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Experiencing Mania in America



Finding Light In The Darkness

The memoir reflects on the universal experience of human emotions, delving into the heart of emotional struggles faced in bipolar disorder and the shared human condition. It offers insights into the journey towards self-discovery and balance in life.

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Daniel Shane Golman

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Preface

Navigating the Chaos

Amidst the intricate landscape of our minds, there exists a realm known as mania—a place where reality blurs, emotions intensify, and the normal rhythms of life break apart. It's a place of profound complexity, where the self seems to splinter into different versions, each one pulling you in a different direction. At times, it feels like standing in the eye of a storm, with everything inside you whirling at breakneck speed while you desperately try to hold on to a sense of who you are.

But mania is only one part of the bipolar experience. In the quiet moments between the storms, you grapple with the weight of reality—struggling to reconcile the chaos of your mind with the demands of the world around you. The highs are sharp, electric, and all-consuming. The lows, by contrast, are hollow, numbing, and suffocating. It's this constant swing between extremes that defines my life and the lives of so many others who live with bipolar disorder.

As we embark on this journey through the pages of my story, I invite you to step inside this world of extremes. This memoir isn't just a collection of personal stories—it's a window into the lived experience of a condition that remains deeply misunderstood by society, and even at times by the medical community. I've spent years trying to make sense of my own mind, constantly seeking healing and understanding, but the challenges are never static. And neither is the world around us.

Today, the world of mental health is caught between two realities. On one hand, technological advances are opening up new ways to assess, diagnose, and treat mental illness. Telehealth, digital therapies, and mental health apps are revolutionizing access to care. But beneath the surface, the systems that support acute mental health care—our hospitals, our clinics, and yes, even our jails—are still operating on outdated models. We have the tools to look forward, but the institutions tasked with managing severe mental health crises are stuck in the past, under-resourced and ill-equipped for the complexities of disorders like bipolar.

For those of us in the bipolar community, this disconnect is particularly painful. The promise of better treatments and more personalized care hangs just out of reach, but the reality of navigating a broken system remains a daily struggle. Our medications evolve, but the way we receive care doesn't. We are often left managing our conditions

alone, in isolation, while the larger healthcare system falls behind. It's a system that pushes us toward stability but offers little support in the way of true healing.

Putting My Demons to Rest: Where I Am Now

Today, I manage my life like someone walking a tightrope. On the outside, I might appear to be stable, functioning like anyone else going through the motions of daily life. But on the inside, it's a constant balancing act. Every day without a manic episode feels like a victory, yet that victory comes with an undercurrent of fear—fear that the stability I've worked so hard to maintain could slip through my fingers at any moment.

My life is divided into three stages: stability, self-sabotage, and anticipation. **Stability** feels like walking on eggshells, always waiting for the other shoe to drop. It's a sense of calm, but one that's undercut by the knowledge that it's temporary. **Self-sabotage** happens when I grow tired of the routine, when the monotony of stability feels suffocating, and I start to crave the highs of mania again—sometimes turning to marijuana, other times tinkering with my meds, hoping to disrupt the quiet. And then there's the **anticipation**—the ever-present feeling that the next episode is lurking just around the corner, no matter how much I prepare or how carefully I manage my treatment.

My tools for keeping balance are simple but vital. I log my medications religiously, I journal to keep track of my emotions, and I exercise to keep my mind and body in sync. These rituals are small acts of self-care, but they are crucial to maintaining the delicate equilibrium between stability and chaos. Still, even with these safeguards in place, I know that bipolar disorder is not something you ever truly conquer—it's something you manage, one day at a time.

The reality of my life today is shaped by both personal and systemic limitations. I'm on disability, receiving enough from the government to cover my rent and living expenses. I'm grateful, of course, for the stability this provides. But it also serves as a constant reminder that I'm not working, that I'm not contributing in the same way I used to. I spent nine years as a software engineer with a degree from Virginia Tech, yet now my days are shaped by managing symptoms rather than code. It's hard not to feel frustrated, not to wonder if I'll ever fully return to the professional world I once thrived in.

The Bipolar Community and the Mental Health System: Two Worlds Colliding

As I reflect on where I am today, I can't help but think about the larger context—the experiences of those of us in the bipolar community trying to navigate this

ever-changing mental health landscape. The tools we have at our disposal are advancing—apps, online therapy, even digital diagnostic tools—but the systems that should be there to catch us when we fall are still rooted in an outdated way of thinking.

Our healthcare system, particularly for mental health, operates on a model that hasn't changed much in decades. The intake process at hospitals, the acute care facilities, the revolving door of emergency psychiatric treatment—they're not built to handle the nuances of bipolar disorder or the intricacies of other severe mental health conditions. We're still funneled through the same old system: medicate, stabilize, release. And when things go wrong, there's always the threat of being caught in the criminal justice system, where the only "treatment" is isolation in jail cells or bleak psychiatric wards.

We stand on the cusp of so many possibilities. With technology, we can monitor symptoms, adjust treatments in real time, and connect to care from the comfort of our homes. But the institutions that are supposed to help us when we need it most are stuck in the past. They are reactive, not proactive, and they leave us fighting our battles alone.

This book is not just my story—it's a call for change. For those of us living with bipolar disorder, we deserve better than a system that waits for us to break before it steps in. We deserve a future where mental health care is as dynamic and forward-thinking as the technology that surrounds it. But until that future becomes reality, we fight for stability, for survival, and for a world where our struggles are seen, understood, and supported.

I share this journey not just for myself, but for everyone navigating the complexities of mental illness. This is an invitation to understand the challenges we face, to recognize the courage it takes to live with a condition that never truly goes away, and to hope for a better future—a future where we are no longer lost in the chaos, but finally, truly, found.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mother, whose unwavering strength and courage guided her through the trials of my mental illness and who continues to navigate the challenges of caring for a son with bipolar disorder—a profound mental illness still so shrouded in mystery by the medical community, and a source of uncertainty for all who grapple with its diagnosis or discovery within themselves.

Whether it stems from a genetic predisposition etched within our DNA or emerges from the complex interplay of societal factors and our environment, I dedicate this work to shedding light—a beacon of understanding—for those seeking knowledge and wisdom in the uncharted territories of this condition. May it offer solace to those who find themselves in the labyrinth of the unknown, and may it ignite the courage needed to press onward.

I also want to express my deep appreciation for the challenges that have profoundly shaped my life. Amidst the trials and tribulations, I have unearthed a unique perspective—a viewpoint I am privileged to share with others. This journey, fraught with the disruptions caused by a recurring illness, has also granted me the precious gift of resilience. I've been fortunate to receive unwavering support from friends and family, guiding me toward my aspiration of long-term stability and care.

This memoir, a chronicle of my journey through the highs and lows of bipolar disorder, serves as a testament to the complexities and challenges of living with a mental health condition. It's a story of struggle and triumph, despair and hope, chaos and recovery.

As I continue on this path, I am constantly learning and adapting, finding new ways to manage my condition and live a fulfilling life. My experiences have taught me the importance of self-care, the value of a strong support network, and the power of resilience.

I hope that my story resonates with others facing similar challenges, offering insights, encouragement, and a sense of solidarity. The journey with bipolar disorder is unique for each individual, but it's a journey that doesn't have to be walked alone.

In sharing these experiences, I aim to contribute to a broader conversation about mental health, fostering understanding, empathy, and support for those who navigate this complex terrain. The road ahead may be uncertain, but it is filled with possibilities for growth, learning, and newfound strength.

Darkness Within

Author's Poem

I am trapped inside a body that is not mine.
If I traveled back in time, then people would see.
The soul I bare and the soul I can be.
There is a soul to set free.
Once the pain subdues, I will be resurrected.
The conditions in my life will change.
I am scared, these feelings will not fade.
I despair like tragedy, I encourage pain to enter and never leave.
To grow glutenous and seek pleasure from pain to enter.
Punishment and fear are designed to blind, delusions so simple, fleeting inside my core.
I have the tools, I know what needs to be done, still I forget.
I forget who I am because I can no longer see the identity of being free.
My shadow is forever gone, yet my heart is pure and soul dark.
This soul is damaged and trying to heal.
Every attempt seems to cause more pain.
Searching for a way out, causes me to go insane.

Genetic Predisposition (Early Trauma)

Dawn of High School: Senior Year, August 2009

Beep... Beep... Beep...

