

"Mel's Story"



SECTION 1

OUR MEL - PART ONE

Our beloved Melissa, (Mel), came into our lives on 23rd August 1983.

Mel was the second of our three children.

Mel, and her brothers, enjoyed what could be generally defined as a "normal" family upbringing in the Sutherland Shire of Sydney. There were many, many happy family gatherings and celebrations along the way - birthday parties, Christmas's and lots of wonderful, fun filled family holidays and outings.

Of course, there were also the mandatory sibling rivalries, arguments, fights and drama filled theatrics, again, falling under the broad definition of "normality".

As a child, Mel displayed a fun loving, happy go lucky nature. With a beaming, almost cheeky smile, backed up with a raucous laugh or a giggle that reflected more than a small element of "mischief". Mel possessed a very vivacious personality.

Mel was a loving and caring little girl, always conscious and aware of others, and their needs. This was one of the many qualities Mel portrayed throughout her life, even in her darkest hours.

Mel, like her brothers, was raised and educated in the "Catholic Faith". Mel was one of those "rare beasts" who loved her school years, couldn't get enough of it. Mel never had a shortage of friends. Mel valued her close friendships very highly.

In her early years and leading up to her teens, Mel more than likely would not have been considered as "exceptional" or "outstanding" in any aspects of her life. Mel was slightly above average academically, and an average sportsperson in all sports she would participate in.

But what Mel may have lacked in "natural ability" she more than made up for with her "steely" determination and a strong competitive nature. Mel was also very "street smart" and "forward thinking".

To emphasise these qualities, her dad recalls a particular school athletics carnival when Mel was about 10 years of age. Mel entered in a middle-distance race, about 600m for children her age. Mel had never run a middle-distance race so her dad gave her a few tips on how to "stay with the pack" and conserve energy for the latter part of the race.

There were some accomplished athletes in the event, and as a result, Mel was not expected to feature anywhere near the "medal winners". The race began, about 25 athletes, and a large pack formed in a jog early in the race as expected. At about the 50m mark, Mel, all of a sudden broke into a sprint and headed well out in front of the pack. (much to her dad's dismay). This move seemed to cause some confusion and uncertainty in the "pack" but they held their ground thinking that Mel will run out of puff and fall back to the pack in due course.

After around 300m Mel had established a gap of around 40-50 metres to the other runners, and was making the gap wider with every step. The race "favourites" became aware that Mel was not faltering so they took off after her. At about the 450m mark Mel was tiring badly and her pace had dropped considerably.

The race favourites were gaining ground on Mel, but it was too late, the horse had bolted. Over the last 100m Mel ran on adrenaline and determination alone, she was spent. Mel crossed the finish line around 10 metres ahead of a fast finishing group of runners. She fell to the ground and took several minutes to recover.

Her mum and dad went over to congratulate her, and her dad asked why she chose to run that way. Mel said, *"Dad, if I had run the race the way that I was expected to run it, then I would have had no chance, so I thought I would do the "unexpected" and see what happens"*. Quintessential Mel.

Mel could never be classed a "non-conformist", more an "individualist" and proudly wore the tag given to her by her mum as "miss independent".

Whether it related to fashion, music or the "philosophy of life" Mel was certainly her own person, never a follower, and cared little for how that might be perceived by others.

As Mel passed through her early teens and beyond, her "levels of achievement", both academically and in the sporting arena, escalated rapidly. Mel was now a "high achiever" in all aspects of her life.

Whilst we put this down to the careful "execution" of her many qualities and skills, history now unveils that there were other, more prominent "motivational factors" in Mel's quest for success.

Mel began hearing "voices" at the age of 14, the result of a terrifying traumatic event she had endured. None of her family nor close friends, or anyone for that matter, were aware of the voices nor the trauma Mel had suffered. She carried that burden on her own for many years.

Mel topped her form in year 10 at school, a wonderful milestone that everyone, excepting Mel, thought was an outstanding achievement.

It was at this time that Mel began to change. She became unsettled, isolating and developed severe mood swings. Whilst her family tried to convince themselves that this was just "the pressures of life" for a 16 year old girl, deep down there was a real concern as to what was happening to our Mel.

Mel's eating habits became very sporadic, and she developed an "obsession" around her looks and particularly her weight. Mel decided to become a vegetarian, and very soon it was evident that Mel had an "eating problem"

After many family "chats" and arguments, Mel finally agreed to seek help and got a referral to a psychiatrist who specialised in "eating disorders"

Mel attended half a dozen consultations and declared that she was done with that and wanted to just get on with her life.

In years 11 and 12 Mel buried herself in her studies in preparation for her HSC exams. Her mood swings and demeanour were still very prominent and it was an extremely "sensitive" and "emotional" roller coaster ride for us all.

Mel completed her schooling in early November 2001, her HSC year. With the exams completed, it seemed that a load had been lifted off Mel's mind and she appeared (temporarily) happy and content.

A group of her close friends went out to celebrate the night the exams finished, and when dad picked them up late that evening, there was much laughter and frivolity amongst the group. But, alas, it was to be short lived.

The following day brought the heart-breaking news that one of Mel's closest school friends had taken his life, the very night the others were out celebrating.

This was devastating for all the year 12 group. A time of happiness and celebration had turned into a period of sorrow and despair.

It was at this point that Mel's whole life changed dramatically. Mel developed a toughened exterior which pervade an air of anger, solemnness and emptiness. She reluctantly attended the year 12 "schoolies" week on a cruise, but the feedback from her friends was that she rarely left her room or joined in on any of the activities.

The school took the decision to hold the end of year "formal" but it was a very docile and sombre event for all.

Over the ensuing weeks Mel became more isolated and unresponsive.

The HSC results arrived and Mel had achieved an outstanding result. We hoped this would be the tonic to give her the lift she so badly needed. But the result was met by a response of indifference.

When the UAI (university admission index) scores were released, Mel was working a part time job and asked her dad to go on line and get her result. Her father recalls ringing Mel at work to inform her of her results. Mel had achieved a score of 97.75, a score that earned her the "dux of the school" award. Her dad remembers that he was choked up with emotion, and when he rang and told her the result, her response was, "Really? ok, well thank God that's over with, see ya". Again, everyone applauded this outstanding achievement, everyone except Mel.

The 29th January 2002 was a date forever entrenched in the minds of her family and close friends. At around 12.30am that Monday morning, we were awoken by a knock at the door. There stood four of Mel's close friends. They apologised for the "late visit" but asked "Is Mel alright, we have been getting some strange messages?"

Rushing to her bedroom we discovered that Mel had taken a large overdose of a variety of medications and was barely conscious. Together with her friends, we rushed Mel to the local hospital emergency. They pumped her stomach and Mel was out of any immediate danger.

Words cannot express the feeling of the realisation that someone you love so dearly, our precious daughter, sister and friend, had tried to end her life.

And so began Mel's long journey on the "mental health merry go round".

