

*Connected by Nature*

Janis Norton

“I think I might be bipolar. I’m going to see a psychiatrist on Friday to see about medication.”

She handed me a clipboard with the signed paperwork, and we settled into our chairs, facing each other across a small coffee table. The bright light from the bay window seemed harsh so I stood to tilt the blinds a little. Dropping into the leather chair I noticed how thin she was, her black leggings like rails anchored by big thick heeled shoes. Her long straight chestnut hair was shiny, but her eyes were flat, and her skin was pale.

“What makes you think that?”

She sighed heavily. Her description of her return to college trajectory was a familiar one, at least to me. Fourth week of the term, tests and assignments starting to pile up, two of the three roommates unhappy with the third who is the young lady in my office, a boyfriend who spends a lot of time on video games and might be flunking out.

“And I can’t sleep, I’m behind in my labs already, and I just want to stay in bed and get some rest.”

She is 19 years old.

“Where are you from? Tell me about your family.” I hand her a box of tissues and she pulls one out, holding it under her eyes while she sniffles.

“Oh, I’m from Richmond, Chesterfield. My parents are there and my little brother.” She gazes out the window, frowning.

“Do you think I have bipolar? I mean, I’m depressed. And before I came back to school I wasn’t. Not at all. I had all kinds of energy, even maybe too much. “

“What do you mean, too much?” I noticed her nails which were painted sky blue and had little stars on some of them.

“I was constantly going out over the break. My parents were kind of annoyed with me. I just felt so jazzed, like I couldn’t just sit around the house. . But I did have some good times—”

She launched into a description of overnights with her high school best friend and a day trip to visit her grandmother in Charlottesville.

“Tell me about her.”

“Oh, she’s been my friend since middle school. We talk every day.”

“No, no, I mean your grandmother.”

Ashley shrugged and then looked out the window. She drummed her fingers on her pants.

“Mom’s mom. Lives alone. “

“What’s her age? Is she healthy?”

Ashley shook her head. “No. She’s not. She has cancer.”

She was getting ready to move into their home, Ashley’s parent’s home. She would be taking Ashley’s bedroom because it was first floor. Ashley would stay in the basement guest room when she visited home.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind.” Ashley shifted a little on the couch.

There seemed a lot more to say but Ashley was fidgeting and had a pressing question.

“So could I have bipolar? I’ve never felt this awful. Like my motor is running all the time but I can’t focus or get anything done.” She leaned forward and put her head in her lap, cradling her knees.

We talked for several more minutes, a little about bipolar disorder and then more about her relationships with family and friends. We scheduled another time, and I walked her downstairs and unlocked the room where she had stowed her bike while we talked. She cycled off and I gratefully sank down on the front steps of the building, drinking in the October sunshine and watching the foot traffic making its way up Main Street.

The lawn looked so different, absent of trees as it had become this autumn. Always there had been a pair of maples, two sisters I thought of them. One had been dropping leaves onto the roof and leaning towards the building in a way the Jeremy, landlord, described as “scary.” He thought the lawn would look better with one maple and voila, the taller one was gone one day. Her sister had remained but now she too had been cut down, her stump ground, the lawn flat and covered in straw to help grass take over.

When Jeremy put up a notice about the first maple destined for mulch, I had tried to tell him that trees don’t take kindly to having their relationships disturbed.

“Jer, that second tree is not gonna like this. “I was waiting for my mail which he was sorting into pigeonholes in the break room.

“Really?”

“No, you’re taking away her friend.”

He scoffed and dropped a piece of mail. Our heads almost banged when we both reached for it.

“No, really, I’m serious.” I fished a colorful flier out of my mailbox and threw it in the trash can.

“Okay, I’ll bite. What do you mean?” Jeremy asked.

I was in a hurry, had a client in the waiting room, so I kept it short.

“Well, there are connections. Hidden connections. Below the ground. We only see part of the tree. The underground network is critical and very complicated—”

A colleague came in and we made way for her to collect her mail. It was time for me to stop anyway. Jeremy was nodding politely but, well, the tree was coming down.

While I led my next client upstairs, I thought about the questions I would ask Ashley, when the time was right. Likely she would tell me that her mother was trying very hard to work full time in her career while she cared for her rapidly failing mother. The extended family might be around to help but in so many cases the siblings were at a distance and unable to do as much as was needed. The family would be feeling the press of impending loss and, per usual, underestimate its impact.

“Well, she’s 88. Of course, she’s going to go sometime.” Or something like that.

Meanwhile Ashley’s parents might relate more distantly than usual, or perhaps quarrel more often, depending on how they usually responded to stress. A teenager home from college would feel it all but, being 19, would claim to feel nothing much directly about the family situation.

“The real problem is I can’t sleep! I’m so frustrated with these awful nights.”

I recalled the deep circles under her eyes. It had crossed my mind that she looked like she had cancer.