My alarm clock blared at 6 a.m. on a sweltering August morning in 2009, piercing through the thick heat of an already 95-degree day. This wasn't just the start of another day—it was the first football practice of my senior year. Everything I had worked for, everything I had built as a high school athlete, was coming to a head. This day would set the tone, not just for the season, but for my leadership on and off the field. It was more than just football; it was a test of who I was as a person, a leader, and a fighter.

At 17, I carried more than just the weight of shoulder pads and a helmet. I carried the expectations of my team, my coaches, my family, and most heavily, myself. Being a senior wasn't just about playing a sport—it was about embodying leadership. I wasn't just an athlete; I was a role model, a guide for the younger players who looked to me for strength and direction. They watched my every move, measuring themselves against my performance, my resilience, and my discipline. I thrived under that pressure, or at least I thought I did. That morning, I believed I could handle it all.

The first practice of the year wasn't just another drill; it was a battle—against the heat, the expectations, and my own limitations. I could feel the weight of that day long before I set foot on the field. My younger brother was still asleep across the hall, oblivious to the emotional intensity building inside me. It was my job to wake him, another small duty that reminded me of my responsibility. We got ready in silence, both mentally preparing for the challenge ahead, our paths intertwined yet uniquely our own.

In the car, the silence was heavy, filled with our shared anticipation for what was coming. He was looking to prove himself, while I was looking to cement my place as the leader of the team, the player who could be counted on. I felt the weight of his expectations too. I had to be strong—not just for me, but for him. He looked up to me, and that fueled my determination to be everything I needed to be, even when the pressure threatened to crack me.

When we arrived at the locker room, I was among the first to walk in. I liked it that way—the solitude before the storm. I plugged in my headphones, drowning out everything but the music and my own thoughts. The locker room was a sacred space, one where I could mentally prepare for battle. Football wasn't just a sport to me; it was my identity. It was what defined me, the reason I pushed through every hardship, every pain, and every doubt.

Practice that morning was brutal. The heat was oppressive, the drills exhausting. Every sprint, every tackle felt like a war, but I kept going. I couldn't afford to slow down. I was a senior now, and that came with the unspoken responsibility of showing everyone else how to push through adversity. I wasn't just leading by words; I was leading by example. In my mind, a leader couldn't show weakness, couldn't let pain get in the way of the mission. So, I kept pushing, even when my body screamed for me to stop.

But then, after practice, I stepped on the scale, and everything changed. The number stared back at me—223 pounds. Just three days earlier, I had weighed in at 236 pounds. Thirteen pounds lost in three days. At first, I couldn't process it. My mind raced to explain it away: dehydration, heat exhaustion, the intensity of practice. I was supposed to be strong, invincible. But something about that number wouldn't leave me alone.

I approached my coach, a man I respected more than most. He had always been there, pushing me to be my best, to overcome every obstacle. I told him about the weight loss, expecting him to share my concern. But he brushed it off, saying, "Daniel, you're probably just dehydrated. Make sure you're eating enough, drinking plenty of fluids. Salt helps too."

His words didn't ease the gnawing feeling in my gut. I wasn't just dehydrated. I could feel it in my bones, in my muscles. Something was wrong. But what was I supposed to do? He was the coach, and his confidence in me was unshakable. I nodded, trusting his authority, and tried to push the doubt away. I had to keep going. I had to show everyone, especially myself, that I could handle whatever came my way.

But the next day, things only got worse. My body wasn't just tired—it was shutting down. I couldn't eat, couldn't drink without feeling like I was forcing my body to accept something it didn't want. I felt weak, something I had never allowed myself to admit before. But the team was counting on me, and leaders don't show weakness. Leaders don't sit out. So, I went to the trainers, hoping they'd have some quick fix, some explanation that would let me get back on the field.

Instead, they benched me. Red-flagged for 24 hours. No practice, just rest.

Rest? I didn't know how to rest. I had trained my mind and body to fight, to push through, to never stop. Sitting out felt like failure. I watched from the sidelines as my teammates ran drills without me, the guilt and frustration gnawing at my insides. **Leaders don't sit out.**

But I didn't have a choice. My body was forcing me to confront something I had always tried to ignore—my limits.

That afternoon, the coach pulled up in his golf cart. He called me over, his voice carrying that same commanding tone that I had always respected. "Daniel, we need you out there. You're a leader. The team counts on you," he said, his words echoing through me like a challenge.

I tried to explain the weight loss, the exhaustion, the gnawing feeling that something was wrong. But he wasn't listening. His focus was on the field, on performance. "Overcoming adversity is what makes a champion," he said. "I believe you can push through this."

His words were meant to inspire, but instead, they crushed me. I wanted to push through. I wanted to be the leader he believed I could be. But my body was betraying me in a way I had never experienced before. The pain hit me hard that night—unbearable muscle cramps that left me curled up in bed, unable to move. I tried to call out for help, but no one was there to hear me.

I felt alone. Not just physically, but mentally. The identity I had built around being strong, being invincible, was cracking, and I didn't know what to do.

After several failed attempts to reach my parents, my brother's girlfriend finally answered. She rushed me to the emergency room, my body wracked with pain, my mind clouded with fear. The doctor's face was grim as he delivered the diagnosis: *rhabdomyolysis*. My muscles were breaking down, releasing toxins into my bloodstream. My kidneys were at risk of failing.

I lay in that hospital bed, IVs pumping fluids into my system, feeling vulnerable in a way I had never known before. Football no longer mattered. My life, my body, everything I had built was at risk.

Over the next few days, my body began to heal, but mentally, I was in a fog. The physical recovery was slow, but the emotional toll was heavier. My coach visited me in the hospital, and his first question stung: "When can you get back on the field?" It was like a

punch to the gut. Here I was, physically broken, yet the only concern seemed to be when I could return to playing.

I left the hospital with more than just a diagnosis. I left with the realization that my body and mind were not invincible, no matter how much I pushed. I felt betrayed by the very thing I loved most—football.

The season went on, but it wasn't the same. Every hit, every sprint, every play was tinged with the knowledge that I wasn't invincible. The accolades came—Second-Team All-State Offensive Guard—but they felt hollow. The recognition didn't fill the void that had opened inside me.

Post-football, I was left with a growing sense of emptiness, a void that I didn't know how to fill. My identity, once so firmly rooted in the game, was unraveling. The depression that followed wasn't just about losing football—it was about losing who I thought I was.

When I finally opened up to a doctor about how I was feeling, the diagnosis came: clinical depression. Treatment began, and with it, a new journey—a journey not of strength and resilience in the physical sense, but of mental survival. The medications, the therapy—they were tools to help me navigate a new battlefield, one that existed in my mind.

What I didn't know then was that this was only the beginning of a much larger battle. A misdiagnosis of depression would eventually lead to the discovery of something far more complex: bipolar disorder. But at that moment, I was still trying to figure out who I was without football, without the invincibility I had once believed in.

That journey—the journey of survival, of discovering who I was beyond the field—was just beginning.

Misdiagnosis (Depression)

College Life

As I stepped out of the vibrant, entrepreneurial ecosystem of college and into the structured realm of professional software engineering, I found myself at a crossroads of identity and aspiration. My college years weren't defined by academic accolades but by a whirlwind of hackathons, projects, and ventures that stretched well beyond the classroom walls. This path, unconventional yet enriching, seemed to uniquely prepare me for life after academia, but there was something beneath the surface—an internal storm building that I couldn't yet comprehend.

In this narrative, I aim to explore the complex path from the misdiagnosis of depression during my high school years to the eventual recognition and onset of bipolar disorder. This journey, intertwined with the transitions and pressures of professional life, highlights the broader issues of mental health care and societal perceptions. It's a story of struggle, discovery, and ongoing challenges, set against the backdrop of a society ill-equipped to understand and support those with mental health conditions.

The roots of my mental health journey trace back to high school. During those formative years, I experienced what were eventually misdiagnosed as symptoms of depression. I was moody, withdrawn at times, and struggled to find meaning in my daily routines. These early experiences were marked by a lack of clarity in both diagnosis and treatment. The medical strategies employed were aimed solely at managing depression, a narrow approach that missed the complexity of what I was actually experiencing. The nuances of my condition remained hidden beneath the surface, setting the stage for greater complications later on.

The shift from college into a professional setting brought its own challenges—balancing mental health while meeting the demands of a new work environment. In college, my days were filled with projects that fueled my passion and creativity, but the professional world felt restrictive and unfulfilling. The transition from a space where I thrived to one that felt confining began to take a toll on my mental well-being. The change wasn't just in my work; it was in the very rhythm of my life, profoundly affecting my mental state.

