



WITNESS STATEMENT OF JUSTIN MARCUS HEAZLEWOOD

I, Justin Marcus Heazlewood, say as follows:

- 1 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

Personal story

My childhood years: 1980–98

- 2 I grew up in Burnie, Tasmania in the 1980s and 1990s. I was an only child who never met my dad as he abandoned Mum and me before I was born. He lived twenty minutes' drive away in Wynyard and had his own separate family. I lived with Mum in a small brick unit in a block of six. From age six I was aware that something wasn't right. Nearly every weekend we would visit Nan and Pop in Wynyard. There was an argument which ended with Mum being angry and dragging me towards the car. I remember crying and not wanting to go because she was acting scary. I wanted to stay with Nan and Pop. This incident set the tone for my young life.
- 3 At seven I remember lying in my bed while Mum wailed in the bedroom next to mine. I was reading my Sesame Street book and got a red texta to keep track of Mum's volume levels. When the howling got louder I would do big spirals. When the crying grew quiet I would draw smaller ones. I wanted the crying to stop. This is my first memory of monitoring Mum's illness, something I would spend a lifetime doing. I didn't know it then but I was a child carer.
- 4 When Mum was unwell she would lie on the bed and the couch a lot. "Get up Mum," I'd say. I didn't like her doing nothing. It's as if she was sick or sleepy but there wasn't anything wrong in the normal sense. I wouldn't mind if she was reading or watching TV but often she'd be giggling to herself or swearing angrily. She could see things in the space that I couldn't. "In five minutes I'll get up," she'd reply. She was often putting me off, pressing me gently like a snooze button.
- 5 By age nine I could see patterns forming in Mum's behaviour. It seemed half the time she was well and half the time she was sick. When she was good, Mum was her kind, warm and funny self. She checked my spelling and tucked my tag in and put my electric blanket on. She'd make my favourite egg and toast for tea with apple pie from scratch. We'd read funny books like Rumples and Tumbles about the pink and blue rabbits who go to England

to see the Queen. We put on posh voices and laughed a lot. Mum and I were joined at the funny bone.

- 6 When Mum would start to get foggy-headed my heart would thump. When I knocked on the door after school and Mum took too long to answer, I'd know. Three months is a long time for a kid. It seemed like Mum always got sick just before Christmas. Or before family members came to visit. Mum had two brothers on the mainland and one in Burnie but he cut everyone off when I was a baby. The close connection with Mum made losing her a tragedy each time. I'd wander off to my trampoline and try and bounce myself better.
- 7 At nine I went off the rails a bit. I got in with some bad kids in the neighbourhood. I was attracted to video games and worked out that I could take money out of Mum's purse while she was lying on the bed. In the end I took fifty dollars out. I also took a bread knife to the local milkbar with the idea of robbing it. The lady tut-tutted me and sent me back home with a hotdog and a packet of rainbow chewing gum. I was alone and worried on the dark streets, but it was sort of exciting. When was someone coming to help me?
- 8 By age 12 I was a very mature and intelligent child. It helped that Nan and Pop were so generous and encouraging; they were definitely my main supports. It didn't matter what mood Mum was in, we would visit them most weekends. Nan and I often went bushwalking together. The Tasmanian bush was my favourite place and the rich smells helped me relax. The world was still beautiful. Nan would give me pep talks as we overlooked her sprawling, colourful garden. "You're a man now, Justin," she'd say. There was expectation for me to take charge and work with Nan to solve Mum's problems. The first step was making sure Mum was taking her tablets. Nan had a theory that she stopped taking them and that's why she kept getting sick.
- 9 During this time I was an excellent student and athlete and role model. I was on the Student Council and played several sports including surf lifesaving and table tennis. I even helped start the *Montello Times* school newspaper and in Grade 6 pretty much wrote and published it myself. I even drew the cartoon. I saw life as a computer game adventure movie that I was the star of. It was my job to work extra hard to be as excellent as possible and rescue lives and earn points. It didn't matter if I was diving beneath the waves or patting my cat or gazing up at the stars. I felt incredibly alive and determined. I was going to live my dream.
- 10 At home I would encourage Mum to get off the bed and make sure she took her tablets. I'd suggest she cook tea instead of wanting to get takeaway. Sometimes it felt like a comedy sketch where I was the grown up and Mum was the teenager, but there was no laugh track. When Mum got sick the house got sad as dishes piled up and the cat litter stank. I did my best to mow the lawn and empty the rubbish, but mostly I wanted to hide

