

Introduction

One morning in December 2020, just after my son turned one, my mind busied with thoughts and memories: they flooded me. I took a green pack of post-its and started jotting down thoughts and memories, and didn't stop until a couple of hours later. What I was writing were reflections from after our beautiful baby boy was born. Two weeks into motherhood, I became seriously ill with postpartum psychosis and was admitted to a Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) two hours away from where we lived. There, I was sectioned under the Mental Health Act and remained for five weeks and five days.

In a very short space of time I went from the strength and excitement of being a new mum, to the miserable fall of mental instability and unreality. It was terrifying. I felt it unfair and unlucky to have suffered in this way, but blessed that there was a bed available for me so I was not separated from our gorgeous baby boy.

I have referred to the unit fondly and simply as 'MBU' throughout this book, as that's the name we used at the time and since. This book was written predominantly for myself. I felt, if I wrote everything down, I could move on more easily and would help the last stages of healing: that it could give me some closure and quieten my mind again. I used my diary, the notes in my phone, photographs, phone messages and hospital paperwork to help me piece together a coherent picture of what I had gone through.

Even with these to help me, I have found that the great swings in emotion throughout each day, and the new light that hindsight and health have cast on those experiences, has made it hard to keep the story as clean and clear as I might wish it could be. I also strongly believe that I owe it to my 'ill self' to give her a voice, as even though she was ill, wrong, delusional – she still existed. And so although I have written it mostly retrospectively, from a place of relative health, I have kept the first person notes made at the time, to ensure that her voice is heard and that every version of the events that transpired there is represented. These ramblings are often muddled, confused and nonsensical, and I should warn those of you who are reading this that it is not always a happy place to be.

I have also chosen to include messages between me and my family, because they were such a crucial element of my experience and recovery, and to whom I am always thankful, ever thankful. These are conversations between myself and my parents, my husband, and my sister – people with whom I was in constant daily contact. Again, they express the raw emotions we experienced, and the help I received during my time there. Writing this book has been highly emotional – embarrassing at times. I also know that witnessing me become so unwell cannot have been easy for any of my family or friends. It pains me to think of my husband waving goodbye to his wife and baby boy - barely three weeks old. The cruelty of false reality: I am not sure who it is more upsetting or frustrating for.

I'd be lying if I said what happened to me was completely behind me, that I feel nothing but positivity from the experience, as that isn't the case. Recovery isn't linear. I still have days where I cry at the drop of a hat, feel that life was unfair, I sometimes wonder what life would be like if I hadn't been admitted. At times I still feel that I missed out terribly on Eddie's first few weeks and I just get days where I feel cross and angry and upset, and maybe I can't even put my wild emotions into words.

I could not, however, have made the swift recovery I did without the dedication of the staff at MBU, their Outreach Team, the Perinatal Mental Health Team and also the unlimited love, support and encouragement from my incredible family and friends. Thank you all for being so strong for me throughout this strange and truly challenging experience. I wish you all peace and hope in your minds, health in your bodies and love in your hearts.

I also wrote this book with the hope that women who have experienced postpartum psychosis, or have had negative experiences with mental illness, may learn something from what I have been through - that some may find focus and strength in my story - and that perhaps healthcare professionals and carers alike might gain insight into this serious illness by reading my story.

‘Delusions of Grandeur’

Delusions of grandeur are a very common symptom of postpartum psychosis, and mine were of the most grandiose going! Some mirrored beliefs from my first psychosis, namely that I was super-bright, brighter than most, that everything I believed was right and everyone else in the world was wrong. I was omnipotent. These delusions ran alongside the paranoia that I was being poisoned by those administering my drugs, and that I was being watched and monitored through mirrors in my room - that convex mirror in the corner of my room.

This time round, my delusions ran deeper and longer and larger: I had written (not read) all the books in MBU; I had written The Mental Health Act under which I was sectioned - even though I would have been only two years old at the time; I was a lactating Mary Mother of God, and Eddie was the Son of God; I was as bright as Einstein, as enlightened as Buddha. I believed myself to be a genius, wrongly imprisoned and it was my goal to prove 'them' all wrong and that when I eventually did, it would hit the papers - 'Genius sectioned!' and I'd sue the NHS and become rich and famous.

