Piles of bills strewn upon tables among bottles and bottles of pills. Putters of a car sliding away in the middle of the night. Soft sobs from behind closed doors. This was my upbringing. Growing up, my parents seemed constantly concerned about something furtive. Never the kind of person to let questions go unanswered, I was incapable of overlooking the mystery surrounding me. Though my attempts to decipher the cause of my parents' actions were numerous and determined, they were unsuccessful. I spent my childhood so curious about the events that were occurring in my household that, once I finally ascertained the true cause of these occurrences, the information I discovered was a let-down. The reality is that my father has Bipolar Disorder.

My father's disorder means that his mind has only two settings: sluggishly passive and violently angry. No one ever knows what mentality to expect from him, including himself. My life has been filled with his terrifying behavioral episodes, created by his inability to control his state of mind. This disorder has terrorized his psyche for seventeen years, since the very year I was born; I have always lived in the same home as my mentally ill father. Discovering the truth of his illness was not a shock but, rather, a much awaited explanation. I suddenly learned the reason that I was often home alone with my father; my mother has worked extra hours for years because my father cannot work at all. I also learned the reason that I was an only child; my mother has never had the time or money to care for my father and multiple children. Of all the things I suddenly knew about my family’s situation, I had an immensely difficult time dealing with one particular repercussion of my father’s condition: Bipolar Disorder is hereditary. The prospect of what I feared was my own imminent fate, a future defiled with the presence of
near-insanity, tore me up inside. With the threat of my own genes being all too similar to my father's, attaining the happy future I had always imagined for myself suddenly seemed impossible. This, in combination with the constant whirlwind of living with a mentally ill parent, had a profoundly negative effect on me. I felt isolated and became a painfully shy child as a result.

Once in high school, I decided to throw myself into school-life in an attempt to take my mind off of the constant conflict within my family. Fortunately, it absolutely worked. I stayed after-school each day for any clubs and sports available, in order to prolong my time away from home as much as possible. Academics became a miraculous thing for me. While a desire to learn had not been my original motivation, I became truly interested in learning. Slowly, I began to focus on my education. Getting involved in my school allowed me to have real friends to talk to, work to spend my time on, and inspiring ideas to fill my mind. The constant drive of curiosity that had pushed me through childhood returned, replacing the dull roar of sadness that had been dragging me for too long.

I have grown to accept that my father’s Bipolar Disorder, like many other elements of life, is something simply out of my control. While his disorder has been challenging for my family, it is undeniable that positive things have come out of our difficulty. Though I can never be certain of what the future will hold, I have realized my own personal strength in dealing with whatever comes my way. If it had not been for my father’s illness, I may have never been able to learn this about myself. I understand that true strength is a product of hardship. My future no longer feels like an impending doom as it once did but, instead, a lifetime of development in which I continue to shape myself. I have formed my motivations and aspirations under stigmas
different from those of most individuals, yet my accomplishments and dreams are far from stifled. Though Bipolar Disorder runs in my family, I choose not to let that define me. I am so much more than the daughter of a disabled man or the child of a low-income family. Looking in the mirror as a child I used to wonder who it was looking back at me. Looking in the mirror today I see a fighter—I see myself.