inside TV or a book. I'd report back to Nan who was as frustrated as I was. She felt we needed to get a message to Mum's doctor.

- 11 At no point did I mention Mum to anyone. Not even my best friend Nick who would often sleep over when Mum was sick. Mum would stay in her room and my friends thought she was just having a nap or giving us space. At school I was well presented and behaved. Up until Grade 5 Mum was "Mother's Help" (teacher's aide). As far as my school was concerned, not only was Mum fine, she was an enthusiastic and patient woman who would read to the children and help them type their stories onto the computer. "If Mum can pretend to be okay," I thought, "why not do it all the time?"
- 12 When Mum was really bad she would cry uncontrollably. The sound of Mum howling was torturous for me. It would happen in the evenings and upset me so much that I'd have to ring Nan and Pop. This happened several times between the ages of 11 and 13. During these phone calls I would be crying and ask Nan to come and get me. Nan would confer with Pop and then say something about how it might upset Mum more if they came. "We'd better not interfere," she said. Nan would ask to speak to Mum who by this stage would have calmed down. Nan and Mum would negotiate for it to not happen again. Nan's offer was that I could call back anytime I liked.
- 13 Thirteen was a big year as I started Grade 7 at Parklands High School. I kept a diary and wrote in it, "I'm a bit depressed, okay?" It was a difficult time as Nan and Pop had gone on an interstate holiday for a month, leaving me alone with Mum when she was sick. The silence of their empty home was almost too much to bear. The loneliest day of my life was spent on a blustery Sunday with Mum flaked out on the couch listening to the same record on repeat. This was my life, it seemed. I couldn't wait to get back to school and table tennis.
- 14 In Burnie, we were fortunate to have good neighbours. I used to rollerskate with the girls in Number 3, and at Christmas, Ray from Number 5 would dress up as Santa. Mum was in regular touch with her next-door neighbour Barbara. She would visit Mum and me regularly and make small talk and invite Mum over for a coffee. Barbara was a source of great agitation for Mum. She would have paranoid delusions and become suspicious of Barbara's nagging questions. There was an incident where Mum went over and banged on Barbara's door angrily.
- 15 Barbara, like all our neighbours, was aware of Mum's condition but didn't interfere. Now I was in high school she and I would sometimes confer after school. "Your Mum's not real good is she?" The conversations were similar to those with Nan. The focus was more about the cause and whether Mum was going to her doctor or taking her tablets. Barbara offered for me to come over to her house if I needed to, but I felt shy about doing so.

"Your Nan and Pop must be worried," she'd say, mirroring the concerns of my uncles. No-one ever asked how I was.

