

Barbara's Story

Thirty years ago and after six years of almost continual mental illness and hospitalizations, I was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder. I was at the onset of illness, I thought, a happily married woman with a career as a private secretary I had returned to because I enjoyed it. I had two children just entering their teens and a financially well off and I thought emotionally stable marriage.

I am now a student at Parawest Adult Campus in Adelaide here, and in 2004 received an Award of Merit for Outstanding Student in Journalism. I am on a Disability Pension and have been for the past 25 years. All my results for the four years I have attended Parawest have been either High Attainment or Very High Attainment and have incorporated both artistic and academic subjects – a long way indeed from the cot case my then husband was told, early in my illness, I would be for the rest of my life. Prior to undertaking studies, I took in ironing for 17 years, 6 days a week with one week off at Christmas – to supplement my pension and keep Bethany afloat. Unable to enter a convent because of my illness, after my annulment came through I decided with advice from my then Confessor and Director to make private vows and live, with outstanding imperfection *sin que non*, the lifestyle I have come to call simply Bethany. No one created the lifestyle; it simply unfolded in my path. I have lived here in Bethany in Elizabeth South Australia for 21 years and have practiced in the Elizabeth North Parish now twinned with The South Parish. Where to from here? I watch the unfolding for my cues and clues and some potential directions are currently in the unfolding.

Despite my illness which triggered my divorce and loss of my children, now 40 and 42 years old and now my best pals, followed by six years of poverty, illness and homelessness which included rejection by my then Parish community and other connected church and social communities, I remained a practicing Catholic with much difficulty and it was my Faith alone that gave me the strength and courage to persevere in the face of many difficulties as my life and journey with mental illness unfolded with connected major life losses. Coupled with my Faith, The Lord has always seen to it that some remarkable priests and nuns especially were in my path and outstanding in their faithfulness to me through thick and thin and the various confusing and disturbing factors, as well as quite socially distasteful ones, connected with mental illness and major psychoses. To these I am eternally grateful for their love and encouragement, spiritual and human warmth, and over and above the call of duty. I am eternally grateful too to my family who had to surmount their lack of knowledge and indeed fear of mental illness to welcome me in their midst after what I know was a journey in non understanding for them for many years. These factors supporting me are far, far more than is the plight of many with mental illness.

I am a prolific writer indeed and my personal diaries alone number over 5000 handwritten pages in exercise books. Acquiring this computer coupled with touch typing skills has increased my writings even further and on many subjects indeed. Often I will write under a pseudonym. In the main I remain unpublished. It bores me and is time consuming I could give to writing and other things and also asks discipline (no smileys! – laughing!)

"Brenton" is based on several people I have known as well as their stories and some of their experiences all wound into the one character. The conclusion of "Brenton" lapses into poetry to contain something of my own very personal experience and deliberately veiled in poetry more for my own benefit than anything. All other identities have been obscured to protect the innocent. The guilty, it is my experience, are well versed and skilled in protecting themselves. "Brenton" is reflective too of the plight of many who suffer mental illnesses.

The biggest hurdle we face in making fulfilling and contributing lives in society and in our various communities is the false and incorrect stigma with which we must deal almost daily. This stigma and rejection on several social levels forces us into the second biggest problem we face as a group generally speaking: isolation, loneliness coupled often with lack of self esteem and self confidence. We are forced, most of us, into having to apologize for our own existence, when mental illness remains an illness like any other. The brain is an organ of the body and can malfunction or become diseased as heart, liver, kidneys etc. We are simply ill like any other ill person with cancer, diabetes, heart disease, kidney problems etc. etc. – but in my thirty year experience of psychiatric wards and appalling places, never once have I seen flowers or a get well card on a ward. That is an indictment!

Amongst ourselves we say we, with that prevailing good humour which abounds amongst mental illness sufferers, that we should get what criminals incarcerated get, and they should get what we get. I guarantee none would want to commit a crime again and be jailed. Yet we have committed no crime, we are only ill and illness allowed by God for His Reasons.....don't blame us – look 'further afield' if you look to blame.

If "Brenton" in any way shocks you: good! then I have in part achieved what I set out to achieve.

"It is not our darkness we fear

But our light, for "Who am I to shine?"

Rather "Who are you not to shine, child of God?"