Mania I

I am the Hero, You are the Villain

Virginia Tech

Stepping into the professional realm as a software engineer after college was both thrilling and nerve-wracking. My college years weren't defined by straight A's or accolades, but by a whirlwind of entrepreneurial pursuits and hackathons. I threw myself into projects and side ventures that stretched well beyond my coursework, fueling my ambition and drive. This unconventional approach seemed to give me an edge as I entered the working world, but underneath it all, something deeper was beginning to unravel.

The first signs were subtle—a gradual sense of detachment, followed by a surge of energy I hadn't felt in years. After starting my first job at a consulting firm, I found myself on the consulting "bench." It was an experience that left me in professional limbo—showing up to the office every day, clocking in, but with nothing meaningful to do. The idle hours made me restless, amplifying the stress of collecting a paycheck without contributing. It felt like I was being paid to wait, a purgatory that went against every instinct I had developed during my fast-paced college life.

Eventually, I was assigned to a client, but the situation didn't improve. The new job required a 90-mile commute, turning my life into an exhausting cycle. Every Sunday, I would pack up, drive to my hotel near the client's office, work the week, and return home on Fridays. Living in two places and adapting to the new work environment took a toll on me, both mentally and physically. My sleep patterns began to shift, and I noticed a strange sense of energy that didn't align with the exhaustion I should have felt.

In an attempt to regain control over my mental state, I began tapering off my medications—Lexapro and Abilify. Initially, the results were exhilarating. Without the numbing effects of the medication, I experienced a surge of creativity and productivity, much like my most energetic days in college. At work, I impressed my managers with my ability to deliver results, feeling a renewed sense of control over my life. But the high wasn't sustainable, and soon enough, the cracks began to show.

The energy I had once celebrated transformed into something more erratic. I found myself staying awake for hours, my thoughts racing uncontrollably. I could recall details,

like song lyrics, after just hearing them once. I would sleep for only a few hours and wake up feeling completely refreshed, yet uneasy. It was like riding a wave of mental energy that I couldn't control, no matter how hard I tried. I felt invincible but strangely out of touch with reality.

I began obsessing over concepts like "flow"—that heightened state of focus and productivity where everything seems to align effortlessly. I researched the phenomenon, convinced that I had tapped into something beyond the ordinary. It was reminiscent of the movie *Limitless*, where the protagonist unlocks untapped potential with a simple pill. I reached out to experts, including the wife of the person who coined the term "flow," but no one could explain the prolonged state of mental energy I was experiencing. Their inability to provide answers only deepened my sense of isolation and confusion.

Frustrated and seeking answers, I approached the medical office at work, explaining my heightened mood and productivity. I expressed concern about feeling "unnaturally happy," but their response was dismissive—they chalked it up to holiday cheer and sent me on my way. It was a disheartening experience, one that left me feeling unsupported and unheard. My attempts to seek help felt futile.

The holiday season brought my family closer, and they began to notice the changes in my behavior. I was speaking faster, making erratic decisions, and my overall demeanor seemed off. But none of us understood the gravity of the situation. It wasn't until I reached a breaking point that we realized what was happening.

My mind was spiraling into mania. I began to believe I was touched by God, that I was the new messiah sent to rid the world of evil. Every strange occurrence seemed to reinforce this belief, and soon enough, I was no longer tethered to reality. I latched onto the idea that I was chosen for something greater, and that my mission was to save the world from darkness.

My personal life began to collapse. After moving back home due to unemployment, I clashed constantly with my father. He saw the signs of my instability, but I refused to acknowledge them. I continued self-medicating with marijuana, denying that I had any mental illness. Our fights grew more intense until, eventually, I was kicked out of the house. At this point, I felt completely lost.

In my delusional state, I drove back to Virginia Tech's campus in Blacksburg, seeking refuge in a place that had once brought me purpose. I was convinced that I could rid the school of evil through a symbolic act. I emptied all my belongings onto the Virginia Tech Memorial at the Drill Field, where 32 individuals were murdered during the 2007

shooting. I believed that sacrificing my possessions would purify the campus. After leaving my things there, I pressed one of the emergency buttons scattered around campus and told the operator I needed help.

When campus police arrived, I believed they were there to commend me for my actions. I walked them to the memorial and explained my sacrifice. In my mind, I was saving the world. But in their eyes, I was a danger—to myself and to others. They told me I wasn't being arrested, but that I needed to be handcuffed and detained for my own safety. They reassured me that it was protocol, but I could sense the shift in their demeanor.

I was transported to St. Albans Mental Hospital, where the reality of my situation finally began to sink in. I was placed in the West Wing, an area reserved for those deemed dangerous. The patients there saw me as different, with some calling me a beautiful soul who didn't belong on the "evil side," while others treated me with suspicion. The staff was equally divided—some were kind, others treated me as though I were a terrorist.

I resisted the medication they tried to prescribe, convinced that the doctors were part of the evil system I was meant to fight. I became a difficult patient, questioning every treatment and challenging every decision. My paranoia intensified, especially after my previous trauma with authority figures during my senior year of football. The more I resisted, the more the staff documented me as "non-compliant." They saw my refusal to take medication and my acts of prayer as signs of rebellion.

One night, I reached my breaking point. I found a Bible and sat in the reading area, praying for deliverance. But instead of offering me peace, the staff saw my prayer as another act of defiance. They threatened to restrain and medicate me by force. I believed I had rights, that I would be treated fairly, but my hopes were quickly shattered.

It took twelve staff members to physically restrain me. They strapped me to a chair, binding my arms and legs as if I were a dangerous animal. I was injected with a sedative, and one of the nurses, with a sinister grin, whispered, "Don't fight it." His laugh echoed in my mind as the medication took hold. My body burned from the inside, the restraints cutting into my skin as I felt myself fade away into unconsciousness.

After days of being in this sedated state, I was brought before a judge for an involuntary commitment hearing. I had no idea that every conversation with my doctors, every question I asked about my treatment plan, was being used as evidence of my "non-compliance." They extended my stay, and the forced medication continued. When

the initial injection wore off, I felt like a zombie—too weak to move, barely able to eat, and with no will to fight.

Over time, I learned to play the game. I started attending group therapy, complied with the medication, and kept my head down. The staff, who had once been suspicious of me, began to ease their grip. Slowly, I earned their trust and was given a discharge date.

But the discharge didn't come with healing. I was released into the world just as unstable as when I had arrived. The goal of the system was to stabilize me enough to leave, not to offer long-term care or true support. I was pushed out before I was ready, left to navigate the complex world of mental health without a map. The experience scarred me, reinforcing my distrust of the healthcare system and deepening the wounds of my already fragile mental state.

Reflection: Mania I

Reflecting on my first manic episode, I am struck by how much was beyond my control—and yet how much I have learned from the experience. Mania is deceptive. It feels exhilarating at first, as if you've unlocked a secret power that no one else can access. But the energy, the creativity, the feeling of invincibility—it's all a lie. The crash is inevitable, and the consequences are devastating.

The first lesson I learned was the importance of **recognizing early signs**. Mania doesn't happen all at once. It builds, slowly at first, and then spirals out of control. Looking back, I can see the signs—the sleepless nights, the racing thoughts, the impulsive decisions. But in the moment, it felt like I was thriving. I wish I had known then what I know now about managing those initial warning signs.

The second lesson is about the need for **support and understanding**. During that time, I pushed away the people who cared about me. I didn't want to admit that something was wrong, and I certainly didn't want anyone else to see it. But the truth is, you can't navigate mental illness alone. You need people who can recognize when you're slipping, who can guide you back to reality, and who can stand by you when things get hard.

I also learned a difficult truth about the **healthcare system**. My experience with St. Albans Mental Hospital was traumatic, not healing. Instead of receiving compassionate care, I was met with suspicion and force. The system isn't built for long-term healing—it's built for stabilization and release. And when you're dealing with a chronic

condition like bipolar disorder, that's not enough. I came out of that experience with a deep distrust of the very institutions that were supposed to help me.

Another lesson is about **acceptance**. Bipolar disorder isn't something that can be cured. It's something I will live with for the rest of my life. Coming to terms with that has been one of the hardest parts of my journey. The medication, the hospitalizations, the stigma—they're all part of this reality. But I've learned that acceptance doesn't mean giving up. It means learning to live with the illness, managing it day by day, and finding moments of peace within the chaos.

