

## Preface

What happens when you can't protect your children from something that is so hidden that no one can see it?

In 2015, our daughter Alice had her first episode of psychosis.

The rug was pulled out from under our feet and the blindfold ripped unceremoniously from our eyes when mental ill health was flung at our front door. We didn't ask for it to come inside, but it did.

It sat at our table uninvited and unwelcome.

We would come to imagine this Dear Psychosis as tentacles slowly wrapping themselves around our daughter, and sometimes around us too.

Why her? Why Alice? Why?

The answer was we had no idea.

When our children turn a certain age, we realise that they need to spread their wings, fly and broaden their horizons. Sometimes they fail and pick themselves up, dust themselves off and get on with it, and occasionally they don't. I wonder if it is how we deal with these moments that ultimately shapes their life?

When the mental health train struck, we became silent in our grief. Of what we as a family had lost, but most importantly grieving that Alice herself was slowly disappearing.

We were going in oblivious, with no clue as to what was ahead.

It didn't take long to be envious of friends and families that seemed to have it all. The beautiful, perfect families. Even if they had flaws, they were still perfect in my eyes.

On the few occasions we went out in that first year, Shane and I remained silent about the battles we were fighting at home. Dealing with it together, with a psychiatrist, a psychologist, and a concoction of drugs to keep Alice well.

No one knew.

No one knew or could help us because we were scared to share, for fear of Alice being judged. In my mind the life that I had mapped out for her was over.

Her brain was shut down and the strangeness had started.

She had voices in her head.

Conspiracy theories abounded.

The television was listening in to us.

She thought she had been implanted with a microchip in Istanbul and that it was still in her.

She could not read or write.

She could not draw in those adult colouring-in books, and certainly in those early days she could not have a conversation without it being completely delusional.

These delusions led to tricky conversations. You might not realise until halfway through it, that you weren't actually having the conversation with her that you thought you were. It was often hard to define things she said as fact or fiction, or the two would be jumbled together. We could sometimes find the essence but, in all

honesty, we would give up after a while and would try and divert the conversation or mindset.

I would say, "I don't understand what you are talking about, can you explain again?" Often followed up with, "Let's go outside for a walk or cup of tea."

That simple chat you thought you were having, never, ever, really existed.

The diversion would either be met with indifference or anger.

When she became angry, she would throw verbal grenades at us. This could go on for a few minutes or become a rant that lasted for quite a while.

When these verbal grenades came our way, I could not see the light at the end of the tunnel. In fact, my only vision was of her having no life at all.

In those moments, I often could not stomach it, and would tell her she needed to stop talking as we were going nowhere. Inside, my heart was breaking for her and for all of us.

The sadness I felt was often intense and overwhelming.

Still, Shane and I essentially kept silent about what was happening at home. Too scared to share our story, our grief, and our heartbreak for what the future might be. It looked so very bleak.

But.

Spoiler alert – this story does have a positive ending.

We needed good healthcare, the perfect psychiatrist and psychologist for Alice, medications, house rules and routine, routine, routine.

It may not be what I envisioned for us as a family when we

started having children, but to be blatantly honest, none of our kids fit the mould. They all march to the beat of their own drum and have always thought outside the square. They would never have walked a straight line regardless of what we did.

**So, what led me to writing a book? A narrative non-fiction book at that!**

It started out as a cathartic bout of writing for me, a mother whose daughter was lost within the unexpected consequences of mental health, psychosis, bipolar, anxiety and depression, with often only my husband to talk to.

On any given day, I could be a nurse first and a mother or wife last, that's just the way it is, isn't it? As we grow up, our roles change depending on who or what needs us the most.

Like many others that have gone before us, and sadly to those who are coming after us, we needed the gift of hope.

Writing ended up being my therapy. An outlet where I could voice, without burdening or, dare I say, worrying or boring the small number of family and friends we had shared our ever-so-secret secret with.

Expressing what was going on in our everyday life, uncensored and directly from the heart, soon became my mission and my passion.

I would be lying if I didn't say that the year after Alice's first psychosis was the hardest time I have ever had in more than fifty years of life. Emotionally I was blown around like a sunflower in the wind. Roots holding firm, but frightened that I would break with the weight I felt that I was carrying on my shoulders.

My words began to multiply. Six months after our return from Istanbul, it became clear that I had more than an article but not enough for a book.

I started to think that perhaps I, no, *we* could write and share our journey with families and caregivers going through something similar. Most importantly, I wanted these families to believe in hope and know they are not alone. On a broader scale, my wish is for healthcare workers, doctors and nurses read it, to look at the other side of the coin. To see what is really happening in the homes of their patients, and thus create positive change. To treat the whole family, and to share in the wisdom and knowledge of those of us who have been in darkness.

I asked Alice if she felt she could put pen to paper but it wasn't until a year after her return from Istanbul that Alice emailed me the words that she had written. To be honest, I was not expecting her to recall much, and if she did, I was doubtful that I would be able to add it to our book. What Alice gave me was an amazing insight into her psychosis. Her words are confronting, frightening, and fascinating. A no-holds-barred account of what she went through while in Istanbul and then back at home.

I then asked our oldest son, Jesse, who was studying medicine, to add his words. To recount the week that he spent with us at the most critical time in Istanbul. To add further crucial observations and insight, not only of Alice at that time, but of me too. Our writing then turned into page after page of our story and this book was born.

Mental illness is silent and often invisible, as people (and we were those people) are reluctant to 'out' themselves or their loved one due

to perceived repercussions that sadly exist in our society today.

By reading or listening to us, you are not only helping break the silence on mental illness, but you are assisting us in making as much noise as possible.

This book is NOT a self-help book.

What it is, is a story. It is our story.

Why is it so important that it is told?

If we don't share our experience ...

The silence. Will. Continue.

## Introduction

The Grand Tour. Some would call it a rite of passage, a post-school ritual, an overseas adventure, or a well-trodden path taken by many young people, whether within their own country or further afield. In 2015 it was our daughter's turn. Her year for excitement and adventure. Her time to grow and experience the 'trip of a lifetime'.

Having finished her university studies, a Bachelor of Arts and Communication, in June 2015, our twenty-one-year-old daughter, Alice, travelled overseas for an adventure through Europe. In London she met up with her older brother Jesse, Jesse's girlfriend Ella and their friend, Micca, before heading off on a trip they called their 'Roads Less Travelled Tour'. They bought a cheap car in Madrid, then together spent six weeks travelling before Jesse and Ella headed home to Melbourne, Micca to Greece and Alice to Turkey.

Once in Turkey Alice checked into a youth hostel near Taksim Square, the tourist quarter of Istanbul, where she met and hung out

with a melting pot of wonderful humans from all over the world, seeking adventure, hope and freedom. She met a Syrian guy, who worked at the youth hostel she was staying at and who introduced her to his friends. These friends were fellow Syrians, displaced by the ravages of war from their homeland, and who were now living in Istanbul waiting for their next chapter.

They embraced Alice immediately and loved her simply for being her.

These were the people that would ultimately save Alice's life.

Istanbul, August 2015

She is running down the street, hair flying wildly around her face. Her head searches frantically from side to side, looking for something, anything. Her eyes are filled with fear and her throat has closed so much that no words can escape. Her arms are waving like windmills in a gale. A car stops beside her, and she wrenches the door open. Someone grabs her from behind and pulls her back. She lashes out at them. Trying to push them away, punching and hitting whoever has trapped her and suddenly it's like she's moving in slow motion.

Her world goes black.