



Saving Millie: A Daughter's Story of Surviving Her Mother's Schizophrenia

Tina Kotulski

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Many evenings, Millie Smiley would suddenly have a desire to run to the local store for provisions for making fudge and for TV dinners. Author Kotulski, her daughter, speaks of these times as strangely comforting and yet simultaneously laced with volatile upheaval for her and her sister Susan. They never knew when Millie's demeanor would suddenly plunge into fits of rage or into silent withdrawal: "The periods when our mother's rage would subside were rare, yet they remain vivid to me. When she was calm, we savored her laughter, her jokes, and the relief from the tension that haunted our daily lives." Kotulski says her sister bore the brunt of Millie's anger more than she, for Tina played the comedian, the clown, and the appeaser. Though the girls had a father living nearby, he never was able to take command of the situation enough to remove his daughters from the abusive household.

As the youngest of two children, Kotulski recalls her early life with a mother whose unpredictability destroyed any chance at normalcy for her and her sister's childhood. Kotulski details life in Hinsdale, a Chicago suburb, where the upper middle class neighbors shied away from Tina and her family. Even Millie's own mother and extended relatives, dismayed and understandably afraid of her sometimes-violent outbursts and physical attacks, remained somewhat apart and thus enabled Millie's injurious behavior upon the girls. Susan eventually moved into her father's home and Tina was left emotionally inconsolable while Millie played the innocent martyr. Tina's adolescence was further impacted by her attempted suicide, psychiatric treatment, and rocky transition to adulthood when she tried to make sense of her family's impact on her emotional well-being.

Kotulski is a speaker on mental illness at national conferences, seminars, health care centers, schools, and community centers as well as advocate in the Daughters and Sons of Persons with Mental Illness. She tells her family's story of discovering and dealing with her mother's schizophrenia. This memoir is heart wrenching in its honesty and Kotulski's rendition of life with a mentally ill parent clearly reveals how far-reaching the pain can be. Kotulski's style is simple, straightforward, and presented with ease as she details her troubled early life from one juncture to the next. The only nagging question readers will have is why didn't someone intervene and protect Kotulski and her sister earlier on? Overall, the author succeeds marvelously in depicting life with a mentally ill parent. Readers will appreciate the author's candor and applaud her courage and tenacious spirit.

MICHELE HOWE (April 10, 2007)

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