(Nelson Mandela, Inaugural Speech as President of South Africa)



Barbara M Garnaut

Bethany -7.20pm
22nd. May 2006

Story – Poem - BRENTON

BRENTON

He startled people, both by his appearance and his personality. Hair had been dyed so many different colours at one time or another, the endless bleaching had killed all life. It was thin and flyaway, falling midway down his back. He was a tall man of 32 years . . . a little over 6ft. or so perhaps . . . he had a slim build with shoulders somewhat hunched. Brent had a tendency to stride rather than walk with his frame hunched over and eyes on the ground and consequently often bumped into people and other assorted matters in his path. He apologized profusely to both. His mother was Polish and from her I felt he inherited his beautiful pale blue, sad and gentle eyes. His father had passed away while he was a child and Brent had little memory of him.

Brent was sometimes mistaken for gay; however, it was due rather to a quite creative streak (depending, I guess, on any definition of what creativity in essence actually is) that he wore makeup, usually black kohl on those deeply set and quite beautiful pale blue eyes, edged with emphasis by dark thick and long lashes. He wore black lipstick too and at times had black chipped painted nails, that I strongly suspected was paint, which were long and almost oriental in appearance.

His appearance in clothing was also theatrical, flared brightly coloured trousers, long gone from any fashion scene usually with equally outdated built up boots and a shirt that always seemed to be a shocking mismatch of colour to his trousers.

All this was standard fare with Brent.

If one could bypass the shock of appearance and approach him, one was jolted into a paranoid world of aliens, spies and of evils but also Brent's absolute hatred of anything that hinted of violence and on any level - he accompanied this with constant arm and hand movements and anxious fingers thru his hair. His voice too was memorable and betrayed the fact he had perhaps known better days . . . well modulated and deep, soft and sonorous . . . all in absolute contrast to content.

Brent was without purpose or friend, midst our urge to herd and to belong. Brent suffered with schizophrenia, guilty of nothing really except perhaps the absence of our herd values and desire to adopt or belong to same.

I valued Brent as unique amongst my friends. Beyond aliens and spies, beyond any loathing of evil and his hatred of all violence was a man without guile or any vanity, despite his garish appearance. He was not egotistical, but a man given to truth as he perceived it, even to self-detriment and having stated, did so with neither smile nor apology.

He never showed up at my door without some sort of gift, fish and chips for tea, or a packet of cigarettes, a trinket from a second hand shop. I never showed up at his without a welcome of joy.

The schizophrenia had onset with devastating consequences when he was at University studying engineering sometime in his very early twenties as far as I can deduce from the bits and pieces from Brent over the years - sometime around then I think. Brent had been, at times had always been smoker of marijuana and this triggered an otherwise possibly latent gene and he very quickly lost contact with reality and attempted suicide, almost succeeding. When he came out of a three-day coma, due to an overdose of sleeping medication, his quite brilliant intellect (or so his family told me later) was totally replaced by paranoid delusions, which frightened his rather wealthy family and quite large circle of mainly university friends away. Thus isolated, he withdrew completely into a world of fears, persecution and also of dire poverty - his studies abandoned.

Brent was utterly alone at death - his guitar and case close by. He had overdosed on heroin, pronounced accidental, and since I had never heard him talk of suicide, I felt this was probably correct.

We buried him last year, his coffin and grave a mass of floral tributes. His family and friends wept. They had been absent from his life for eighteen years since the onset of the schizophrenia. It was for that I wept ... all those sad and lonely years. We laid him to rest at last, and I can only hope at peace ... a peace denied him in his life. Neglected during his long illness, he was crowded around at death by the same people who had abandoned him during those very years when he had needed them most.

A wake was held, but I didn't go. I was too sad, too sorrowed by the long abandoned years of which for twelve he had been my friend and from which death only could release him into, well I hope, a better place perhaps and one of peace.

I came home by bus in 40 degree heat from West Terrace Cemetery feeling disconnected from the world unfurling still around me. Brent, in all the years I had known him had never been accepted, let alone understood . . . and that was all I could feel as authentic....the messenger had left, and with him his message. That was all I could feel as real. And all around me I could feel mine and every reality barring what is strange and the stranger...different...unique.

Brenton's Mum rang two weeks after we buried him, wanted my opinion as it was planned to erect a monument over Brenton's remains in West Terrace Cemetery . . . could I think of a nice epitaph for the base on which would stand a very nice almost life size figure of the common concept of a compassionate Jesus apparently with arms extended in blessing to all, and would I like a picture of Brenton and one of his cassette tapes with Brenton singing and playing his guitar? "Yes I would, thank you" I replied a trifle absently knowing nothing was needed to keep Brenton alive somewhere in this filing cabinet we call memory . . . and with disinterest in any epitaph . . . they would handle it very well I was sure from the assortment of 'they' at his funeral and ceaselessly chattering tongues like a distant hum . . . soft, polite and respectful murmuring and with such 'nice' things to say about Brent if they happened to bump into me, wondering who 'they' thought he was, or I am . . . or was . . . perhaps irrelevant images conjured from the long ago, before 'they' abandoned him . . . something like that I guess . . . I guess I wonder a lot about it all now and then . . . well his Mum seemed to know me and some comfort . . . perhaps I will ask her one day who I was, or am . . . she seemed to know me, just forgotten my name and could she have my telephone no . . . I gave it to her so I could move away, I think, well, I guess . . . so this was the mysterious 'they' that had so haunted Brent because he didn't know where they were anymore . . . they're here, Brent, just too late that's all, but you'll go into dirt with some aplomb and better than nothing . . . well, I guess . . .

