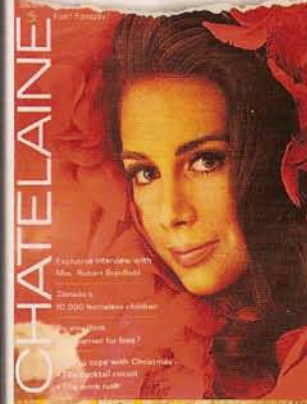


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Autumn Stringam today, at 35, with her four-year-old daughter, Meagan, at their home in Coaldale, Alta.

For years, I whipped back and forth between mania and depression, heard voices and was consumed by thoughts of suicide. Now, with my severe bipolar disorder under control, I can finally be a wife and mother.

by Autumn Stringam,
as told to Marlene Rego
photograph by Colin Way



My new, ordinary life

When there's no milk in my fridge, I go to the grocery store to buy some. On weeknights, I pack healthy lunches for my four kids, and in the mornings, I wave from the front door as they head off to school. These may seem like simple things; I may seem like a typical mom. But 12 years ago, when I was in the darkness of bipolar disorder, everything was very different.

There was a time when I wasn't allowed to be alone with my three-year-old son. I suffered from a severe form of the disorder characterized by extreme highs and lows in mood. I'd go through periods of irrational, grandiose thoughts and then depression.

At my lowest, I would feel it coming on, like hot tar welling up from my bowels into my throat, bubbling and churning. First the agitation, then the anger, the grief and the voices, creepy and hissing, so loud that it was as if someone was yelling beside me. I'd lunge into the kitchen and rummage through drawers for a knife. My dad would hold me in a tight hug. "Autumn," he'd plead, holding my arms down. I would be hoarse from screaming, yet I couldn't make myself stop. I was 23 years old, and I was under constant supervision by my husband or my dad. I was taking five different drugs, and I was on suicide watch. I never imagined I would ever function like a normal person. >>

At our new church, Mom introduced me by saying, "Autumn's really emotional. Kids called her Old Yeller."

Mom's struggle

Growing up in Alberta, I was the second-oldest of nine children. Mom was beautiful and radiant. I loved her smell after she'd spent the afternoon planting flowers. I would watch her and Dad sway to the music of our record player after all of us children were supposed to be asleep. Those are my happy memories of her.

But there are terrible memories, too. Some weeks, she didn't get out of bed; not even our cries of hunger could coax her out. My older sister and I would feed the babies as she lay sobbing on our paisley couch. At eight and seven years old, we were poor babysitters. The younger boys would scuffle and overturn chairs. Dirty cereal bowls lay on the floor.

I remember her, still in her nightgown, gathering all us kids into the family Bronco one afternoon and silently driving us 20 minutes to Peace River. I was scared. Steering the car down the boat ramp, Mom said, "We'll all feel better soon." My brothers and sisters screamed as the river's foamy waters rocked the truck and waves lapped

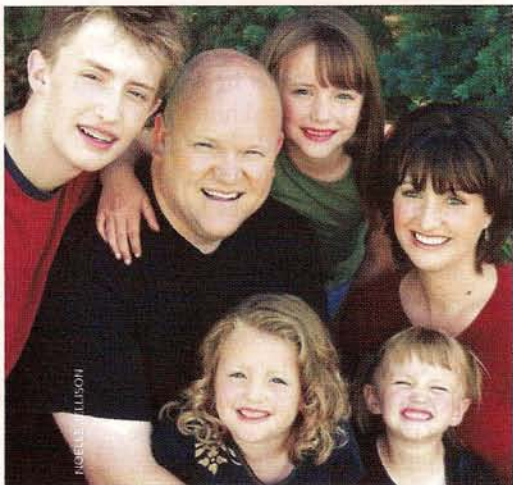
against the doors. Suddenly, she burst into tears, sobbing over the steering wheel. She backed out of the launch and drove us home.

An emotional child

When I was 10, my family moved to Fort McMurray, Alta. At our new church, Mom introduced me by saying, "Autumn's really emotional. Kids called her Old Yeller." At school, I remember my Grade 4 teacher leaning over my desk and whispering, "Autumn, why are you crying?" as she shielded my face from the rest of the class with her body. I lied about not being able to do my math assignment. Some days, I did no homework. Other days, I did so much my teacher thought I was cheating.

When I graduated from high school, I left home for Edmonton, where I went through two apartments, two jobs and six boyfriends in less than three months. When I moved back to my parents' house in Fort McMurray, I slept in the laundry-room closet for a couple of weeks on the floor.

At 18, I met Dana, a kind, broad- >>



Autumn with her husband, Dana, and children (clockwise from left): James, 15, Samantha, 8, Meagan, 4, and Melanie, 6.