Long, extended stays in numerous public and private "institutions" became the norm, some of which were "terrifying" for any human to have to endure and experience. Endless cocktails of anti depressants, mood stabilisers and anti psychotic medications were Mel's "staple diet". Many sessions of ECT (electro convulsive therapy) were agreed to and undertaken on the "promise" from mental health professionals that it would "get rid of the voices and improve her level of depression". The only thing it

achieved was wiping out a large chunk of Mel's memory. Mel was now truly entrenched in the world of "mental illness"

Ironically, in the "2001 year book" produced by the year 12 students in Mel's form, was an article captioned " person most likely to succeed", under which stood the name "Melissa Roberts".

In January 2005 Mel put together her own very personal and vivid account of her "journey" to that point in time in her life.

Mel titled the story "**Limbo - A Story of Depression**"

It is compelling reading of the intimate details of her thoughts and feelings.

We move now to section two of "Mel's Story":

"Limbo - A Story of Depression"

SECTION 2
LIMBO: A Story of Depression
(by Melissa Roberts)

10th Jan 2005

I want to die! I want to leave this black world of mine behind. I want to disappear, feel better, or for something to change in some way. I want life or death, not this limbo shit in between.

Imagine that you are driving along a country road. No other cars are in sight and despite a few bumps along the road; you are enjoying a carefree ride. Bang! You suddenly hit a brick wall. You feel as though your life has ended and it very nearly has.

This journey for me is like the journey of depression. Throughout this story I will be attempting to describe my experiences of depression. This in itself is a very difficult thing to do as many of my memories are blurred and it is difficult to admit some of the not-so-normal thoughts, which I have had. I do not endeavour to define depression, as every bout of depression is individual and unique to its sufferer.

I will however try to make you see that you are not alone, there is help and there is hope for a better life, a concept which I am still discovering myself.

Chapter 1

I was always a relatively reserved and shy child. I did not have any significant mental problems. I did, however suffer from severe headaches from years four till five. I had every test under the sun to discover the cause of my symptoms.

But, no matter what tests or treatment I had, nothing worked. I even went as far as to have hypnotherapy. To this day I am not certain as to whether these were stress or anxiety-related. The headaches did subside and I went on to lead a comparatively full and normal life for a girl living in the Sutherland Shire.

I did respectable at school; I participated in sports such as tennis and athletics and had entertaining and pleasant friends throughout my childhood. I definitely had problems but it was the twentieth century.

As I grew older, I became increasingly sensitive towards my world and those accompanying it. Whether it was an odd glance in my direction or a snide remark, I would obsess upon it until I was convinced that the world was against me. I never really acknowledged that it was a problem until my eleventh year at school. Despite this I noticed that others didn't take everything said so literally and that they were much less receptive to criticism.

My obsessions metamorphosed into paranoia. I was convinced that the world, and everybody within it, despised me; almost as much as I despised myself.

My life revolved around pleasing others, gaining their acceptance and hiding my true self from society. I felt that in order to be happy, I had to make others happy. I also felt that the only way to please others was pure perfection. I began to build a shell, an asylum where I could live without the judgment of others.

On the exterior I appeared content, intelligent and social. Inside, I concealed my veritable emotions and self. I had unsuccessfully built what I saw as the perfect person. Little did I know that many saw through my mask.

I now see that my depression actually developed in my early teens. Whilst sifting through some old school assignments I came across this piece which I wrote “through the eyes” of somebody with depression.

I was fourteen when I wrote this poem and although I wouldn't admit it at the time, I think it clearly depicted my depressive frame of mind.

Depression by Melissa Roberts

*Humane, sentiment, deep, meaningful,
Yet, who or what has concern for my being?
I am the self-comforter, the self-listener to my woes,
As trouble reins those close to me evaporate.*

*I am a person, yet those around me neglect,
Tossing around my very emotions
Disdain or isolation? Take your pick,
I am but a fragile soul used as a target for mockery.*

*The days all run into each other,
By a mixture of scorn and noise.
Into a constant nightmare relieved only by sleep,
Ahhh! Sleep, my only escapism.*

*To wish for eternal sleep is to wish for death,
But is death such a torrid thing?
The loss of a life is a minor price to pay,
For eternal peace and serenity.*

*I long for tranquillity, a retreat from this hostility,
To stroll along amicably where man has never been.*

*For places no-one has ever fought or sobbed,
A place to join in sync with God.*

*I long for a sanctuary from wars between peers,
A place where society understands,
Where families are in eternal peace,
A place where you don't have to be something, you just have to be.*

*All around me people derive joy from life,
I look around and think- how?
How is life full of joy?
Fighting- our world which consists of mutiny.*

*I writhe in pain- inside,
I cry for help from the bottom of my heart.
I beg for someone to ask, to care,
For someone to realise I am here, a person.*

*And yet the world keeps spinning,
I am but a mere speck of dust on a desert.
I am the grey hair on a middle-aged mum;
Not needed, not wanted, and certainly not loved.*

*I have no sense of life, or love,
But the destruction of my self-esteem.
Do I deserve such mortality?
Let me out, let me escape, let me die.*

*I am the very picture of destruction,
Born as an angel; innocent and fresh.*

*Scarred with life and its fatal flaws,
Doomed to be alone, forsaken.*

*No! I don't want your pity,
I don't want your amateur psychoanalysis.
I want to be loved. I want a purpose,
I want to live life as it was meant to be lived.*

*Society, culture and those close to me,
Have ruined any chance of life.
My life has turned upside down into abhorrence,
So, I do have the need to escape, for eternal peace.*

*And eternal peace is what I will get,
No more mockery, any more pain.
For I don't belong here in this world,
But belong in peace, serenity for eternity.*

*Death, by its nature is known as doom,
To me, death resembles sleep.
Sleep is peace, a retreat,
A sanctuary from this otherwise cruel world.*

Sleep is peace. Sleep is death. Death is peace.

Surprisingly, my teacher did not recognise this very obvious cry for help. His comments at the bottom of my assignment read:

*Your creativity and knowledge of the subject is clearly evident. A pleasure to read.
Very thought provoking. 19/20*

Chapter 2

I wanted desperately for somebody to fill me with a sense of wellbeing and love. It was only explained to me recently that I was the only person that could fill that hole. I felt like I was holding an empty wine-glass, just waiting for it to be filled, little did I know that I held the bottle to fill this very glass.

Despite acknowledging this, I still yearn for someone to rid this emptiness for me. I want and wanted for somebody to wrap me up in a blanket, cuddle me and tell me that everything was going to be alright. I wanted somebody else to take responsibility for my security and my happiness.

I was fourteen at the time I first had auditory hallucinations, which I, and most of society, refer to as ‘voices’. At the time it didn’t cross my mind that what I was ‘hearing’ was a voice, it was simply ‘Ron’, a friend. I clearly remember sitting in the school toilets at lunchtime, in year 8, and hearing a voice. It was a male voice and was clear as a bell. I must admit, I freaked! What was a man doing in the girl's toilets?

The first word that came out of Ron’s mouth was simply “Hi”. Once I searched the toilets and realised that no man was actually there, I dismissed it. I thought that I was imagining things.