I thought about the hike into the blue hills I had taken yesterday with a friend. It had been raining a lot lately and we wanted to see if our favorite waterfall was as spectacular as we thought it might be. It was cascades of white froth gushing over ancient rocks.

While we dangled our feet in the pool at the base, I pointed to a small brown fish darting from under the huge root end of a fallen oak at the edge of the pool. The roots were a thick tangled mass as big around as the boulder we were both sitting on.

“Nice place for the trout.” Lisa squinted at a twosome, followed by another. The water was cold and bracing and my toes were feeling frosty.

We wondered why the oak had fallen.

Lisa knows more about trees than I do, and patiently entertains my questions on these hikes. Birds are my passion lately and we stop talking while we dry off our feet and re-boot ourselves. A sharp trill repeats a few verses.

“Ovenbird. Maybe” My contribution to the day’s learning.

We stand in the mud and closely inspect the root wadding. Lisa points out the different types of spikey tubers. The thicker “anchor” roots and the slimmer and plentiful “feeder” roots.

“At one time covered in fungi. The better to exchange chemicals and signals.”

“Oh, that’s how warning signals get sent. The fungi.” I was starting to sink in the mud a little and stepped back onto the rocky bank.

Lisa followed me up the bank and we stopped at the trail entry to let a couple with a baby strapped to the dad's back pass by. The baby stared sleepily when I waved to her.

"The fungi," she repeated.

"How does it work? Do all the trees communicate with each other. Or just trees related in some way?"

We stopped at a jutting boulder and scraped our boots on the shining quartz surface.

"I think it can go several ways. But for sure, related trees keep in touch. Mothers tell their daughter's stuff. Like *look out, bad bugs coming.*"

I interjected. "Or *we got trouble in the neighborhood. The chain saw is revving up.*"

I told Lisa about the second maple at work, losing its companion and then dying.

She shook her head and we kept walking. It was all uphill and the day was getting warmer. We were surrounded by hundreds of trees, dozens of varieties, and it felt like we were bathing in leaves that day. My lungs literally felt washed by the time we were back at the parking lot.

Later that week I welcomed Ashley back to the couch. She perched on the edge of the sofa, dropping her mammoth backpack onto the floor with a thud. She looked less tired, more animated as she turned off her phone and set it next to her.

"Well?" I keep the start of the conversation simple sometimes.

"I went home over the weekend." She laughed a little. "And I got some sleep. Finally."

She went on. Her mother had called a family meeting. Ashley's aunt was visiting and the six of them "had a sit down."

"It was me, my brother, my parents, my aunt Trish, and grandma."

"Whose idea was that?" I started making notes.

“Aunt Trish. She’s like that. My cousin Katie, her daughter, says she would call a family meeting if there was a –well, you know, anything. One time they had to have a full family pow wow about the hair in the shower drain.”

“Don’t tell me. She’s your mother’s older sister.” I Had my pen poised to record her answer.

“Let me see. Uh, yes, she is. Does that matter?”

I shrugged. “Oh maybe. You know, big sisters sometimes step in and\_\_”

“Take over?” She finished for me.

I nodded and asked, “So what happened?”

She described a discussion about the cancer. Her grandmother talked about how she saw it unfolding. “She talked about dying.”

Ashely recalled her aunt asking the grandmother what she thought everyone could do for her.

Ashley’s eyes filled up with tears. “God, my mom just broke down. It was so hard to sit there.”

She went on. “My brother kept getting up and going into the kitchen. Then he and my dad went outside and did something in the shed.” She rolled her eyes. “I guess my brother is a little young for all this.”

“And my dad too.” She smiled and I did too.

“Was there some good out of it all?” I put down my pen.

“Well, maybe. My mother looked more relaxed by the time I left. Even though she says Trish is awfully—what was the word—oh, yeah. *Direct.*”

“They get along, but mom finds her a little *much*, If you know what I mean.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

I was aware of the clock. “Did the conversation get you thinking about how you’ve been reacting to things at home?”

She sighed and looked archly at me. “No, but I have a feeling that maybe it should have.”

“Oh, well, no, no. Whatever you do, don’t think about this stuff. It will only make things worse.” I returned her arch expression and then she smiled.

I tapped my pen against my notebook.

“Come on, dig into your roots here. Your most significant connections are facing upheaval—”

We talked about her family for a while and then it was time. I hoped she would be able to stick with a focus on her network and her place in it. While I picked up a manila file and turned my thoughts to the next client, I glanced out the bay window. My landlord was standing in the middle of the straw patch in the lawn looking at a small burlapped tree he was attempting to center there.

I frowned. A skinny sapling. All by itself? Would that work?

I would have to call Lisa. She would know.

I could hear it now. *Trees were not meant to be stand alone. It doesn’t work that way. Give that little guy a friend or a relative. Or more. That’s how it works.*

I raised the blinds and then eased the window up. Dust made me sneeze.

“Hey, Jeremy. Nice tree. Can we talk?”

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