I only hope that any heaven and its creator will give Benton what he deserves denied him by his fellow human beings and his god and me, perhaps we were too busy elsewhere on more important things with worthier victims....his wounds his loneliness and pain unsighted, or cared about - ignoring him and walking by . . . and death a strange Samaritan but available in all and every journey's end.

Life tends to expose any gods or god and us as well as I guess, as unkind and cruel, well now and then I guess, and we're all mad to ask that life and its creator and we who follow in the wake, be not thus . . . just the way things are I guess . . . so here's to the faithful, may all and every mad eternity's hope prove true . . . somewhere or other . . . here's to the people of this merciful and compassionate lord - so full of it ourselves often, aren't we?

.....but surely the tune that wins the game from womb to tomb sung in the twixt . . . or judged tuneless . . . somewhere or other . . . and we can all only guess, I guess . . . for guess is all it ever is in Sunday best . . .

The Catholic priest who had spoken so highly over Brenton's remains and duty thus fulfilled, had called on him once in Brent's life and after never enquired or phoned so Brent had said and then added wistfully that he didn't 'go' any more. "They just ignore me. I feel not really there . . . he seems to shake my hand as quickly as he can and then just turns away . . . he says 'How are you Brenton?' but I don't think he really wants to know, not really, so I just say 'O.K. and thank you' . . . what else is there?" Truth finds some shelter in mad or truth the cause . . . but we don't really want to know. The ivory tower of the sane a comforting illusion of the herd, the sane....the secure in this growing asylum.....destruction everywhere to pave the road for baser aspirations..... and nothing spared . . . not surely Brent . . . now at peace is my Sunday-dressed guess . . . he floats drifting somewhere it seems in some unknown bliss and no real hope or life and this too strange!...conflict and battle stalking these halls, these wards, the only known . . . and death the only release, with this mad guess that dresses in its Sunday best . . . but only then . . . and then taken out now and then for some base reason or other needing hope.

Without any asking, having hung up from Benton's Mum, all these damned memories crowded in on me without real invitation or welcome as memories often will, and the compassionate Jesus over this grave busy elsewhere in a worthier place . . . The priest droned on about some sort of resurrection and a heavenly home . . . I wanted to walk away, go home, somewhere, anywhere out of earshot of the crap and crap artists mourning but most of all to somehow walk away from myself, now and then I knew memory would replay it all uninvited I seemed hear a gong sounding a nothing sort of tune and I am marked forever by Brenton and his damned humility, honesty, lack of guile or vanity . . . whatever tag we give it, whatever the hell it was! - no goodbye to that I knew now, trapped in guilt, my booming gong, my social mores, my cursed sanity and sane charity of patronizations and the condescension's . . . as empty as gongs booming for every sure victim . . . someone indeed is laying buried in West Terrace Cemetery and we the fools and clowns all puppets in this puppet show of many skilled masked puppeteers that laugh . . . but I'll abide else take a path like Brent to a sure western cemetery . . . and here am I with these handy notes, lines, these sweaty palms . . . these rolled out memories . . . go away! . . .

. Thursday! . . . I forgot to put the bin out!" . . .
and I came home to what it's really all about I guess . . . safety zones . . . devoid of persecution . . . no rejection, ostracization . . . no alone and lonely . . . no existential crucifixion . . . and the erstwhile fate of Brent.

I could hear the phone ringing but ignored it and walked outside to put the bin out . . . I hope they haven't been already . . . and all those most important trysts . . . security the illusion, but it will have to do . . . I guess!

. . . behind barriers . . .

somewhere between these polarized eerie twins . . . and so well masked . . .

doubting one, refusing the other . . . nor bridge twixt them and these . . . polarized!

. . . safe for this moment behind these barriers

but endlessly on the run

Madness the master in either market and empty security's creation . . .

. . . and formless . . .