Soon, Ron’s presence became more frequent and I accepted him as a friend. I did think that I was a little old to be having imaginary friends but it was the only explanation that my mind could comprehend. I have never admitted this to anyone before but it was actually kind of nice to have my own secret friend. And at the self-conscious age of fourteen any friendship was a welcome one.

Like many girls in their early teens, I changed groups and friend's a number of times. I use the word friends very loosely as at this age it is not uncommon for your best friend to turn into your worst enemy at the flick of a switch. I did meet one girl, whom I am still very close to.

She and I had a great deal of fun both in and out of school. Some of this was harmless fun, but we were also quite mischievous. So mischievous in fact that we were often in trouble with school staff and I was labelled a “princess”, a label, which has followed me through to, even, today.

Being a bright student, capable athlete and a reasonably popular peer I experienced a great deal of pressure. Whether these pressures or expectations were mine alone, I am not certain. Nevertheless, they were there. This is where and possibly why my depression and destructive behaviours began.

Because of my ‘potential’, I hid my pain and behaved in a fashion befitting somebody of my background.

*“I’m a puppet of society; my face is a mere mask,
Perfection in the morning, noon and night is quite a task.
I’m baffled by the heights of standards set by you,
I simply don’t know what to say, not even what to do.*

*Each and everything I say seems like one big mistake,
Trouble, confusion and anarchy are all I manage to make.
This outer trouble however, cannot compare to that of my head,
I know I’m hell to be around, however easily I tread.*

*No matter how hard I try, I could not, in this life, be,
The kind those like to be around, the opposite of me.
Why are people un-eager, to love and befriend I?
Why can’t I reach this perfection, it doesn’t matter how hard I try.*

*I’m going to end this poem, as half-assed as it is,
Just keep in mind I try, as pointless as it ‘tis.”*

Chapter 3

By my final year of school, it was quite obvious to myself, and those I held dearest, that all was not well. In all actuality, life was not only imperfect it was hell. I began to sink deeper and deeper into my little world of self-hatred and despair. This hurt was, at the time, expressed in the form of anorexia.

I believed that I did not deserve to eat. I realise now, that this was a form of self-harm; a subject I began to learn all too much about.

I began to visit pro-suicide and pro-anorexia websites, which fuelled my agony. At the time, they made me feel less alone, however looking back, they were certainly not beneficial. This is when my obsessions of death became a fixation. I wanted to die and planned to after the HSC was completed.

Little did I know that I was not the only person with such a plan. Although upset at the death of a friend, I was also, selfishly, upset at my plans being foiled, for the time being.

My year coordinator (at school) was referred to, by the students, as 'Babs'. She was not necessarily the first person to notice the change, but she was certainly the most significant in the initial stages of my recovery. After her original interest in me, I set about writing Babs a letter concerning my eating disorder. I had no idea what I wanted from her, or even why I had written the letter.

To this day, I cannot remember what the letter said or even meant. Looking back, I realise that my asking for help was a very positive step towards healing. After the letter was read, Babs took a strong interest in my physical wellbeing. Little did she know that my mental well being was a superior issue.

As the weeks went by, I sank and sank. My life revolved around studying and fantasising about my death. This was the time when Ron's voice developed from a friendly, and somewhat positive, influence to a negative one. He would enlighten me with negative and rather confusing messages. The following remarks stand out in my mind as some of the most frequent and disturbing:

"It's your fault. They are trying to kill you. If you lied we could be free, you would be able to end the pain forever."

"Come on. End the pain. Kill yourself. I know you want to."

"Nobody wants to be near you, you're a disease, a burden. Nobody wants to help you, do NOT trust them."

"Nobody will miss you, nobody would even notice if you were gone".

"Don't speak. Don't look at people. They are watching, spying."

"Cut yourself. It will stop the pain."

"You're not welcome here, you're different. Disappear from the world. Go to a better place, a place where you will be accepted."

"Hide. Everybody's looking at you. They can see the real you. They are repulsed."

"They are coming for you. They are coming".

"Don't talk to your parents. Don't let them see".

This negative speak induced self-harm behaviours such as cutting. My 'cutting' began with a few scratches on the tops of my thighs. As I discovered the rush that one got

from self-harming I began to increase both the severity and the frequency of this behaviour. I cherished the sight of blood.

The messier the cut was the better. Recently, whilst weighing up the options of burning and cutting, I was indecisive as to which outweighed the other. While cutting was the most visually satisfying, burning was a great deal more painful.

I thought that nobody had noticed the self-harm until Babs uttered five simple words. "I know you're not well".

These scary and meaningful words were spoken with such incredible empathy and understanding. I felt that I could finally trust somebody. I felt that maybe the entire world wasn't against me. Despite my protests Babs convinced me to visit my local GP. With her company and support I survived this visit and left with a prescription for an antidepressant called Zoloft.

Unfortunately, I was not entirely honest with my GP and hence, he was unable to see the full extent of my 'disorder'.

It was unknown to me that my parents were also aware of my problems. This was not evident until they sat me down one day, held my hand and said, "Darling, we know something is wrong". As soon as these words were muttered I ran away for a week. I did not want to confront my problems. If I admitted them, they would become more realistic.

I wanted to escape... so I did. Little did I know that I had a network of people looking out for me. I had the school councillor, school principle, friends and family friends, all keeping a watchful eye on me.

One positive feature of this year was the special friendships that I formed with four girls in particular. These girls saved my life. I still consider them my best friends and I'm sure that this extraordinary bond will carry on for the rest of our lives.

Throughout the following two months, I wholly lost my will to live. These months were supposed to be the best of my life, with the completion of my Higher School Certificate, graduation and the renowned 'Schoolies Week'. I couldn't bring myself to attend, let alone enjoy, many of the celebrations that occurred. I was empty, alone and felt that the only way to achieve peace was through death

Chapter 4

It was January 2002 when I finally decided to follow through with my desire. What pushed me over the edge was an argument with somebody whom was, at the time, a close friend. This argument confirmed my fears, that they, meaning all my supposed 'loved ones', despised me.

I overdosed on the nearest available drugs, a combination of paracetamol and Zoloft. After I was 'discovered' I was taken to the emergency department of Sutherland Hospital. Here, my entire memory consists of failure. I did not want to wake up. I wanted to die.

It was such an incredible disappointment to wake up in the same world in which I thought I had left. Once stabilised, I was taken to the Children's Ward of the same hospital, where I remained for ten days.

I was extremely intimidated by the Doctor who was responsible for me. He would pose at the end of my rickety hospital bed, posed like a psychiatrist would in a second rate film. He would sit, forefinger rested under his chin with an unreadable, blank expression on his face. Each morning, this Doctor's lackey (a Registrar) would sit and talk with me.

Through rigorous questioning, hypothetical's and educated guesses, he eventually understood me, more than anybody had ever understood me before. I felt naked yet, a little relieved.

