

Munchausen Syndrome

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I used to have a friend named Paco. I met him when I was twelve. We just so happened to be classmates for summer class, but that's about it. To me, he was simply some random guy who was overly confident and social, going back and forth in the classroom to introduce himself to others and shouting out answers whenever he could.

It was until we both got into the same secondary school that Paco decided to tell everyone (who he had just known for a month) he was gay and was suffering from mental illnesses. I wasn't sure what he was thinking. Coming out of the closet in a Christian school was already a foolish decision, let alone exposing your health issues to people who barely knew you. I didn't know what he was trying to get from it, all I knew was that "Paco" was not just a name anymore. Instead, it had become a topic for gossip in our school. "Acting gay to get girls." "Psychopath." "Disgusting attention seeker." Whenever his name popped up in conversations, you just knew it would be something negative. Yet Paco managed to stay positive and continued to socialize with others, even when they didn't want to have anything to do with him.

As someone who was also exploring their sexuality and struggling with mental health, I found a sense of belonging in him, for he is the first person in my grade to be open about being gay and mentally ill. I admired his bravery, especially when everyone else was questioning and attacking him. When everyone was running away from him, I ran towards of him instead.

He inspired me to be true to myself and everyone else.

Back before we became friends, I heard two girls from his class joking about him in the changing room once. "He said he has dissociative identity disorder and that he has over twenty alters!" One of them burst into laughter. "Who the hell does he think he is? Billy Milligan?"

Not even knowing what disorder they were on about or who Billy is, I never took it seriously.

I was introduced to D.I.D. the following year, when a friend of ours got into an argument with him. We tried to resonate with him, but he just wouldn't listen. He said we weren't talking to "Paco" anymore, that we didn't understand, and would never understand.

As a strong punch landed onto the wall near my head, I asked myself to understand.

He used to tell us the abuse he had gone through in his childhood. He was abandoned by his birth parents when he was too young to remember their faces, he recalled, only to get adopted by a young, married couple who were always mad at him, insulting him or slapping him whenever they were in a bad mood. We always wondered what they looked like, and I almost got to figure out once.

One afternoon, when the two of us were out for lunch, Paco suddenly exclaimed. I tried to catch a glimpse of what was going on, only to get pulled away immediately. "My dad is across the street," he said as we hid behind the MTR exit. Curious, I poked my head out. In front of us I saw a man who had the same long face as Paco, same small eyes, same height, and even the same haircut.

My first thought was that the man must be Paco's dad. But then I remembered the fact that Paco was adopted, meaning that his dad should not look like him at all. At least, he should not look exactly like Paco at all.

I was about to ask Paco, but he told me to stay quiet. "I don't want him to see me," he whispered, "he would yell at me when I got home."

As time passed, Paco's mental illnesses went from only D.I.D. to a long list of disorders: PTSD, depression, social anxiety, panic disorder... I always struggle to remember them all. Some of our schoolmates even joked about how he was collecting illnesses like Pokémon at this point – "gotta catch them all". I always defended Paco, telling them Paco wasn't lying, that he seriously needed help.

He was just like me, who needed to be diagnosed, who also needed help.

Soon, I also got targeted. As Paco's friend, it was difficult to socialize with others as they would turn their backs against me. But I didn't mind. I knew what it was like to suffer from mental illnesses and not be taken seriously, and I knew I was doing the right thing, because stand up for your friends is always the right thing. It must be.

Concerned about the situation after telling his counsellor about his symptoms, Paco was taken to see a psychiatrist. He decided to take me with him. “You are the only person who has believed me the entire time,” he said on the MTR, “of course I want you to come.”

When we got to Mong Kok, it turned out the clinic was hidden in a commercial building, located at the end of the corridor on 16/F. Paco asked me to stay at the elevator lobby, and I did. I kept pacing around the area, imagining the psychiatrist’s face when he listened to Paco talk about his past and his symptoms now. I imagined he would find Paco to be his scariest patient with all his illnesses, and I was slightly relieved as Paco was getting the help he needed.