Lastly, I've learned the importance of **advocacy**—for myself and for others in the bipolar community. My experience in the mental health system was isolating and, at times, dehumanizing. But it's not unique. Many people with bipolar disorder face the same challenges—misdiagnosis, misunderstanding, and mistreatment. I've learned that we need to advocate for a system that offers true support, not just quick fixes. The journey to healing is long, and it requires compassion, patience, and understanding from both ourselves and the world around us.

This first manic episode was a turning point in my life—a moment where I realized that I would never be the same. But it was also the beginning of a journey toward understanding, resilience, and acceptance.

Mania II

Catch Me If You Can

Austin, Texas

Over the next four months, I found myself drifting in and out of psychiatric hospitalizations, sleeping in my car, and relying on the generosity of friends to crash on their couches. It was a period of intense instability, but I was eventually able to make a commitment to my parents that would become a turning point. I promised them I would abstain from marijuana and stay consistent with my medication. This marked the beginning of a new phase of stability in my life—one that gave me the confidence to start interviewing for jobs again.

As a software engineer, I knew my skills were in high demand. However, the process of securing a new job was grueling. It took nearly 100 interviews—first rounds, second rounds, final rounds—before I finally received an offer. That offer came from a small political donation platform, one that had played a pivotal role in the 2016 Republican National Committee's fundraising efforts for Donald Trump's presidential campaign. As the sole engineer at the company, my task was to compete with ActBlue, Hillary Clinton's donation platform, and implement Safari-enabled Apple Pay donations for the Republican candidate.

Working in Washington, DC during this period was challenging for many reasons, but the rising availability of marijuana in early 2016 proved to be one of the most significant obstacles. The temptation to relapse was overwhelming, and before long, I turned back to marijuana as a way to cope with the mounting pressure and stress of working at this startup.

The pressure to earn a paycheck clashed with my growing moral discomfort. I was torn between the financial necessity of my job and the realization that my work was helping to fuel a political machine that I didn't align with. This internal conflict triggered something inside me, awakening the dormant mania I had tried so hard to keep at bay. Feeling overwhelmed by guilt and stress, I disclosed to my employer that I had a severe mental illness and needed to take time off to recover.

I had expected my employer to be understanding, but the reality was far different. The company, with fewer than ten employees, had no HR policies in place to accommodate

my situation. Instead of offering support, they revoked my server access and essentially forced me to resign. I was told to leave immediately.

At the beginning of another manic episode, this injustice was more than I could handle. Fortunately, my father stepped in to help negotiate a severance package worth \$15,000. However, after taxes, I was left with only \$8,000—far less than I had anticipated. Still, in my manic state, I saw this as an opportunity to do something grand, something that would "rid the world of evil." That mission started with helping my childhood best friend, who was homeless in Waco, Texas.

Before the money even hit my bank account, and before I realized it would only be \$8,000, I booked a ticket to Austin and sent \$1,500 to my friend to help him survive until I arrived. My mind was racing with the idea of saving him, of bringing him back to Virginia where we could both start fresh.

When I arrived in Austin, my purpose was clear: I was going to bring my friend home. We had his car, and the plan seemed straightforward enough. But Austin, with its vibrant energy and my friend's upcoming birthday celebration, quickly changed the course of our plans. In my heightened state of mind, fueled by the imminent security of the severance payment, I embraced the detour. "What's the worst that could happen?" I thought to myself, as if I hadn't already lived through enough worst-case scenarios.

Wanting to give my friend a chance to regroup before we tackled the journey back to Virginia, I booked an Airbnb for a few nights. It felt like a good move—he could relax, we could enjoy the city, and everything would come together smoothly. But when we ventured into Austin's infamous 6th Street, we realized the Airbnb was far too removed from the action. So, I found us a hostel downtown, putting us right in the middle of the city's pulsating nightlife.

The hostel was an eclectic mix of travelers, entrepreneurs, and dreamers, all from different walks of life. It was a melting pot of ambition and excitement, and in my manic state, I began to see myself as a rising star in the tech world. Austin, known for its burgeoning tech scene, felt like the perfect place to carve out a new destiny. My mind raced with visions of success and grandeur, as if I were on the verge of something monumental.

But with the intensity of mania came indecision. Should I return to Virginia with my friend, or should I stay in Austin and build a new life for myself? This internal struggle was compounded by an infatuation I developed with a girl staying at the hostel. My heightened competitiveness and hyper-sexuality, fueled by the electric atmosphere of

the hostel, drove me to pursue her despite knowing she would only be in town for a short time.

I eventually worked up the courage to ask her out, though she seemed hesitant at first. After confiding in my friend and weighing her options, she agreed. The fact that our date fell on Valentine's Day felt like a cosmic sign that everything was falling into place. However, the date itself was anything but romantic. We went to see *Fifty Shades of Grey*, a decision that did little to foster any real connection between us.

After the movie, we returned to the hostel for what I had hoped would be a quiet, peaceful night. But peace was not in the cards. My friend, drunk and agitated, began mocking the girl for staying in with me instead of joining the party. His taunts stoked a fire inside me, and I retreated to my room, consumed by a whirlwind of anger and frustration.

Unable to contain my rage, I stormed out onto the streets, searching for her in a manic frenzy. When I returned and found her and my friend together, the final thread of my sanity snapped. What followed was an explosive confrontation—an outpouring of all the pent-up emotions and anger that had been building inside me for days. My friend and I, realizing that our relationship had become toxic and unsustainable, agreed to part ways. He would return to Virginia, and I would stay behind in Austin to face an uncertain future.

In the aftermath of the fight, I tried to make sense of the chaos. I called emergency services, telling them I was having a panic attack, though the situation was far more complex than that. The girl, understandably scared and confused, locked herself away, distancing herself from the unfolding drama. Left alone to pick up the pieces, I clung to the delusion that I could still make a life for myself in Austin.

I threw myself into job hunting, undeterred by rejection after rejection, even as my bank account dwindled. In my mind, I was on the cusp of a breakthrough. I imagined myself settling into a new apartment, starting a new job, and adopting a dog to keep me grounded. But none of it was real—just the fantasies of a mind gripped by mania.

My fixation soon shifted to a woman who worked at the apartment leasing office. I misinterpreted her Southern hospitality as romantic interest, and in my manic state, I became obsessed with her. This obsession escalated to the point where her boyfriend confronted me, triggering another spiral of paranoia and isolation. I locked myself in my apartment, unable to face the reality of what I had become.

In a desperate act of self-preservation, I armed myself with items I had stolen from Walmart, convinced that I needed protection. My agitation and paranoia reached a fever pitch, and in my manic state, I began destroying my apartment. The chaos that had been building inside me spilled out into the physical world.

Finally, in a moment of clarity, I called my parents. My father urged me to abandon everything and come home. With no other options left, I agreed. I left behind the apartment, the dog, and the grand delusions I had built in my mind.

But before heading to the airport, I made one last stop: a karaoke bar on 6th Street. It was there that everything came to a head. A confrontation with another patron escalated into a physical fight, and when the police arrived, they detained me—not for the fight, but because they recognized the signs of mental distress.

I was transported to jail, still unable to fully comprehend how my life had spiraled so far out of control. I was placed in isolation, surrounded by the unsettling sounds of other inmates. The experience was unlike anything I had ever faced—cold, impersonal, and terrifying. When I asked a guard about my right to a phone call, I was told that in this part of the jail, such rights didn't exist. It was a shocking contrast to everything I had been taught about the justice system.

Feeling abandoned and hopeless, I eventually managed to contact my mother, thanks to the guidance of a fellow inmate who showed me how to bypass the jail's digital phone system. My time in isolation was disorienting and dehumanizing. When a nurse came to check on me, I made the mistake of disclosing thoughts of self-harm, thinking it would get me transferred to a psychiatric facility. Instead, I was stripped of my clothes and placed in a padded 'safety room,' wearing nothing but a thin "turtle suit."

The room was cold and bare, designed for safety, but it felt more like a punishment. Alone in that stark space, I was forced to confront the darkest parts of myself. I threw up in the vent and hyperventilated, overwhelmed by the crushing weight of my situation. Surprisingly, the guards—who had been indifferent at first—showed me unexpected kindness, trying to calm me down in my lowest moments.

