

Taylor Aussiker
Rainy Day

Sometimes it seems to me that my sister and I can truly solve the world's problems together. Or at least our family's problems. Recently, she and I went to a popular Mexican restaurant in Littleton, New Hampshire, where we spent hours discussing the newest development in the family: our mother had been prescribed with Wellbutrin.

"I knew her anxiety was getting out of control," Tonia confided, her eyes shining with her love of the brain or her concern for Mom, or both. "But having a professional confirm it makes it even more real." Mom had recently started seeing a counselor to help her with her anxiety. The Wellbutrin was supposed to help in this endeavor, but not much had changed. My sister tells me that the official diagnosis is severe obsessive compulsive disorder. She's the psychologist in the family, so her opinion is gold when it comes to Mom's mental condition.

Mom called on Tonia's cell phone as we ate our enormous burritos, and Tonia became visibly tense as she answered the phone. I didn't have to hear the other end of the line to know that Mom was panicking about me driving home in the dark, even on a perfectly clear, summery night. This was only mild panic, nothing like some of the major episodes that occurred during our childhood.

"She never calls me unless I'm with you," Tonia admitted after hanging up the phone. "She never comes to see me unless you're there. She has such a weird, unhealthy attachment to you. I'd love to know what that's about." She always wants to know. I never want to know.

Most of my childhood exists as a blur in my memory, and most of my memories exist in mental compartments according to where we lived at the time. Some of my memories I've repressed altogether because of some unpleasant event that I didn't want to remember. Not that my childhood was horrible, but it strikes me that I simply can't remember most of it. Tonia remembers almost all of it. She'll tell me about people that we used to know in Bradford, or some odd family in Cabot. She'll tell me about the time that Dad said he saw signs of mental illness in our mother soon after they married. I don't remember any of this, but one event stands out in stark contrast to the happy memories of my childhood, which I shared with Tonia that night over dinner. It was the day my mother stopped the car in the middle of the road one morning on the way to school.

The day drizzled over Betty, our family's worn out, miserable Ford Focus. The sun tried to rise through the clouds over that forlorn morning as Mom drove me to school. Being in her company was like walking on broken glass; every step was dangerous, every word uttered was a potential landmine. I was attempting to talk to her the whole drive just to initiate a pleasant conversation that had nothing to do with my sister, but Mom didn't answer. She didn't even acknowledge that I was speaking to her. Her eyes glazed over like the dull eyes of a porcelain doll. She drove on autopilot, and when even that much effort failed her, she took her foot off the gas and let the car coast. The car seemed to roll ever so slowly for

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

miles as it gradually came to a stop. She didn't press the break. She didn't even pull over. She just let the car come to a stop as she stared over the steering wheel into the fog ahead.

The lump in my chest that I'd learned to ignore started to rise into my throat. Here was another episode, another moment in our lives when Mom couldn't handle the fact that she was no longer in control of Tonia. I tried to pull her out of her stupor. It was a quiet road in the tiny town of Lyndonville, but it was still unsettling to sit in a stopped car in the middle of the road, especially with my unpredictable mother behind the wheel.

"Mom, you've let the car stop," I tried. "You gotta push the gas." She put the car in park and turned to look at me.

"How do you feel about this?" she asked through her glassy eyes. Her question was so vague, but I knew she was talking about Tonia.

"What do you mean?" I hesitated. "I'm fine."

"You're fine? Your sister ran away and is shacking up with her irresponsible boyfriend, and you're fine?" Her volume was rising steadily. She was becoming hysterical. I could see the tears pooling in her eyes. "It doesn't bother you that she did this to you?"

Tonia hadn't run away. Well, in a sense she had. But in truth, she was simply visiting her boyfriend of many years on summer break from college in Pittsburgh. She was an adult, and she had every right to spend her vacation with Alex. But our family knew that the real reason she left was to get away from Mom.

A few days before Tonia left, Mom had backed her in the corner of the basement, screaming at her that she was an ungrateful daughter. I had stayed up in the kitchen, unsure of my role in this battle. Tonia was sobbing and unable to escape Mom's wrath. I just stood by the sink, arms wrapped around myself, feeling utterly useless. Tonia left the house that night to stay with a friend, as Mom continued to yell that she was a horrible daughter. A couple of days later, Tonia's friends whisked her away in her maroon Mitsubishi to Alex's loving arms in Pittsburg, leaving our family in shambles as Mom broke down.

Mom raged for weeks, alternately verbally assaulting Dad and screaming at her mother, Mimi, on the phone, accusing her of siding with Tonia when she admitted to knowing Tonia's plan. I didn't ask for anything in those three weeks that Tonia was gone. I didn't spend more time with Mom than I needed to. School was an oasis, in which I delved deeper into my European history and English lit homework just to pretend there was no problem.

Dad didn't have the spine for such conflict. When Mom yelled at him, he called Alex and yelled at him. When Alex hung up on him, he called Tonia to yell at her. Nobody talked to me during this time, except Tonia via instant message, who apologized for my unfortunate situation. I didn't blame her. It wasn't her fault. I knew she had to get out.

I went to school and joked about the situation with my friends. They all chalked it up to my Mom's eccentricities, since she was known for panicking when she couldn't control a situation. I would laugh about

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

the whole matter, saying “it’s World War III in the Aussiker house.” But it didn’t feel like a joke in my head.

At eighteen years old, my mother was engaged to my father. Her parents told her they would pay for her college tuition or for her wedding, but they couldn’t pay for both. She chose to marry my father, even though she had already been accepted at Champlain College. Her decision to marry my dad was not out of love for him, but out of fear of living alone, of having to be an adult and take care of herself. College would mean having to make her own decisions, cook for herself, pay for things on her own. Marriage, in her mind, would mean having someone do that for her for the rest of her life.

By the time she was twenty-four, my mother had a husband, a full-time job, a mortgage, two car payments, and two children. Her best friend, Tonya, had died shortly after giving birth, shortly after my sister was born with the same name and a different spelling. I imagine my parents’ marriage began to decline at this point. They kept things together well enough for Tonia and me, although it’s likely that I simply can’t remember things falling apart around us, as I seem to have forgotten most of everything else.

In the car that drizzly morning, I didn’t know how to answer Mom’s question. Tonia hadn’t done anything to me. She ran away for her own safety, to protect herself. I wanted to tell Mom that I was upset about her, that she was using me as her sounding board for her own loss of control. I wanted to tell her that her behavior with me, her teenage daughter, was inappropriate. But I could never say that.

Instead I said no, it didn’t bother me that Tonia had done this. She was my sister; I respected her decisions and I loved her. Mom responded the way she had to Tonia, telling me that I was an inconsiderate daughter and a terrible sister, that I should want her to come home because she had caused such chaos for our family. I let her rage, but it only angered her more that I didn’t respond to her.

Eventually, she put the car in drive and drove hastily to the high school. Her eyes were still dull and vacant. The rain stopped, but Mom let the windshield wipers continue to wipe at nothing. I could tell it was still raining in her head, as it always was, the storm clouds forming almost visibly over her head. I went to class and allowed the conflict to melt away into the comforting brick walls of my school, more of a home to me than anywhere else.