When he got out, I asked him to pass me the doctor’s note, which stated his diagnosis. He hesitated, saying that it was nothing special and that it was just a piece of paper, but handed it to me anyway.

The fact that it only had two lines was already weirding me out. “Social phobia” and “generalized anxiety disorder” were the only two diagnosis he got, when the symptoms he told us about had been showing obvious signs of worse disorders. I asked Paco about it, but he simply shrugged and said that the psychiatrist was not professional.

One day, when I was lining up outside the lab for my next class, Paco ran up to me. He said his groupmate was being an asshole since he didn’t finish his part before the internal deadline. He told her he was in depression the week before, making him unable to do research. But instead of understanding, his groupmate told everyone in class, including their teacher, that he lied about being mentally ill again and used it as an excuse to not collaborate in the project.

As he was talking, I could feel eyes on us. Some of the people in the line stared at him, whispering to each other; while others looked at me, waiting for my response.

“Um... I mean... You do have to be responsible. It is a group project after all...” I murmured. His brows knit, as if he had not expected this answer from me. “I did work hard,” he argued, “It’s their fault they don’t understand.” As the bell rang, he mumbled goodbye and left for his class.

“Is he on it again?” A friend of mine asked.

“Sorry?”

“Paco. Is he making up lies again?”

“No?” I replied, “sure I agree he was being slightly irresponsible just now, but that doesn’t mean he’s lying.”

“Sure... Telling everyone he’s sick and so on just to get away with things. Don’t you get it? He’s clearly lying!”

“Why would he lie to me? We’ve been friends for years!”

“Because you are dumb enough to believe in everything he says! Wake up! Stop believing his terrible lies!”

“He’s. Not. Fucking. Lying!” I yelled. It caught everyone’s attention, even our teacher’s, who was just around the corner. Embarrassed, I apologized to everyone at once. But I was still sent to detention, and my friend has never talked to me ever since. I knew I shouldn’t be ashamed for standing up for a friend, yet something didn’t feel right.

It's almost as if my friend was telling the truth.

A year later, it was my turn to see a psychiatrist. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, something I had never heard of. During my stay in the hospital, I did research on the disorder and tried to match my behaviors with the symptoms. Turned out the exaggerated confidence and extreme mood swings I had been struggling with for the past year were two of the common symptoms. I also learnt that the disorder is frequently mixed up with intermittent explosive disorder as they have a similar name in Chinese (bipolar disorder 躁鬱症 and intermittent explosive disorder 躁狂症), where patients with the later one experience frequent anger outbursts instead of mood swings.

A few weeks after I got out, Paco and I had lunch with another friend of ours. We were talking about our struggles recently when our friend asked me about my days in the hospital. “What were you diagnosed with?” Paco asked, smiling as he sipped his drink, as if he was waiting for me to spill some tea, when it was a serious matter. “Bipolar,” I answered. Our friend looking concerned as she told me how hard it would be to get completely cured.

“Bipolar? Oh, I also have that!” Paco interrupted, “just around a week ago, my group member made me super angry when he knocked off our props. I was so mad I almost lashed out on him! Luckily, I...”

My friend and I exchanged a glance. We finally understood.

It was in this short conversation that I finally realized I had spent the past six years defending a liar, only to get picked on by others and lose a friend who was just trying to snap me out of the obvious lies. I trust people too easily, I realized. There have been hints all the time, yet I simply chose to ignore them because I fully trusted my best friend, when he might not even see me as one. I ended up pushing him away, only to be threatened and bad-mouthed as “the terrible friend who left him when he did nothing wrong”.

He’s now happily spending his college life with his friends, clubbing every weekend with his social phobia, and living with his loving parents who turn out to be his birth parents the whole time.

I, on the other hand, feel bad for extending deadlines and skipping classes because of my illness, fearing that I am slowly becoming another Paco, and am only using my disorders to run away from responsibilities. Sometimes, I wonder if I am faking my illness for attention, just like what Paco had been doing the entire time.