The isolation became a form of forced meditation, a grueling mental challenge that tested the limits of my resilience. After what felt like an eternity, I was transferred to another jail facility. The bus ride to the new location was a nightmare. Shackled and ridiculed by other inmates, I found an unlikely ally in a convicted murderer who defended me against their taunts.

Eventually, my mother arrived to post bail, and I was released. But the damage had already been done. The journey back to Virginia marked the beginning of a long, painful road to recovery. Therapy, medication adjustments, and rebuilding trust with my family became my sole focus. Returning home was bittersweet. My family was relieved to have me back, but the reality of my condition was hard to face. The process of recovery was slow and fraught with setbacks, but I was determined to regain control over my life, even if it meant starting from scratch.

Reflection: Lessons from Mania Two

Looking back on my second manic episode, what strikes me the most is the intensity of destruction—not just the physical chaos of my apartment, but the emotional, relational, and psychological wreckage it left in its wake. This was a period where my illness manifested in external, uncontrollable ways. Unlike my first episode, which was more internalized, this time, the mania became a force that tore apart everything around me.

The **first major lesson** from this episode is the **power of denial**. In the months leading up to my move to Austin, I thought I had everything under control. I was maintaining a job, staying on my medications, and for a while, I was able to convince myself that the worst was behind me. But mania is never truly gone. It hides in the background, waiting for an opportunity to surface. The warning signs were there—the sleepless nights, the racing thoughts, the increased confidence—but I ignored them, thinking I could handle it on my own. Denial is a dangerous thing when it comes to bipolar disorder, and this episode showed me just how deadly it can be.

Isolation is a recurring theme in my manic episodes. In Austin, I isolated myself both emotionally and physically. I stayed in a hostel, surrounded by people who didn't know me or my history, and I cut myself off from those who could have recognized the signs of my unraveling. I distanced myself from my family and friends, convinced that I was on the verge of some great breakthrough. But the truth is, bipolar disorder thrives in isolation. It's in those moments, when you're cut off from reality and support, that the illness gains the most power. This experience underscored the importance of staying connected to a support system—people who can pull you back when you start to drift away.

Another key takeaway is the **danger of self-medicating**. In my first episode, I had used marijuana to cope with the growing mania, and in Austin, I fell into the same trap. I turned to weed to manage the anxiety and stress of my job, but all it did was amplify the chaos already brewing inside me. Bipolar disorder and substances like marijuana are a

dangerous mix, and this experience taught me that self-medicating only deepens the spiral of mania.

The mental health and criminal justice systems intersected in a terrifying way during this episode. Being detained, placed in isolation, and stripped of my rights was one of the most dehumanizing experiences of my life. The criminal justice system is ill-equipped to handle mental health crises. Instead of receiving the care and compassion I needed, I was treated as a threat, as someone to be contained rather than helped. This is a systemic problem, one that too many people with mental health issues face. My experience in jail reinforced the need for reform, for a system that prioritizes treatment over punishment. Being locked away in isolation, shackled, and misunderstood by those around me left lasting emotional scars that took years to heal.

One of the most difficult realizations from this episode was how **delusion distorts reality**. During my time in Austin, I became consumed by grandiose ideas, convinced that I was destined for greatness, that I was meant to "rid the world of evil." Every action I took felt justified by this narrative I had created in my mind. But these were just delusions, fueled by mania. The experience was a harsh reminder of how easily reality can be distorted when mental illness takes hold. I now know how important it is to ground myself in reality, to be vigilant when I start seeing patterns and signs where none exist.

A critical lesson from this episode is the **importance of self-awareness**. As the mania escalated, there were moments when I had brief flashes of clarity. I knew something was wrong, but I didn't have the tools or self-awareness to stop the spiral. Now, after years of therapy and introspection, I've learned to recognize the early warning signs of an episode—the racing thoughts, the sleeplessness, the impulsive decisions. Bipolar disorder doesn't just hit you out of nowhere. There are always clues, and being aware of them is the first step in managing the illness.

Lastly, **forgiveness**—both of myself and others—played a major role in my recovery from this episode. When I came out of the mania and realized the destruction I had caused, the guilt and shame were overwhelming. I had lost a friend, destroyed my apartment, jeopardized my career, and alienated myself from the people I loved. But I had to learn to forgive myself. Bipolar disorder isn't a choice, and the actions I took during the episode were not entirely within my control. I had to accept that, while the consequences were real, the illness had played a major role in my behavior. Forgiving myself for the damage done was essential to moving forward.

At the same time, I had to come to terms with the **failures of the system** around me—the police, the jail, the hospital. These institutions weren't equipped to handle someone like me, and holding onto resentment for the way I was treated only prolonged my healing. Instead, I had to focus on advocating for better mental health care, not just for myself but for others who face similar challenges. This experience taught me the importance of standing up for myself, of demanding the care I deserve, even in a system that often fails to deliver it.

Mania Two was another turning point in my journey with bipolar disorder. It was a harsh reminder that the illness is always there, lurking beneath the surface, waiting for an opportunity to take control. But it was also a lesson in resilience. Despite the destruction, the chaos, and the pain, I emerged from the episode stronger, more self-aware, and more determined to manage my illness moving forward. The road to recovery hasn't been easy, but it has given me the tools to navigate the unpredictable landscape of bipolar disorder with more clarity and purpose.

Mania Three

San Francisco

San Francisco

After returning from Austin, Texas, in the aftermath of my second manic episode, I was overwhelmed by guilt, shame, and anger. The weight of what had occurred felt inescapable—the financial wreckage, the damaged relationships, and the looming fear of unemployment. Back at my parents' house, it was as if all the independence I had fought for since college was stripped away.

It was March 2017, two years post-college, and the walls seemed to be closing in. My future felt uncertain, like I would never regain the normalcy I craved. My parents provided shelter, but it felt like dependence and defeat. The responsibility of taking medication and attending regular therapy sessions weighed heavily on me, and I knew that the next few months were critical. I needed to focus on healing, but even with medications, I never quite felt like myself.

I worked relentlessly to reestablish stability, placing equal emphasis on physical and mental health. I forced myself into routines—daily gym visits, gratitude journaling, and ongoing therapy—to stay grounded. It was a strict regimen, driven by one overriding goal: independence. I wanted to break free from the support of my parents and return to the workforce.

The hyper-focus on escaping my parents' house led me down an exhausting path of endless job interviews. The tech world moves quickly, and after countless rejections, I finally landed a job offer with a government consulting firm in Crystal City, Virginia. The position was a dream in many ways—I would be the technical lead on a counter-intelligence project. But the position required a security clearance, a daunting prospect given my recent history of bipolar episodes and the legal fallout from Austin. Despite the obstacles, I was allowed to start working in the unclassified scope, and with this opportunity came a glimmer of hope.

But nothing is ever perfect. The job came with a grueling daily commute of over an hour each way, a rhythm that quickly began to take its toll. I convinced myself that I could tough it out—that this was a temporary discomfort until I could save enough to move

out of my parents' house. The focus on independence blinded me to practical realities, such as the importance of building an emergency savings fund for future episodes or medical emergencies. My only goal was to escape.

To control my impulsive spending—a hallmark of my mania—my older brother stepped in as my de facto financial advisor. This arrangement was as challenging as it was necessary. Every penny I earned went into a bank account I couldn't access without his approval. We would sit down and calculate my expenses, discussing every potential purchase, down to the last dollar. It was suffocating at times, but it was also the only way I could avoid financial ruin. The process tested our relationship, as I often found myself needing to justify my spending, constantly under the shadow of suspicion: *Are you sure you're not manic?*

After months of this careful financial management, I finally secured an apartment two miles from the office, a significant milestone in my quest for independence. By December 2017, I was living alone, two years past my first manic episode and psychosis, attending therapy regularly, and continuing to exercise as a way to manage my mental health. It felt like I was starting to build a new identity, one focused on stability and professional success. My self-esteem began to recover as I thrived at work, using the structure of daily routines and skill-based hobbies to keep myself balanced. But as much as I attributed this period of relative stability to my own efforts, it was my brother's support that made it possible.

He helped me set tangible goals: staying at my job for a full year, saving money, and maintaining my lease for the same duration. But even with those achievements, something was missing. The medications made me feel numb—disconnected from the world, and from myself. I began to spiral again, slowly sinking back into my old habits.