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"I'd see hideous demons each time I passed the mirror in the bathroom."

shouldered man who lived near Edmonton. Because I lived six hours north, in Fort McMurray, we saw each other only on weekends. Still, he witnessed some awful mood swings. One Saturday, we were driving to the beach, when suddenly my face flushed red. Dana coaxed me into talking. I told him I wasn't angry at him. But I felt strange and disconnected, as if there was a thick glass box on my head. He was the first person to suggest I go see a doctor.

I made an appointment with my family doctor in Fort McMurray. In his office, I described the sunburn-like pains I'd feel all over my body and how sometimes everything sounded distorted. The doctor told me that I was just nervous about being intimate with my boyfriend. He handed me bath salts and told me to relax. I felt so embarrassed.

Shortly after that first doctor's appointment, Dana proposed. "We're young, but we can grow up together," he told me. I said yes. Seven months after our August wedding, I was pregnant. My joy was quickly replaced by fear. I'd lie in bed all day, consumed by thoughts of dying. Our basement apartment was strewn with dirty towels, and food-crusting dishes filled the sink. Dana thought I was just homesick and hormonal. Weeks after our son, James, was born, I refused to get out of bed to take care of him. Dana would roll me around to latch James onto my breast so he could nurse. "What's the matter with you?" Dana would ask. "Your baby is hungry. He needs you."

Hearing voices

Dana had enrolled in classes at a community college, and every morn-

ing, he'd leave the apartment early and lock the door. Lying in bed, I'd hear voices that told me he was only pretending to lock the door, that he had actually left the door unlocked so someone could come in to kill me and my baby. Hours after he left, I'd be lying under the bedcovers, stiff with terror. One morning, Dana forgot a textbook and came back into the apartment. I attacked him in the hallway, thrashing and screaming. At first Dana thought it was a joke. But when he realized I was serious, he said, "You're sick." Shortly after, I was misdiagnosed with postpartum depression and prescribed Prozac. The medication worsened my symptoms: Six weeks after I started taking it, I tried to jump out of a moving car. Holding my seat belt down with one hand and steering with the other, Dana drove me back to the doctor.

A revelation

This time, I was diagnosed with rapid-cycling bipolar I. I'd never heard of the disease, which causes cycles of mania and depression at least four times a year. In my case, these cycles changed almost daily. The doctor prescribed lithium, which is effective in many bipolar cases. I called my mother and pleaded she get help, too. Before she hung up, she said, "You're a little lithium-head. A druggie."

The lithium didn't work for long. Over three years, my doctor tried combinations of 13 drugs. I was haunted by voices, visions of monsters and fantasies of suicide. I'd see hideous demons in the medicine-cabinet mirror in the bathroom. Even with a full bladder, I'd wait for Dana to escort me to the toilet. I was in and out of psychiatric and emergency wards. >>



Hearing the truth about my grandfather's death made me feel desperate: Was my own suicide inevitable?

A tragic end

In 1994, my mother committed suicide. My father was on a business trip when she drove the family van to a provincial park and attached a hose to the exhaust pipe, filling the van with carbon monoxide gas. My youngest sister was only six years old. Later, Dad found antidepressant medication in Mom's purse. The prescription had been filled three weeks before her death. He didn't even know she had been to see a doctor.

That's when Dad told me Mom's father had also committed suicide. As I was growing up, Mom had always said that Grandpa ate too much salt and his heart stopped. Hearing the truth made me feel desperate: Was my own suicide inevitable? It was as if the choice had been taken away from me. Around that time, my 13-year-old brother, once easygoing, started acting violently. He was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and prescribed lithium. Dad feared there was going to be another suicide. Some doctors even warned him that he might have to plan more funerals.

My dad's quest

Instead, my father spent months poring over medical books, combing the internet and reading everything he could find on bipolar disorder. Eventually, he and a friend formulated a vitamin regimen based on their research, which they tried on me and my brother. It was a last resort.

By that point, I was so heavily medicated, I didn't know what they were feeding me. Yet within a day or two, the visions disappeared. My extreme mood swings eased. Two months later, I was entirely off medication; I took only the vitamins, every day. For the first time in years, I was productive. When we ran out of vegetables, I went grocery shopping without Dana. I started doing laundry. I rode my bike again.

It took years and a court battle with Health Canada to allow the vitamins that had helped me and my brother to be sold as a natural-health product. Now, researchers at the University of Calgary are in the midst of a scientific study to examine the link between the vitamins and bipolar disorder.

Even after my symptoms were under control, I went through counselling to gain clarity. I had to rebuild my partnership with Dana, after years of him taking care of me. When I could finally concentrate again, I began to write my story as a way of healing and forgiving my mother. I made up for lost time with James, who's now 15. Dana and I also gave birth to three daughters: Samantha, who's now 8, Melanie, who's 6, and Meagan, who's 4. Our girls are constant reminders that there is life after mental illness. Today, I'm present with my children. I'm predictable. I know exactly what I'm going to be like tomorrow morning. ■

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