Once discharged, I continued to see both this Registrar and his 'mentor'. After only two weeks I was readmitted to hospital after a rather careless admission of auditory and visual hallucinations. Yes! Now I was 'seeing' objects as well as hearing Ron. I was readmitted to the children's ward of Sutherland Hospital. When admitted I was reassessed and was put on a new anti-depressant as well as the first of many anti-psychotic drugs.

After six weeks, however, it was recognised that I was getting progressively worse. No drug or treatment was helping me and I fell further and further into my deranged world. I was so psychotic that the nurses feared for my safety in the comfortable surrounds of the children's ward and it was suggested that I commence ECT (Electroconvulsive therapy). After much deliberation and worry I reluctantly agreed to undergo this treatment.

I was transferred to the psychiatric ward for my own 'safety'. I feel this term is inappropriate as the surrounds were a greater danger to both my physical and mental health. My parents, in particular, feared for my safety in such an environment.

Remarkably, I was not distressed by my placement in such an unusual environment. And it was an unusual environment! The room consisted of four bare stark walls, a prison-like bed, rubber mattress and linoleum floors. The grounds were a caged-in, ten-by-ten meter, concrete jungle

Once stabilised, I was able to join the family of the Children's ward once again. This was through the perseverance of my special registrar. Here I met a wonderful group of nurses who mothered me to the extent that I almost felt at home. They were so good to me, in fact, that I was given permission to smoke in the children's playground. An action that I now realise was irresponsible, but, was at the time, a Godsend.

Throughout this admission, I underwent a total of seventeen ECT (Electro convulsive therapy) treatments. I was frightened to have ECT. I had previously read Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar". This book follows the story of a very depressed young woman

in the 1960's. In her story, she vividly depicts the process of ECT. These images were certainly not beneficial for a young girl about to undergo such treatments.

Despite my initial nerves, I grew to love the feeling of being washed over with sleep as the anaesthesia kicked in. The process was by no means similar to that depicted in "The Bell Jar". It was a quick and easy procedure, which began with that illustrious feeling and ten minutes later, I would wake up in the rather harsh surrounds of my hospital room.

Unfortunately, the treatments were unsuccessful. One of the side effects of ECT is memory loss. I regrettably lost huge chunks of my past. To this day, I am uncertain as to whether this was caused by memory loss, or by me simply blocking the memories.

When looking at the few photographs, I have of my schoolies cruise, I remember nothing. They are mere pictures of something that I thought I had never experienced.

I was dead inside, deserted in my world of emptiness. I did not care where I was; I only cared that I was. I spent my days in a haze. I do remember spending most of my days surrounded by a cloud of smoke. Unfortunately, lighters were not permitted in this hospital so we were required to light our cigarettes on a dirty box situated on the wall of the 'yard'.

After two months of a prison-like sentence, I was discharged from Sutherland Psych Ward and I was released into my parent's care. At my discharge, it was suggested to my parents that I penetrate the private health system. My parents agreed, wholeheartedly, relieved to be in 'safer' territory. It was like they were bringing their little goldfish, not back into the bowl, but at least into stiller waters.

Chapter 5

I was introduced to Southview Clinic, a private clinic containing both psychiatrists and psychologists. Over the next three years I would spend at least three hours a week at these small offices.

To begin with, I was under a male psychiatrist whom came highly recommended by my previous doctor. He was a nice man and was reasonably reassuring however his expertise was not therapy but rather medications. He suggested that I see somebody whom was more therapy based. So, again, I changed doctors.

This time, I saw a female doctor, which I thought was a sensible move. Even though I found our sessions moderately helpful, I was not entirely convinced that I was understood. I was introduced to yet another doctor due to this particular doctor's busy schedule.

It is a horrible feeling to be shifted from doctor to doctor. I became apprehensive of trusting anyone for fear that the moment I opened up, I would be abandoned again. This time was a little different however. I actually trusted her. This trust nevertheless was not established immediately. To begin with, I acted as a child; hiding my face and my feelings from her.

Despite this I later learnt that she saw through my charades and actually had a clear understanding of the torture I was experiencing. I didn't realise it at the time, but this doctor would be my saviour. I saw her three times each week and soon discovered that she was truly an angel in disguise.

Throughout the next months my mental health fluctuated severely. My moods ranged from hyper to suicidal. It was through this angel of a doctor that I was admitted to a small private hospital, Wandene, which was for individuals with mental illnesses. It was a total contrast to the hospital care I was accustomed to.

Here, I was able to sort and gather my thoughts. It was a very retreat-like environment. I met a number of individuals who suffered from similar illnesses and was comforted by the realisation that I was not alone. My days, though seemingly futile, actually provided a great deal of support through the aid of some wonderful nurses, some of whom I will never cease to forget. After nearly a month, I was released and sent out to face the dark world once again.

After a year of convalescing, I felt that I would be able to commence University. I was to begin studying psychology. What an irony! A mentally unstable individual, training, to treat those with similar afflictions. And so I began. Within a month I was again admitted to Wandene.

It seemed that I could not, after all, cope with the concentration and stress of a Uni student. I did have plans however to return to university, this time, not as a psych student but, as a student of economics.

Throughout the next two years my memory is blurred. I was admitted to Wandene on a number of occasions yet it is difficult to distinguish one hospitalisation from the next. For the duration of these hospitalisations two nurses stand out in my mind as remarkable. One of these nurses went as far as to visit me when I was last scheduled to Sutherland hospital. These two nurses had daughters of a similar age and could thus understand the mentality of a 19-20 year-old.

They talked to me about the future and gave me hope. So much hope in fact, that after one admission to Wandene, in late 2003, I experienced a very optimistic, constructive and clear period of time. I wanted to live and I enjoyed a full and relatively normal life for a few months. My anxiety decreased considerably, I was extroverted, loving and, well, almost a typical 20 year old. At this stage, I actually did return to uni and studied, as I had planned, economics. Again, I was unable to concentrate and became unwell. Although admitted to Wandene yet again, I continued my studies through correspondence for a further three months.

Chapter 6

Prior to this improved period I do remember overdosing on quite a number of occasions. Some of these overdoses were discovered and others were simply slept off. I always wondered why nobody noticed that I slept, on and off, for nearly two days straight.

I kept a record of my thoughts and feelings at this time, which I expressed in both pictures and words. I entitled it “An insight into the not-so-wonderful world of Melissa”. I warned readers:

“My mind is a whirlwind of jumbled irrational and obsessive thoughts”. Below are a few of the eerie words and phrases I used to describe my world

“I feel like I need to cry....but the tears just won't come. I just stare, struggling to ignore my existence”

“I can't sleep, but I want to... sleep will stop the thoughts... sleep is peace, my only peace”

“When I wake up in the morning, I just want to sleep some more. I can't bear the thought of facing the world”

“Little things...

Little comments...

Little situations...

Seem like a tremendous deal and I obsess over them. They are no longer “little”, they are LIFE-ALTERING”

“I'm a horrible person. Nobody could ever love me. The only love I ever see is obligatory. Nobody could ever love such a worthless person. If I can't stand me then how could anybody else ever like, let alone love me?”