Marijuana became my escape once more, breaking my long streak of abstinence. With it came a creeping feeling of hopelessness, feeding the narrative that I would never truly be okay. Despite my success at work, I began to dread the endless hours of unfilled time in the office. I would clock in, work a few hours, then sneak out for an extended lunch at the gym, only to head home early, all while pretending to be online if my presence was required. I knew my employer noticed the shift in my productivity—three days of remote work quickly became days of procrastination, guilt, and self-medication.

The loneliness crept in too. I started going out to bars and clubs almost every night, looking for companionship in all the wrong places. It became a game of instant gratification—trying to attract someone to fill the void I felt inside. I was no longer

prioritizing my mental health, and it showed. The friction of living a double life—trying to succeed professionally while sinking deeper into my old habits—became unbearable. I felt trapped in a life I didn't want to live.

Searching for answers, I began blaming my medication for the emotional numbness. I convinced myself that my employer wasn't giving me enough work, that the problem wasn't me—it was them. And so, I started job hunting again, certain that the next opportunity would be the one to make everything better. It was a familiar pattern: the belief that the grass was greener elsewhere, that a new job or a new city would solve my problems.

As the mania slowly returned, I fell under the illusion that I was destined for greatness in Silicon Valley. The stories of tech entrepreneurs fueled my delusions, and I began interviewing for new roles, despite my employer's belief in me. I knew deep down that I was betraying the opportunity they had given me, but I couldn't stop. My year-long anniversary with the company was approaching, and I convinced myself that a fresh start in San Francisco was the answer to my growing dissatisfaction.

During this period, the emerging mental health tech sector caught my attention. I found a niche where I could combine my technical skills with my passion for mental health advocacy. After a series of interviews, I landed a face-to-face interview with Company MH, a startup in San Francisco that seemed like the perfect fit. They flew me out for the interview, solidifying my belief that my dreams were finally becoming reality.

The experience in San Francisco was exhilarating. It felt like a fresh start, the manifestation of everything I had hoped for since my manic episodes began. But when Company MH called to inform me they had chosen a more experienced candidate, I felt crushed. Instead of taking this as a sign to stay where I was and continue building my life in Virginia, I doubled down on my plan to leave my job.

With my lease set to expire in February 2018, I made the rash decision to put in my two weeks' notice without another offer lined up. The allure of Silicon Valley was too strong to resist. In December 2017, I booked a one-way ticket to San Francisco, armed with just three interviews and an overwhelming belief that I could make it work.

My plan to succeed in San Francisco was nothing short of reckless. I convinced myself that this was the next chapter in my journey—an adventure that would finally lead to the breakthrough I had been chasing. When I reached out to companies for interviews, I adopted a bold strategy: I told them I was already in the city and available for

face-to-face meetings within a short window of time. It was a gamble, but I knew that sometimes, you have to force the universe to bend in your favor.

However, not everyone shared my confidence. My older brother, who was managing my finances at the time, had serious reservations about my sudden move. But I convinced him to release the funds I had saved up from my job in Virginia, explaining that this was an investment in my future. What he didn't know—and what I was hiding from everyone—was that I had already begun reducing my medication. The side effects were unbearable, leaving me numb, unfocused, and incapable of performing at my best in high-stakes interviews. I believed that cutting back on my meds would give me the edge I needed to impress the tech companies of San Francisco.

The first week in San Francisco was a whirlwind. I had three interviews lined up with companies that seemed to hold the key to my future. The first was with **Company M**, a healthcare tech startup focused on revolutionizing patient care. They promised to overhaul the way people manage injuries and chronic pain, offering a comprehensive digital platform. The interview process was grueling—four hours of back-to-back meetings with team members, founders, and even a lead physical therapist. But despite the exhaustion, I felt like I was on the verge of something big.

The second interview was with **Company G**, a cutting-edge design manufacturer with a focus on sustainability. Their mission to create high-quality, plant-based materials using 3D printing technology fascinated me. It was a two-hour interview, but by the end of it, the stars aligned in my favor. They pulled me aside, offered me the position on the spot, and gave me just 48 hours to make my decision. The offer wasn't exactly lucrative—definitely not what one might expect for a role in Silicon Valley—but I didn't care. To me, it felt like a stepping stone to my ultimate dream. I accepted the offer, my excitement masking the small voice of doubt in the back of my mind.

Securing the job was a high like no other, but reality quickly began to creep in. San Francisco, with all its promise of opportunity, also presented challenges I hadn't anticipated. Finding a place to live in the Bay Area without spending an exorbitant amount of money was like solving a complex puzzle. The city's dichotomy was stark—tech wealth clashing with homelessness, the thrill of innovation juxtaposed with the dangers of its underbelly.

As part of my employment package, **Company G** gifted me a brand-new MacBook Pro. This gesture, emblematic of the startup culture's openness and generosity, only deepened my euphoria. But even this new high couldn't last forever. I was still without

adequate mental health support and had drastically reduced my medication intake, convinced that I could handle everything on my own.

Just a few days into my role at **Company G**, the excitement began to fade. The startup, like many early-stage companies, was struggling. Despite the rush of work that had been promised during recruitment, there wasn't enough to go around. I found myself sitting idle in the office, waiting for tasks that never came. The paranoia kicked in quickly—why had they hired me if there wasn't enough work? Why was I here?

The combination of anxiety, guilt, and my untreated bipolar disorder began to unravel me. The pressure of performing well, coupled with the absence of meaningful work, became too much. I began feeling like I didn't belong—that I wasn't good enough, and that I had been misled into joining a company that didn't actually need me.

As the weeks passed, I struggled more and more to keep up the façade of normalcy. I earned just enough to cover my basic living expenses, but the isolation I felt in San Francisco weighed heavily on me. I wasn't mentally prepared for the reality of being alone in a new city, miles away from my family and support system.

One morning, in a panicked frenzy, I made the impulsive decision to quit. I walked into the office early, placed my company laptop on my desk, and slipped out before anyone else arrived. As I made my way out of the building, the founder saw me and joked, "Off to get coffee for the team?" Without even thinking, I shot back, "No, I quit." His face registered shock as he tried to catch up with me, but I was already running—fueled by guilt, shame, and confusion.

I bolted through the streets of the Mission District, adrenaline pumping through my veins. By the time I reached my temporary housing, I was utterly drained. The suddenness of my decision hit me like a freight train, and I collapsed in my room, overcome with emotion. My mind raced, replaying the events over and over. Had I made the right decision? Was I running away from something that could have worked out? But alongside the guilt, there was also a small flicker of pride—I had stood up for myself, I had taken control, even if the decision had been made in a haze of panic.

In the aftermath of my departure, I knew I couldn't continue on this way. It became glaringly obvious that I needed to get help, that my attempts to handle my bipolar disorder on my own were failing miserably. This marked the beginning of a critical new chapter in my life—one where I finally sought the kind of treatment I had been avoiding for years.

I reached out to the **UCSF Bipolar Clinic**, a specialized institution that felt like a beacon of hope. The clinic was well-known for its innovative approach to managing bipolar disorder, combining group therapy with individual care. For the first time in months, I felt a glimmer of optimism. There was finally a chance to get better, to regain control over my mental health. The clinic offered me a spot in their program, and I embraced the opportunity to begin a new course of treatment.

The journey wasn't easy. Adjusting to a new medication regimen—this time including lithium—was an intricate process. I had never tried lithium before, and the idea of adding a mood stabilizer into the mix filled me with both hope and fear. Would it work? Would it finally give me the balance I had been missing for so long?

Lithium brought with it its own set of challenges. As the dosage increased, I began experiencing insomnia, a side effect that kept me up at night and slowly drained my energy. To cope, I turned to marijuana again, using it as a crutch to combat the sleeplessness. I was playing a dangerous game, one that threatened to undo all the progress I was making.

The decision to stay unemployed during this time was a conscious one. I needed to focus on my mental health, to give myself the time and space to heal without the added pressure of work. San Francisco, with its surreal combination of chaos and creativity, became a strange but fitting backdrop for my recovery. Every day felt like a battle between hope and despair—one step forward, two steps back. But I was determined to make it through.

My time at the **UCSF Bipolar Clinic** wasn't just about medication—it was about finding a community of people who understood what I was going through. The bipolar support group I joined became an anchor in my life. Surrounded by people who had been through the same highs and lows, I finally felt less alone. The group became a place to share coping strategies, to vent, and to find solace in the fact that I wasn't the only one struggling.

