back, the water enveloping me like a velvet blanket. I floated there, looking up at the impossibly blue sky.

And I heard a voice say out loud, “You’re not on a psych ward anymore.”

It took me a moment to realize, the voice was mine.