I believed I could heal people with just the use of my healing hands and the emanating heat that radiated from them, that I could read people's minds and manipulate them and their thoughts to get my own way. I could speak 'child' language and understand what young infants' babbling meant even when their mothers couldn't. I was placed in MBU to be everyone else's saviour. I was a saviour.

I believed that the patients in the nearby Adult Acute Psychiatric ward could directly converse with me through the staff's handheld radios. The staff all carried these radios, which would now and then alert them to a need in the adjacent building, just a minute's walk away. I would hear terrified voices pleading for my help when no one else could hear them. At one point during my stay there was a voice in the radio and I said 'your radio is going off', she answered and all the staff fled - no one left in the building. On three or four occasions this happened because someone in the acute ward had tried to take their life.

My delusional mind told me there was no night and day and that time didn't really move onwards, forwards - more that we were living on a line and, like a pendulum swinging, we would move forward and back and forward and back. I drew drawings on my chalkboard - the drawings of a madwoman. Circles and lines rubbed out and repeated like an eccentric genius trying their hand at their next complicated revelation.

I was fluent in French, I knew sign language, I could visit Australia in my sleep to see my sister. I was so funny that I could predict comedians' lines, knew them before they did. I had several 'savant skills' and most importantly, it was in my power to disappear from MBU, and go back home. All I had to do was pack and leave no trace of my having been there.

I thought, when I looked out of my window and across to the garden, that I was looking at a parallel world, a kind and warm and happy place that I was striving to get to - only I didn't know how. But I knew it had to be better than where I was. That was my reality - it felt no different to your own. But, by having such delusional core beliefs, by very definition you are completely alone.

‘Skeletons in the Bath’

One afternoon, on the suggestion of a member of staff, I decided to have a bath to help calm me down. I usually loved baths and although they served to heal my many aches and pains and calm my mind, this bath time was particularly horrid. The room itself was large, painted white throughout and was mostly empty apart from a bath smack bang in the centre of the room. It had a tiny toilet in one corner and a sink in the other, with a few baby baths and products, labelled for each of the mums to use with their babies. There was a sign on the wall opposite the bath encouraging us to clear up after ourselves; to leave the room as we found it. Convex mirrors in each corner allowed no hiding - no privacy.

The room was clean and spacious and silent and the door opposite the bath remained unlocked at all times. The door had the now-familiar opaque slats in it that could be opened and closed on the opposite side of the door. I got used to people knocking and peering in to ask if I was ok. At one point, I was so

unbelievably ill that I couldn't bathe alone - anxiety gripping me and my mind failing me so I couldn't even carry out the simplest of tasks. The compassion of the members of staff was overwhelming, on reflection. Being able to help bathe a naked, shaking and sobbing 38 year old woman while still making her feel worthy, cared for and not judged, is no small feat.

This particular bath time I felt more confident and so bathed solo with only my phone for company, trying to use music to calm me. I attempted to bring up a classical music playlist online that I had played Eddie in my tummy every day of my pregnancy; the music that he was born to. For some reason my phone brought up YouTube, and I remember what looked like a band of terrifying-looking black and white skeletons playing on a music video which was odd enough, but they turned to me and started talking, screaming in fact. I was so afraid. But I made myself look, saying to myself that I would not let myself be scared in this episode of mental illness, not like the last time. So I forced myself to stare at the screen, noticing their menacing red eyes and spindly pointing fingers. They were trying to tell me something. The noise emanating from my phone, some sort of thrash metal, was painful to listen to, messing with my head. But I still forced myself not to look away even though it was making me feel disoriented, sick. I was so scared. Then, suddenly, it switched to a video of a man talking directly into the screen - directly to me. He was, in fact, signing but I seemed to understand what he was saying! His complex series of gesticulations communicated to me not to give up or be afraid. To keep going and to continue this video because by the time I'd finish watching it, I would then be fluent in sign language. You can do anything, he signed to me. The videos continued to switch between dark skeletons and the serious man in a suit. Devastating noise followed by bizarre silence. I sat transfixed feeling that by enduring this strange trial, I would come out stronger from the experience. Phone held in my hand, close to my face, I watched until my bath went uninvitingly cold and the familiar knock-swish noise of the door came and a voice asked if I was ok? I wasn't even sure I knew.