Chapter 7

Times were hard and maintaining relationships was an even greater ordeal. I believe that the few friends whom have stuck by me through my years of torment are truly exceptional. I, of all people, realise just how difficult it must have been for them.

Although I always made an effort, I had a rather challenging social life. I would attempt to attend parties and join the local nightclub social set. I was riddled with anxiety, on each of these occasions. I believed that everybody was talking about me and I often had to leave the situation only a few hours into the event.

Even through this, my dearest friends stuck by me. They waited with me for my parents to pick me up, cut nights short and left parties early. I feel honoured to have such amazing people in my life.

During this period I did attempt to have a boyfriend however, I was unable to maintain a serious relationship. This was due to my unstable mental state at the time. At first I attempted to explain to him my anguish. He was unable to understand so I needed to send him a letter which would further his awareness of my illness. Below is an extract from this letter:

You are a fantastic guy and have made me very happy over the past four months. Unfortunately, as you well know, I am not very well at the moment.

Getting better and going to uni are the most important things in my life at the moment. With my illness coping with uni will take 100% of my time and energy and therefore I have nothing left for a relationship.

This has NOTHING to do with you. I also can't commit myself to a definite reunion. I don't know how long I won't be well and can't guarantee that I will ever be able to feel comfortable in a relationship. It is not fair on you to make you wait and it adds to the stress of my situation.

I know that you could make any girl fall in love with you because you are a great guy. I am so sorry if I have hurt you but please try to understand.

Alongside my friends there was a tremendous support system within my family. My parents are wonderful people whom have spent countless hours with me at hospitals, have stood guard for days when I was at my worst and most of all have shown me the unfaltering love and support that only they could provide. Outside this, my brothers and extended family have also provided the strength that I have needed to live through this illness.

Chapter 8

Life hit an all-time low in July 2004. For the next few months I was determined to harm myself in every possible way. I wanted death so badly, yet was not in the right frame of mind to plan a calculated one. I would strangle myself, put plastic bags over my head and burn myself incessantly. I would not leave my bed, let alone my room. I stopped eating and lost fifteen kilos in two months.

On the first of August I wrote a letter to my psychiatrist attempting to explain my anguish.

1st August 2004

I feel like my whole world has turned upside down. They have all got me now and I'm scared. I want to be in control, I want a life. Not that I deserve one. I pray to God every night that he will take me away to a better place.

Everybody tells me that they love and care for me. I, however, don't believe this. I feel like, at any moment, they will leave and abandon me. I'm so depressed that it feels like the world is falling down around me.

Ron won't leave me alone. He says that if I don't obey his commands then I'll go to hell. I don't want to go to hell so I listen to everything that he says. He says that I am disgusting, and I believe him.

I wish I were dead. I'm such a fat pig! If starving me is the only way to kill myself then I will starve myself to death.

Throughout these few months I was comforted only by my closest friends, my parents (whom I don't deserve), my brothers, my psychiatrist and my GP (who went from strength to strength as I became weaker and weaker). Despite this, I believed that nobody wanted to help. I assumed that they would all see the real me and leave.

On a number of occasions my doctor attempted to have me admitted to hospital. A number of hospitals felt that I was too much of a 'risk' for them to take me. I remember telling a nurse this at the beginning of my latest admission and getting a rather nervous response. I was finally accepted to Northside clinic, a hospital that I was scheduled from within six hours.

I was to return to a public hospital for my own safety. My parent's felt that this was not the safest option and once released, my Mother sat with me twenty-four hours a day. She camped out on my bedroom floor of a night and sat with me throughout the day, until my father came home from work of a night. This was Daddy's turn to mind his little girl. This continued throughout the next two months.

I actually remember watching the entire Olympic Games, under my Mothers watchful eye, from my bedroom. I would report daily to my Father of our country's successes and failures. This dedication was a prime example of the love and support my parents have shown me over the past twenty-one years. Looking back, I can now see that they do love me. I often wonder why I have such trouble believing this.

Chapter 9

My nightmares at this time were so crippling that I would awaken at two am each morning and would be too frightened to go back to sleep. My days were hence long and drawn out. During these extra hours, my Mother and Father would sit with me, generally smoking on the verandah. My mind was a mess. I couldn't think, eat or drink. All I could do was watch television and smoke.

Apart from nightmares, Ron would also rouse me of a night, talking his usual garbage, which does unquestionably not appear to be garbage at the time.

Due to my mode of starvation, my psychiatrist believed I needed to be hospitalised for my eating disorder. To begin with, I was again, rejected by a number of hospitals, including Wandene (a rejection that hurt deeply). I was given a glimpse of hope when I was to be assessed by the head doctor of the Eating Disorder Unit at Wesley Private Hospital. I was sceptical of the likeliness of acceptance. But, surprise, surprise, I was accepted and within a week was admitted.

One of the main concerns of this admittance was the open plan of the hospital. The building was much bigger than that of Wandene. Wesley is a thirty-eight-bed private hospital for those suffering mental illnesses. It consisted of three levels. Level one was mainly rooms, with a large, somewhat cockroach-infested yard that sprawled out onto a car park leading you onto the street. Level two was a little more secure, with only one small exit onto the street. Hence, I was placed on level two. Level three was made up of group rooms, doctor's offices, a gym and a chapel.

The Eating Disorder unit was particularly controlled. Throughout the day we would attend group sessions in which we would attempt to keep our eyes open. We would discuss our 'automatic' thoughts such as "I'm fat" and restructure our thinking.

Although this sounds positive in theory, many of the girls were so malnourished that they failed to take a single word in.

Meals were quite an ordeal. Each meal consisted of eight to ten girls sitting around a round table accompanied by a nurse. The silence throughout was agonising. Each girl would have a whirlwind of thoughts, daring each other to take the first bite. If one individual did not make an effort, the group of girls would bitch and moan about that individual. It was a terrifying atmosphere as each lass would be pressured into conforming to the ideals of the rest of the group.

I, along with one other girl, in the program, wrote a song describing the Eating Disorder Unit experience at Wesley. We wrote it to the tune of, Petulia Clarke's, "Down Town".

*When you're alone
And life is making you lonely
You can always go...
To Wesley*

*When you've got worries
All the nurses and doctors
Seem to help I know,
At Wesley*

*Just listen to the music
About Christmas in October
Linger at the nurse's desk
Where tablets are a plenty*

How can you snooze?

*The groups always start on time,
You can forget all you're past times
Forget the word fun and go to...*

Wesley; where all the food is bland

Wesley; where it all tastes like sand

Wesley; there is Ensure there too

*Just listen to the nagging
Of Lisa and Marie Kicka*

*You'll be shitty at them too
Before the night is over*

*The food is more filling there
You can forget all your dislikes
Forget the word taste and go to...*

*Wesley; you'll be on day program soon
This is the place for food!*

I, along with a few other girls in the group, had a particular problem with fluids. At every meal (and there were six a day) we were required to have a drink. I was terrified that this extra fluid would stay in my system and I would hence gain weight. It was explained to me hundreds of times that your system only held enough fluid for all your vital organs to survive.