. . . and when the hearer arrives what real rights can such have
 . . . or such as I do for the ashes, the memory,
 in West Terrace cemetery

and the deaths by culpability.....
 for the drowning or strangled
 in this here western cemetery
 where the hidden masked auctioneer
 illusions' dreams in gold
 allots
 and I am puzzled by their laughter

Every cause must be en masse keeping busy in some light
 or just a number called and then full departed
 unless a jewel in some base crown proclaimed or hidden
 no salt or any leaven
 and empty vessels making many sounds
 on any available handy surface
 as the earth erupts reflecting pain
 as down the ages till but a shadow
 no remembers or even hearers
 nor full lesson ever learnt - nor then ever enter . . .
 asks risk and a death by category

there are rather empty promises
 from gilded halls and podium robbing empty tombs
 and jeweled robes abandoned and no reflection anyway . . .
 and shining cars and phones and internet and yearly holidays and
 every trapping insults earth and heaven where none . . . and waiting
 judgment
 just like me
 we won't escape it

.....and images keep flashing of hope abandoned

tears full falling, flowing.....

The scratching scribe keeps pushing in one helpless way

or is reaching to a mighty tree or a mustard seed
a bushel glowing . . .

sights a beckoning veiled silhouette a philosophical abstraction
- foundational to vanities in motives . . . ominous . . . calling . . .
unanswered and unheeded

Here is this western cemetery . . .
of vapid eyes and words confirming of ears that hear only
the inner need

with honey words
and all touched is somehow tainted and is knowing
and reaching tired and sweating palms . . . fearful . . . caught the
message winging . . .

.....because of Brenton and his lonely life and dying
.....a shadow calling in the mist, now spilt is silent

until the caller calls again
I see a mist misting
glow glowing – all is merging
there that beckoning in-between
that unknown presence in the haze – somewhere beyond the haze?
and no miasma
and the secret silent calling called again

I wish I could leave some actual hope and
some a motive
and go on hoping
with nothing ever in my hands

stillness – quiet - all is well
moving on
moving on quietly
in this endless waiting . . . and there
is housework and the dishes
a pause or two for reasons like the rubbish
and on out into it yet again
the madness on the bus
unless it calls in
or on the phone . . .

Say? If I ne'er write another poem?
.....I do not care at all

and just the way I am

and now tis finished
and unfolded
just like me
tired
spent
needing sleep and rest
and place to lay this aching
and all that sort of undeserving
just like all the rest . . . I think . . . perhaps? . . . or not?

I guess Brenton surely left his reasons . . .
well . . . somewhere or other . . .
I guess . . .
I never listen to his tape
somewhere in all these empty aspirations
but I'll lift my game
and keep on walking
with nothing else to do . . .
just like Brenton
in his grave
and me soon enough in mine
Wherever the caller is, the sun will rise again
clearing any clutter
and all uncertainties and such, I think – perhaps? – or not?

I wish I could lock the door
and lose the key
and kill the auctioneer
ruling by default
a wanton dereliction
and terrible revenge
and all . . . somewhere . . . well, I guess, surely . . .
born to a thankfully transitional hell of caring . . .
or purgation, well I don't know!
and disinterested in any via negativa . . .
and surely via negativa indeed!
Death, that strange Samaritan will claim me in the end
empty handed or full and wasting

hope not needed
in hopeful Sunday best . . .

Aye? Brenton? and Bob . . . Catch 22 . . .
 and Sadie
 and Monk and Amos, Garfield,
 Gaffy, John and Brad and Emma and all the rest . . .
 my Mum and Dad . . . the maimed by truly caring
 and all the broken, and the lost of hope . . .
 and somewhere I can only hope
 catharsis and a resolution
 and hope again
 is dressing up . . .

probably a funeral . . .
 well I guess, I guess . . .
 it always is sooner or somewhere later . . .
 and all memories with words
 conjured
 painfully . . . gone soon enough . . .
 in someone's time . . .
 I guess . . . or not . . .
 you sort of get used to it all
 now and then . . .
 a familiar drill . . .
 images . . . drowned and strangled
 well here and there
 perhaps I can sleep it off
 this time . . .
 waken to better signs of life
 even if life's illusions thin with thinning ranks . . .
 Goodbye Brenton friend . . .

living inside these maddening chosen polarities and barriers . . .
 I guess one's not supposed to care
 . . . not really . . .
 breaking rules
 creating discomfort . . .
 too long epitaphs . . .
 messy breakdown . . .
 come some straw . . .
 . . . Daniel's vision by the water
 . . . weighted by the numbers a vision and a holocaust

 and all those quite distasteful things – hallucinations?
 Perhaps
 Or not

and \$3.70 Oxazepam keeps on keeping me
from their crypt . . .

I wish I could rest and see the end
but I fear that it will just begin again
cast the millstone then, and let it be!

BarbG

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Bethany

Friday 5.3.04 10.45a.m