San Francisco may have been a turbulent place for me, but it was also where I began to rediscover myself. Each day, I learned a little more about how to manage my bipolar disorder, how to navigate the complexities of living with a chronic mental illness. And with that knowledge came a renewed sense of purpose—an understanding that my journey wasn't over. This was just the beginning of another chapter.

Reflections on Mania Three

Looking back, my third manic episode in San Francisco was a turning point, not just in terms of my mental health, but in how I began to view my life, my illness, and the world around me. It was a time of intense highs and devastating lows, but more than that, it was a period where I finally started to accept the truth about bipolar disorder: it doesn't just go away. It doesn't fade into the background because you want it to, nor does it magically disappear when you get a new job or move to a different city.

Up until that point, I had been living with the hope—perhaps the delusion—that my illness was something I could outrun. I thought if I worked hard enough, if I distracted myself with professional success, and if I could just achieve the next big thing, I'd find stability. San Francisco was supposed to be that next big thing. I convinced myself it would be the place where I could finally unlock my potential, where I could make it in the tech world and prove to myself and everyone around me that I was more than my disorder.

But it was in the heart of Silicon Valley, surrounded by innovation and opportunity, that I began to understand just how deeply my illness was ingrained in my life. No matter where I went, it followed me. It wasn't just a phase or a bad habit that I could kick with enough willpower. It was a fundamental part of who I was and how I navigated the world. The hard truth was that I couldn't separate myself from it—not at work, not in relationships, not even in my pursuit of self-improvement.

One of the most painful realizations I had during this period was the understanding that my professional life couldn't save me. I had always believed that if I just threw myself into my work, I could push past the instability. But as my time at **Company G** wore on, it became clear that no amount of work could fill the void that bipolar disorder carved out in my life. I was battling more than just boredom or frustration; I was fighting a deep-seated sense of inadequacy, isolation, and confusion.

There's a strange kind of clarity that comes with a manic episode, at least in the beginning. You feel invincible, like you're on the verge of something extraordinary. I felt that way in San Francisco. The interviews, the job offer, the move—it all felt like I was on the brink of a breakthrough. But the problem with mania is that it's a fragile thing, a false sense of control that crumbles under the weight of reality. And when it falls apart, the crash is brutal.

By the time I quit **Company G**, I was spiraling out of control. The decision wasn't just about work; it was a manifestation of my disorder in full force. I was impulsive, reckless, and completely disconnected from the consequences of my actions. Yet, even in the

midst of that chaos, I felt a twisted sense of relief. I had walked away from something that didn't feel right, even if my reasons were driven more by my illness than by logic.

One of the most critical lessons I learned during this episode was the importance of seeking help. For years, I had resisted truly committing to treatment. I had taken medication, seen therapists, and checked the boxes, but I had never fully accepted that I needed ongoing, dedicated care. The **UCSF Bipolar Clinic** was the first place where I felt like I wasn't just another patient cycling through a system. They understood what it meant to live with bipolar disorder. They didn't just treat symptoms; they treated the person behind the disorder.

The decision to seek specialized care was a game-changer for me. It wasn't just about finding the right medication or attending therapy; it was about understanding that this is a lifelong journey. Bipolar disorder is something that needs constant attention, adjustments, and, most importantly, patience. I realized that I wasn't going to get "better" in the way I had always hoped. There wasn't going to be a magical moment where everything clicked, and I would be free from my illness. But I could learn to manage it, to live alongside it, and to create a life where I wasn't defined by it.

Joining the support group at the **UCSF Bipolar Clinic** was another turning point. For the first time, I wasn't alone in my struggle. The group gave me a space to share, to listen, and to understand that other people were dealing with the same highs and lows that I was. It helped me see that bipolar disorder wasn't just my burden to bear; it was something that countless others lived with and managed every single day. The group became a source of strength, reminding me that I wasn't isolated in my experience, even when I felt like the loneliest person in the world.

In reflecting on this period of my life, I see it as both a breakdown and a breakthrough. It was the moment where everything I had built up—my professional ambitions, my sense of self, my carefully constructed life—came crashing down. But it was also the moment where I finally began to rebuild in a way that was sustainable. I had to let go of the idea that I could power through my illness, that I could outwork or outsmart it. Instead, I had to learn to live with it, to manage it with humility and grace.

San Francisco wasn't the answer I thought it would be, but it was the place where I started to accept my reality. I began to see that bipolar disorder was something I would carry with me forever, and that the only way forward was to stop fighting it and start working with it. I realized that stability, while it might never feel as thrilling or fulfilling as

mania, was worth striving for. Stability meant health, safety, and the ability to build a life that wasn't constantly teetering on the edge of disaster.

This journey, as difficult as it was, taught me that recovery isn't linear. It's messy, painful, and often full of setbacks. But it's also possible. I still struggle—every day is a challenge. But I've learned that those challenges don't define me. My story doesn't end with the chaos of a manic episode or the despair of a depressive crash. It continues with the ongoing work of living, learning, and growing, despite the obstacles in my path.

Looking forward, I know there will be more challenges. There will be more moments where I feel like I'm slipping back into old patterns, where the pull of mania or depression seems impossible to resist. But I also know that I have the tools, the support, and the strength to navigate those moments. I am not just surviving; I am learning how to live, truly live, with bipolar disorder. And that, in itself, is a victory.

Mania Four

Arlington, Va

October 2019 finds me engulfed in a deep, dark depression. The overwhelming feeling of hopelessness is palpable as I question the choices I've made throughout my life. This leads me back to my parents' home, where I find myself confronting the same cycle of challenges that have haunted me since college graduation.

The decision to refrain from marijuana and focus intensely on therapy sessions becomes a cornerstone of my recovery. I also started paying more attention to my physical health, recognizing the intricate connection between physical well-being and mental health.

Despite the evident signs and the turmoil I've experienced, a part of me still questions the reality of having bipolar disorder. This skepticism leads to further exploration into other possible explanations for my experiences, including PTSD and complex PTSD.

My journey through mental health treatment introduces me to EMDR therapy, a technique designed to alleviate the distress associated with traumatic memories. At the same time, I face more medication changes, adding to the already extensive list of over 25 different bipolar medications I've tried.

A growing resistance towards treatment options emerges, fueled by a sense of disillusionment with the psychiatric system. This skepticism, however, doesn't completely extinguish my will to recover.

The path through recovery is not linear. There are days when depression confines me to my bed, isolating me from the world. Even when family members visit, I find myself hiding away, feeling disconnected and inferior. Yet, amidst this darkness, I begin to find glimmers of light.

Gradually, the medications start to take effect. Despite being on five different medications simultaneously, I begin to feel a semblance of stability returning. This newfound steadiness becomes the foundation upon which I start rebuilding my life.

The process of interviewing for jobs is fraught with challenges. I put on a façade of confidence, concealing the tumultuous journey in San Francisco and reworking my resume to downplay the appearance of job-hopping. Disclosing my mental illness is not an option, as it could potentially harm my chances in the highly competitive job market.

After numerous interviews and therapy sessions, I finally secured a position at a large financial banking company in Tysons Corner, Virginia. It's a stark departure from my passion for startups, but it represents a critical step towards independence and "normalcy."

The period between October 2019 and January 2020 is marked by immense personal growth and struggle. Despite moments of wanting to give up, I persist, driven by an underlying determination to overcome my circumstances.

Starting in February 2020, I enter the corporate world, a setting vastly different from the startup environment I once thrived in. It's a choice made out of necessity, a means to regain independence and step back into the world as an adult with responsibilities.

Several weeks into my new role at the financial banking company, I reached a significant milestone. With the help of the large signing bonus, I purchased a car. This acquisition is more than just a means of transportation; it symbolizes my growing independence and control over my life. The ability to drive myself, to come and go as I please, is a tangible manifestation of the progress I've made.

In a twist of fate, I discover that my new employer is the same client I worked with during my consulting days out of college. This realization means that at some point, I have to return to the corporate campus in Richmond, VA – the very place where my symptoms first emerged and my journey with bipolar disorder began.

The thought of returning to the campus stirs a mix of emotions within me. There's apprehension about facing the place that's so closely tied to my past struggles. Yet, there's also a resolve, a determination to confront and move beyond the traumas and triggers associated with that place. It feels like a test of my resilience, a challenge to see how far I've truly come.