Despite this I remained sceptical.

Chapter 10

To begin with I was terrified of the Doctor of whom I was under. But by the time I overcame these anxieties I learnt what a truly special doctor she actually was. With a combination of strength, warmth and compassion, she was exactly what I needed to recover. Being fearful of abandonment, I lightly asked her if she would see me on a permanent basis.

She simply stated that she was too busy to take on new patients. I was crushed and humiliated. I felt that once again, I had failed, that once again, I had been rejected.

That night I ran away from the hospital. My mind was racing. *How could I be rejected again? I must be the worst person in the world. Nobody wants to help me.* Although I had no idea where it was situated, I searched for the train station. Inside an hour, I was picked up by the police and returned to hospital. God only knows the hurt that I placed upon my parents, whom were awaiting my arrival as I returned to the hospital.

I could not give explanation as to why I left as I would be, yet again, humiliated. I could not live through the pain again.

As I continued my sessions with my inpatient doctor, I grew to trust and respect her more than anybody I had ever met. It was a joyous day when she said to me “I think that I can see you when you leave hospital”. I was both ecstatic and relieved. I felt that finally I had a chance in the world. Despite the good news, I continued to battle. After disclosing past circumstances, I became overwrought with anger and fear.

The following day we were taken on an outing. I was left to shop alone, always a bad idea, and brought ‘contraband’ (razors). I cut my leg and was taken back to Wesley. At Wesley, I had another conflict, this time not against myself but another patient. I actually hit her! I have never showed signs of aggression in my life before this moment in time and I knew that this anger was certainly misplaced.

One week later I was scheduled to Sutherland Public Hospital (ahh! Memories). I was a danger to myself and perhaps even to others. Despite my initial fears of a long stay, I was allowed to return to Wesley in four days.

I was relieved to be back, however the battle continued. I had become quite obsessive over the years and often had to punish myself for lack of regime.

23rd Dec 2004

Shit! Another day. I need to go to the toilet. Must remember to use 1/2 flush so that I do not get into trouble with Ron again. Need a smoke. Hope that my packet reads "Smoking Kills" today. I want to go back to sleep. I wish I could sleep forever. I'm scared today. I'm not sure what of though. The time reads 8:35. $8+3=11$, $3+5=8$, $11+8=19$... What is the point of this? I wish that the phones would stop ringing. I can't think!

9th Jan 2005

Everybody keeps telling me that I need to take responsibility for my life. At the same time, I am told that it is acceptable to live for others. Therefore, I am not taking responsibility for my life but that of others.

Chapter 11

Ron continued and continues to take control of my life. Maybe he will disappear, maybe he will stay. Maybe he is a figment of my imagination or maybe he is a negative spirit who has attached himself to me. My new Doctor assures me that it is simply my mind doing 'funny' things and that she is certain that it is not a spirit as Ron cannot be seen.

I, however remain doubtful.

I was taken off the Eating Disorder Unit and was placed on the General Program. I found this a great deal easier as certain subjects spoken about in group would no longer trigger me. I was now able to concentrate on soothing, nurturing and understanding myself. I did participate in a couple of craft and creative expression groups.

These groups allowed me to interact with other patients without the anxiety of being in a full-blown group session. I created a few Christmas cards, a pot and even a Christmas decoration. Without sounding absurd, these small projects gave me a sense of accomplishment.

As well as attending these simple groups, I also began jewellery making and a little bit of reading. I began to read a book called "The Artists Way" which gives you an insight into your inner child and inner artist. It allows you to discover yourself and reflect on what your life is really about.

It is through this time of reflection, contemplation and therapy that I came to the conclusion that I have to help myself, respect my own boundaries and have a right to have my boundaries respected.

Throughout this admission I 'disappeared' on a number of occasions. I would race across the road, daring drivers to hit me. On one occasion, I must have blanked out because I came back to reality and was lying across the road. A kind man, pulled to

the side of the road, took my arm and walked me into Wesley. On another occasion I left the premises to buy pills for an overdose.

This time however, I disposed of the tablets before I accomplished something that I wanted so badly but also wanted to avoid.

One of my most vivid memories whilst admitted to Wesley was being 'grounded' by one particular nurse. I had proved untrustworthy, after purchasing a penknife at the local newsagency, and was sentenced to my room. I felt naked. I was not allowed to smoke and my room was stripped of anything slightly dangerous. This included much of my entertainment. My stereo and television were removed because of the cords. I was not even allowed a pen to write with.

I felt like I was back in Sutherland Psych ward, exposed to the world with few comforts.

11th Jan 2005

I will get better; I will take responsibility for my life. Had an optimistic day today. Nothing specific made it positive yet I feel more at ease with myself and have a greater sense of hope.

This time has also allowed me to work out what I wanted in life. I have also been able to set realistic, short-term goals. My goal, ironically, is to become a nurse. After spending so much of my time in hospitals I have become very aware of what makes a superior nurse. I have met some first class nurses in the three, most significant, hospitals in-which I have stayed.

I plan to model my manner and skills on these women. In particular, I admire the mixture of firmness and fun within a number of my favourite nurses.

Without the steady support of my dearest friends and family, I would not have survived the past twenty one years. Notwithstanding this support, I am petrified of the thought of returning home.

What if I am left alone in this big scary world? What if people stop caring? What if everybody just gives up on me?

The extent of support shown by my parents is depicted in a letter, written to me, from my mother:

Dear Melissa,

My darling daughter, how I love you. From the moment you were born (I just couldn't believe that I had a beautiful baby girl) to now and forever.

I have been tremendously proud of you. Through childhood, school achievements, sporting successes, your ability to help others, your wonderful smile, your determination, strength and courage.

The last few years have been a struggle for us all. To see my beautiful daughter so ill, struggling to cope with her illness, struggling to accept that she (miss independent) needed help, struggling with her painful memories and thoughts and having to bring all her pain and fear to the surface and talk about it. It broke my heart.

I feel this much pain inside, so distraught that this has happened to you and that you have suffered so much and that I was not able to protect you, keep you safe and free from pain. Guilt hovers in my mind, but I push this aside and focus on getting you through each hour of every day, encouraging you to move forward with your life and to develop skills needed to do so.

I no longer dwell on the past, just on the future, moving forward, day by day, slowly but surely.

I know in my heart, dear daughter, that you will survive this illness and that you will have a happy and successful life.

Don't be too hard on yourself, go easy, and look after yourself, live for each day, not in the past. Allow some peace in your life. But most importantly, believe in yourself. You are a very precious person.

Melissa, a mother's love is unconditional and I will be there for you always.

God Bless You,

Love Mum

Chapter 12

Even now, I am confused about whether I want to recover. Despite an overwhelming desire for happiness, I am not sure what this consists of. I want to recover if it means contentment, not if it leaves me feeling emptier still.

24th Jan 2005

I can't stop crying! I have been home for two days now and I should be feeling elated. Instead, I feel an emptiness that I can not fill. I feel scared to be at home. I am getting suicidal urges once again and I want them to stop. I know that if I killed myself at the moment it would destroy my Mother and Father. So, I guess I'll have to stick around and try to rid this pain of mine. I don't know how, I don't know what with, but I will try my damn hardest to get through this. Even if it is purely for my family and friends. I don't want to disappoint them all once again.

The scars formed through self-harm are both mental and physical. I will always look at these hideous disfigurements and remember those times when I was at my worst. On a positive note, if I am able to stop self-harming for six consecutive months, I will be eligible for plastic surgery.

At the moment I am in limbo. I do not have life but I also do not have death. I am stuck in no-mans land. I want one or the other. At this point in time however, I can actually see a glimmer of hope. I can see that a better life is out there for me. I just have to find a way to get there.

I am looking forward to the day when I can look in the mirror and say "Melissa, YOU are a good person."

I am looking forward to the day when people will like me for me. I know that this can happen, I just have to bide my time till triumph.

Quotes which have inspired me

“Self Hatred and self-loathing often comes from having too high expectations of yourself. You may need to reduce your expectations of yourself, to accept yourself as you are”

- *The Dalai Lama* -

"The best place to find a helping hand is at the end of your own arm."

- *Swedish Proverb* -

Depression loses its power when fresh vision pierces the darkness.

-*Peter Sinclair: Inspirational "Overcoming Adversity"*-

'Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help you create the fact.'

- *William James* -

"Argue for your limitations, and sure enough, they're yours."

- *Richard Bach* -

"One of the most tragic things I know about human nature is that all of us tend to put off living. We are all dreaming of some magical rose garden over the horizon - instead of enjoying the roses blooming outside our windows today."

- *Dale Carnegie* -

Some of my Hospital admissions (as best as I remember)

29th Jan 2002-7th Feb 2002 Sutherland Hospital Children's Ward

I was admitted to hospital after my initial overdose of paracetamol and Zoloft.

19th Feb 2002-23rd April 2002 Sutherland hospital Children's Ward

(5th Mar-15th Mar Sutherland Psychiatric Ward)

After a careless admission of auditory hallucinations, I was placed in hospital once again. During this period I spent ten days in the psychiatric ward and commenced ECT treatment. During the later stages of this period I was allowed home on leave.

3rd June-16th June 2002 Wandene Private Hospital

Doctor at the time thought that I was unwell and needed to change medications in a supervised environment.

16th June-24th June 2002 Sutherland Hospital Children's ward

I was then transferred back to Sutherland Hospital because of an overdose on panadol. Admitted to hearing voices once again, was deemed 'unwell'.

24th June-6th July 2002 Wandene Private Hospital

12th July-15th July 2002 Wandene Private Hospital

26th July- 4th September 2002 Wandene Private Hospital

I overdosed on cough mixture and was placed in Wandene whilst Doctor was away

17th Sep-19th Sep Sutherland Hospital Psychiatric ward

Once more, I overdosed. This time on sleeping pills. I was taken to Sutherland Emergency, transferred to the psychiatric ward and eventually to Wandene

19th Sep-25th Oct Wandene Private Hospital

14th Feb-6th Mar 2003 Wandene Private Hospital

Voices were getting increasingly worse, so I was placed in Wandene yet again.

26th Mar- 30th May 2003 Wandene Private Hospital

I commenced uni but was unable to cope and went back to Wandene.

30th May-5th June 2003 Sutherland Hospital Psychiatric Ward

5th June-10th June 2003 Wandene Private Hospital

Back to Wandene.

8th Sep-13th Sep 2003 Wandene Private Hospital

Back to Wandene for intensive therapy. I was supposed to 'open up' about my past trauma to be able to move forward.

20th Sep-3rd Oct 2003 Wandene Private Hospital

15th Jan-16th Jan 2004 St George Public Hospital Emergency Ward

Not well over the Christmas period and hence overdosed on sleeping tablets

16th Jan-1st Feb 2004 Wandene Private Hospital

I refused my medication and was placed on a new anti-psychotic drug

3rd Mar-5th June 2004 Wandene Private Hospital

Cut leg and needed fifteen stitches. Back to Wandene

13th Sep 2004-21st Jan 2005 Wesley Private Hospital

Entered Wesley as an Eating Disorder patient and was soon moved to the general ward.

This is where Mel's own depiction of this part her journey ended. (January 2005)

SECTION 3 OUR MEL - PART TWO

In the final paragraphs of "Limbo - A Story of Depression", Mel stated, (quote), *"I am stuck in Limbo, I do not have life and I do not have death, I am stuck in no mans land"*.

Despite this, Mel was "holding the hope", believing that there was a "better life" for her just waiting, waiting for her to find the way forward. (Quote), *"I just have to bide my time till triumph"*

In the period from early 2002 through to early 2009, Mel spent around 70% of her life in one "institution" or another. As noted in "section one" of this story, Mel endured a plethora of different anti depressants, mood stabilisers and anti psychotic medications. As each medication was introduced and proved ineffective, a new one came in its place. Mel would "experience" almost every type of anti psychotic medication that existed in this country at one time or another. Of course, there were also the "PRN's", (derived from Latin meaning "when necessary").

As each medication was "tested" the dosages would be increased to "terrifying levels" in an attempt to achieve a "breakthrough", which never eventuated. Mel would then be "weened" off that particular medication and would start again on yet another.

The dosages were so potent they would render Mel almost completely comatose, almost lifeless. Her speech would become very "slurred" and she would have difficulty walking. Mel would endure muscle spasms and rigidity, and regular "black outs" would become the norm. There were several mornings when Mel would wake up in a panic, screaming "I can't see, I am blind". Seizures became another "issue" for Mel to endure.

These horrific side effects and the continued "failure" of any of the medications to have any positive impact, only added to Mel's sense of hopelessness and despair.

When all else failed, the "experts" introduced an anti psychotic medication called "Clozapine" (or Clozaril). This was a very old drug that had been around since the 60's. The potential side effect of this medication read like "War and Peace". People were known to have died from taking this medication. The potential impact on blood cells and the heart meant that Mel required weekly blood tests and regular "heart checks".

To be fair, this seemed to be the only medication that appeared to take the "edge" off Mel's suicidality, although at a price. High dosage meant that Mel would sleep most of the day, and her weight increased enormously, not good for someone who has a history of "eating disorders" and "self image" problems. As a result, Mel "despised" Clozapine and fought tooth and nail not to take it. The potential risks to other vital organs as a result of this medication are too many to mention.



Mel on Clozapine early 2008

During her many visits to various institutions (some for many months at a time), Mel made many friends. Mel had this uncanny ability to endear herself to everyone she came into contact with. Not just other patients but doctors, nurses and other staff. It

would never cease to amaze us how people that she had only met her for a short time, would seek her out and valued her friendship and companionship very highly.

Mel often adopted the role of "mentor" with other patients, providing comfort and guidance, despite her own enormous suffering. Amongst Mel's personal effects are boxes of letters, cards, drawings, gifts and other literature bestowed on her by people Mel came into contact with on her journey.