The day comes when I have to make the journey back to Richmond. I board the company-provided bus, using the ride as an opportunity for introspection. It's a moment to practice gratitude, to reflect on the progress I've made and the obstacles I've overcome. Yet, there's also an acknowledgment of the ongoing struggle with my disorder, a battle that continues despite the advancements in other areas of my life.

Spending a day on the campus, now five years into the future, turns into a profound experience. Walking through the grounds, memories of the past intersect with the reality of the present. This visit becomes a testament to my strength and fortitude. It's a reminder that despite the ongoing challenges with bipolar disorder, I am capable of facing and overcoming the triggers of my past. The day concludes with a newfound sense of assurance - a belief that I will be okay, that I have the strength to navigate the complexities of my condition and life's unpredictable journey.

The visit to Richmond becomes more than just a physical journey; it's a voyage through time, revisiting the roots of my struggles. Walking through the campus, memories, both challenging and enlightening, resurface. I find myself reflecting on the person I was when I first stepped onto this campus and the person I have become. The stark contrast between these two versions of myself is both jarring and enlightening.

Amidst the familiar surroundings, moments of clarity emerge. I realize the extent of my growth and the resilience I have developed over the years. This realization brings a sense of pride and accomplishment, reinforcing my belief in my ability to navigate life's challenges, no matter how daunting they may seem.

In my new role, I take on new projects and responsibilities that challenge and stimulate me. Each task becomes an opportunity to prove to myself that I am more than capable of succeeding in a corporate environment. These successes contribute significantly to rebuilding my sense of self-worth and professional identity.

As I settle into my role, I begin to achieve milestones that once seemed out of reach. These accomplishments serve as tangible reminders of my capabilities and the progress I've made, not just professionally but personally as well.

The ongoing journey of managing bipolar disorder continues to be a central theme in my life. The experiences at my new job, coupled with the visit to Richmond, bring new insights into how I manage my condition. I learn to adapt my coping strategies to fit the demands of my new role and the corporate environment.

As the initial excitement of my new job wanes, I am confronted with familiar challenges.

Despite my mid-level engineer position, I am assigned tasks that feel more remedial than challenging, adding to my feelings of inferiority. These tasks, seemingly designed for a less experienced engineer, contribute to a growing sense of discontent and underutilization of my skills.

My interactions with my manager and technical lead add to my frustrations. Their constant check-ins, meant to oversee my progress, instead amplify my feelings of inadequacy. The office environment, which I find suffocating, only heightens this discomfort, making me feel as if I'm under constant scrutiny.

To cope with the stress and discomfort caused by medication side effects, I take extended lunch breaks. These breaks often involve visits to the gym or walks around the expansive corporate campus, providing much-needed respite and time to collect my thoughts.

In therapy, I work through the issues I face at work. Despite this, there's a persistent sense of doom and a lack of passion for the project. I feel stuck in a cycle of unfulfilling work, despite the financial independence the job provides.

The arrival of March 2020 brings with it the panic and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. As companies shift to remote work, I find a silver lining in the situation. Working from home offers relief from the suffocating office environment, but it also presents new challenges.

Navigating the pandemic with a severe mental illness proves to be an overwhelming experience. The isolation and constant changes due to the pandemic add layers of complexity to managing my condition. Fortunately, being at home with my parents during this time provides a supportive environment, crucial for my mental health.

The lockdown period allows me to save money from my job, and by April 2020, I start looking for apartments in Arlington, VA. Despite the ongoing pandemic, I found an apartment that suits my needs.

The move to Arlington represents a significant turning point in my journey. With a car, an apartment, and a stable job, I step into a phase of regained adulthood and normalcy. This move is a testament to my resilience and the progress I've made in my journey towards independence.

As the world around me seemed to crumble under the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic, my professional life took a precarious turn. The stability and predictability of my role at the Fortune 50 financial company, once a source of security, began to feel more and more stifling, a reminder of a career trajectory that had veered far from the exhilarating pace of my startup days. In a bid for change, I found myself drawn to the allure of a new opportunity, a tech startup that had recently secured a significant investment, promising the thrill of innovation and the rush of being part of something on the cusp of greatness. Yet, this decision, made during a time of global uncertainty and personal vulnerability, would come to be a stark misstep, a departure from stability into a realm fraught with unforeseen challenges.

In the months leading up to my departure from the financial company, a nagging sense of doubt lingered beneath the surface of my excitement. The job I was leaving behind, while monotonous, offered a semblance of routine and normalcy, elements I didn't fully appreciate until they were gone. The startup's vibrant promise of a new beginning was intoxicating, yet it masked the underlying realities of my situation: the precariousness of jumping ship during a pandemic, the looming obligation to repay a substantial signing bonus, and, most critically, the delicate balance of managing my bipolar disorder amidst it all.

My decision to leave was fueled by a complex mix of restlessness, ego, and a desperate yearning for validation, elements that clouded my judgment and led me down a path of misguided ambition. The startup, with its ambitious goals and dynamic environment, seemed like the perfect escape from the drudgery of my current role. However, what I failed to fully consider was how this change would affect my mental health. The stability and routine I had at the financial company played a crucial role in managing my bipolar disorder, a fact I overlooked in my rush towards something new and exciting.

As I transitioned to the startup, the initial euphoria of the new role quickly faded, replaced by the stark realization of the volatility and uncertainty that came with it. The job change, a significant life event, acted as a trigger, unsettling the precarious balance I had fought hard to maintain. The lack of structure, the pressure to perform in a high-stakes environment, and the isolation brought on by the pandemic compounded the stress, leaving me to grapple with the consequences of my decision.

In hindsight, my choice to leave a stable job for the allure of a startup was a misjudgment, a moment of impulsivity driven by a desire to recapture a sense of purpose and excitement. However, it came at the cost of my well-being. The move not

only placed undue stress on my mental health but also served as a harsh lesson in the importance of stability and routine for someone managing bipolar disorder. The allure of the new and unknown, while tempting, obscured the vital need for a supportive and structured environment, a lesson learned too late, as I faced the repercussions of a decision made in haste, amidst the chaos of a world—and a mind—in turmoil.

The thrill of starting a new job, akin to a potent, quick-fading drug, always promised a fresh start, a chance to reinvent myself in the bustling world of tech. Yet, invariably, the high would dissipate within weeks, leaving me stranded at square one, engulfed by the familiar, sinking feeling of not belonging. This recurring cycle underscored a deeper issue that haunted my career as a software engineer: the continuous need to fill the gaps in my resume due to periods of wandering through Silicon Valley and absences from the workforce. To navigate this, I resorted to tweaking start and end dates of employment on my resume. This tactic, while effective in securing positions in the initial years of my career, concealed a more significant challenge—the difficulty I faced in collaborating with others due to my bipolar disorder.

This disorder had a profound impact on my professional growth. The hours, months, and eventually years of soft skills and teamwork experience that one would typically accumulate in a stable work environment were conspicuously absent in my career. Instead, my resume hinted at a breadth of technical experience while silently glossing over the lack of depth in interpersonal skills and teamwork. This gap created a dichotomy in my working style; I could convincingly "talk the talk" and "walk the walk," yet under the surface, the potential for regression loomed large. Small triggers, such as a comment from a colleague or a particularly stressful project, could send me spiraling into isolation, transforming me into a version of myself that was far removed from the competent professional I outwardly projected.

This pattern of initial excitement followed by rapid disillusionment was never more apparent than in my transition to the startup focused on changing the world with telemedicine and prescription drug delivery amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The company's lofty goals and the promise of making a significant impact during a global crisis initially captivated me, providing a temporary reprieve from the existential dread that had begun to permeate my thoughts. However, the reality of the situation soon set in. The stress and pressure of the new job, despite its "cool" mission, quickly became overwhelming. My lack of experience in maintaining long-term professional relationships and navigating team dynamics became glaringly apparent. Faced with the

high expectations and fast-paced environment of the startup, I found myself unable to meet the skill level required for success.

The harsh truth was that the strategies I had employed to mask the inconsistencies in my employment history and the challenges posed by my illness could no longer shield me from the realities of the professional world. The decision to leave a stable job for what appeared to be a dream opportunity had exposed the vulnerabilities in my approach to my career and underscored the importance of addressing the underlying issues related to my bipolar disorder. As I confronted the consequences of my actions, it became clear that in order to achieve true fulfillment and success in my career, I needed to prioritize my mental health and develop a more sustainable approach to work—one that did not rely on the fleeting high of new beginnings but rather embraced the value of stability, continuous growth, and genuine connections with colleagues.