In particular, there were two young women at Wesley that Mel became particularly close to. They formed a steely bond and supported each other through thick and thin. They were inseparable.

Mel also maintained a very close bond with a number of her "school buddies" who were a constant support and source of inspiration to Mel. However, due to her condition, Mel struggled to be a part of the "normal social set", although she tried so hard to fit in.

Mel watched, with admiration, as her "school buddies" went on and completed their university studies, started their careers, met partners, got married in some cases, and were enjoying a fruitful, "normal" life.

Mel would always talk about her friends and how happy she was for their successes and achievements, but you could sense her deep remorse as she pondered "what would become of her".

As parents and carers of someone you love, words cannot express the sense of heartache and helplessness that prevailed as we watched our beautiful daughter suffer so intensely. Of course, we were not alone in that situation, as her brothers were also engulfed in this "family nightmare", as they watched their sister drift away at an alarming rate, despite all they tried to do to help her.

In 2008, Mel's relationship with her psychiatrist, whom she had been seeing since late 2004, suddenly began to "sour". Over the years, Mel would eagerly look forward to

her "sessions" with this Psychiatrist, coming away feeling "uplifted" (even if only temporarily). She felt this person was going to be her saviour.

Toward the end of 2008, however, the "uplifting" sessions became a "minefield". Mel would come out of each session extremely distressed and unstable. On a number of occasions Mel was so bad that she was detained and sectioned under the mental health act and sent to whatever public acute psychiatric hospital was available. To say these places were "horrific" is a gross understatement.

As carers, we could not get a sense as to what was going wrong, only "Mel was not cooperating", was the response from the Psychiatrist. Mel's version was that she sensed a change in attitude from the Psychiatrist, in that she seemed to be getting "impatient" with Mel, as if it was all getting "too hard".

Mel would also say (in regard to being "sectioned" under the act), "Dad, they ask me to be completely open and honest about how I am feeling and when I do, they punish me for it" (ie. sending her to a public psychiatric ward), so in future, I won't tell them anything".

Things went from bad to worse, until one day in May 2009, in consultation, Mel informed her Psychiatrist that she believed that "things were not working" between them, and that she was making Mel worse not better, and Mel would be better off by not coming to see her rather than to continue the way things were. Rather than exploring the reasons behind Mel's comments, they were met by indifference from the Psychiatrist and their relationship came to an abrupt end that day. No transitional support or advice was suggested or offered to Mel. She was on her own.

From this point onward Mel's condition spiralled downward dramatically. Although Mel outwardly demonstrated that she was content with the outcome, inwardly she was devastated. This person whom she placed her total trust and hope in, had abandoned her, just like all the others.

The problem now arose in finding Mel a new psychiatrist. When we broached the subject with Mel she immediately replied, 'I want the "registrar" who looked after me

back in 2002 at Sutherland Hospital, he was the only one who understood me". "Go and find him Dad".

As seven years had passed since Mel worked with "the registrar" we were not even sure where he was and what he was doing. As it turned out he now had his own practice in Sydney and was the head Psychiatrist at a private clinic in Sydney. To our relief, when we made contact with him, he said he "would be honoured to be Mel's Psychiatrist"

So began this part of the journey, and whilst Mel seemed 'comfortable' with seeing "the registrar", her condition continued to get worse. He was a consulting psychiatrist, but he did not provide therapy sessions, more he focused on treating Mel by trialling a variety of "medication combinations". As a result, Mel was to see a number of consulting psychologists, but most found Mel's "case" too difficult to handle. More rejection and abandonment.

As Mel's suicide tendencies escalated, her psychiatrist placed her in his clinic for observation and safe care. Mel attempted to escape on a number of occasions, and ultimately, they refused to admit her as she was too "high risk"

So, it got to the point where Mel was not welcome at any private institution or clinic. The only other option was to place her in an acute psychiatric ward, which simply was not an option at all.

As parents, family and carers, you have to put your "faith" in someone or something to help your loved one.

We put our "faith" in the "Mental Health System" and placed our daughter's life in their hands.

It is absolutely clear to us that the Mental Health System failed our daughter. It removed any hope for Mel, rather, conditioning her into a sense and state of "pervasive hopelessness".

In saying that, we mean no disrespect to many of the caring and dedicated doctors and nurses who went above and beyond and who tried so hard to help Mel. We will be forever grateful to them all. The reality is though, that the "tools" they worked with are "archaic" and "inflexible", and yet the "decision makers and policy makers" persist with an arrogance that won't allow them to look past their nose to find new ways (particularly outside the "system") when they know that what they do simply "doesn't work".

What they won't accept is that people are not "born mad". There is a reason why people suddenly change and act the way they do. It is not a "chemical imbalance". It is there job to look inside each person and find what was the trigger.

Essentially, psychiatry should not be about *"what is wrong with you"*, but rather, *"what happened to you"*.

In frustration, as parents, family and carers, we began looking at "alternatives" to the "System" that was killing our daughter. Mel was convinced her voices were "evil spirits" so we sought advice regarding the possibility of conducting an "exorcism". Mel was deemed an unsuitable candidate.

Some research had shown that there was evidence that people with similar situations to Mel had been "cured" by healing the "sins of the father", where there was a view that descendants sometimes are "punished" and "inflicted with a "condition" as a result of the "sins" or "indiscretions" of their forefathers. A particular "religious" ceremony would be undertaken with a view to "abstaining" the forefathers of their sins and indiscretions, which would then remove the burden that their current day descendants endured on their behalf. In desperation, we underwent this "process" but again, to no avail.

Mel's Dad became involved in setting up a "Hearing Voices Network" in NSW, which appeared to have some success overseas. But at this point there was much to learn and time was of the essence.

It was now early 2010, and Mel's condition had gone to another level, with the onset of severe paranoia. This adjoined her severe depression and the constant voices and grotesque visions that plagued her 24/7.

The paranoia removed from Mel any sense of reality, and she trusted no one, not even her parents or brothers. In her eyes, she was totally alone.

Mel now lived under "lock and key" at home. She required constant 24 hour a day care and supervision. Her home was a fortress, much to her dislike. Nothing that resembled a "weapon" could be kept in the house. Taking Mel to see her psychiatrist was a "high risk" event, requiring at least 2 people, sometimes three, to supervise the process.

Mel's life was now a "living hell". The level and intensity of her torment and suffering was incomprehensible.

On 26th August 2010, Mel's incredibly long and brave battle was over, she could endure no more.

Mel passed away that evening at home.

Over 600 people attended Mel's funeral, a testimony to the person Mel was and the number of people she touched in her ever so short journey in life.

This is not the end of Mel's story, as there is an enormous amount of information in the "archives" yet to tell.

We will add to her "journey" over time.



*Our Beloved Mel,
Always loving you,
always missing you,
XOXOXO*

SUPPORT

Some of the material in this story may be confronting or disturbing for some people. If you need to talk with someone, please call:

Lifeline: 13 11 14

(24 hours a day support line)