- 16 In Grade 7 Uncle Ken and Uncle Nigel both came home for a few weeks. Mum was sick at the time but it didn't stop us going on a caravan holiday. Mum lay on the bed most of the time and barely said a word while Uncle Nigel and Ken got drunk on Saturday night. I loved it and recorded everything secretly on my cassette recorder. "I'm staying out of it," confided Uncle Nigel. "I don't want to upset the apple cart." In a small town like Burnie there is a culture of being happy to know all the details but not wanting to interfere in anyone's affairs.
- 17 On Mum's worst days she would become violent. She had a terrible amount of rage inside her. This black anger would boil over and Mum would turn into a monster. Her eyes would bulge and her face would twitch and her voice lowered to a growl. She was unrecognisable. This anger was never directed at me. Barbara was a trigger but Mum rarely acted on it. It was Nan who annoyed Mum the most. Mum had a one-off fury reserved for her parents. On several occasions, always on a Sunday, Mum became violent and physically attacked Nan.
- 18 From age 13 I was able to fly in from playing outside and physically restrain Mum as she tried to punch or kick Nan. Mum and Nan had a lot of emotional baggage and Mum barked about incidents from the past and how she was treated as a teenager. It sounded like Nan and Pop were at shiftwork a lot and being the only girl, Mum was the family maid. Nan was a highly-strung person with hypertension, notorious for her mood swings and aggravated temperament. I'm sure Nan had a mental condition herself, but never received any diagnosis.
- 19 These "grey Sundays" would blow over and Mum would calm down and become apologetic. She'd drive home and Nan would go down to the hothouse to recover and cry and have a glass of home-brew. I would go down to console her while Pop sat in his chair watching the footy. Pop was a World War II prisoner of war and often seemed incapable of any real action. Nan would say she was too old to stand up to Mum and now it was my turn. Every bone in my body wanted to fix this problem and save my family. I would stay the night and Pop would drive me to school the next morning. It was a chance to imagine what it might be like if I lived with them.
- 20 Mum had a regular GP during these years. I knew Mum had what was called schizophrenia (the scary sounding word with lots of letters, like arachnophobia) which meant she heard voices. Mum was on the tablet Mellaril and had been since I was a baby when she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Mum was quite good at hiding her illness when she needed to. She would tell the doctor she wasn't sleeping or was having headaches. When I was 14 I secretly made an appointment with the GP. I told her in

detail how bad Mum was. The crying, the swearing, the violent episodes. The GP said something about doctor–patient confidentiality and that was that.

21 Nothing changed for the next five years. We got on with life built around the routine disruption of Mum getting sick every three months. Sometimes Mum would lash out at Nan, but I would usually be there to stop it. If Mum cried at night I was old enough to deal with it and eventually I stopped ringing Nan and Pop. I didn't want to worry them. This horror was my job.

22 Mum had physical tics similar to Tourette Syndrome which meant she repeated the same few sounds repeatedly. It is difficult to paint the shock of her grinding teeth. She would clench her jaw so hard that the muscles would squirm and eventually crack her teeth. The sound was like bird bones snapping.

23 Mum would hiss the words "stinking bag of shit" repeatedly. She would intercut this with the word "trollop" or "slut". These were spat into the wall from the chamber of her lips. With my sensitive ears all the anger ended up pointed at me. I'd be sitting in my beanbag trying to watch *Beyond 2000* as Mum's madness came slashing from the side. I'd be in the passenger seat as she minced her lips and produced a crunch. "MUM!" I'd yell. "Stop it." The stress of these sounds shot into my stomach. It never got easier; I just got angrier.

24 As a teenager my frustration towards Mum matured into fury. I saw no choice other than to match her. I would be the one swearing and slamming doors just to alleviate the tension. Part of me wondered if I could shock Mum into stopping. Maybe if she realised how much she was hurting me that would be motivation for her to get better.

"MUM!" I'd yell. "FUCKEN STOP I CAN HEAR YOU!"

"Sorry dear," she'd reply, "I can't help it."

"Don't swear," she'd say softly.

25 I hated swearing. I had recently become Christian and prided myself on my thoughtful demeanour. Even though it wasn't cool, I enjoyed the routine of praying to Jesus and was comforted by the themes of sacrifice and forgiveness. It seemed I had a lot to pray. My anger made me feel guilty. Then I'd feel more alone than anyone in the universe.

26 If I went to my room I would hear Mum through the walls. If I went to my trampoline Mum could carry on in the shower. In the grey crazy house of upside down there were times when I had to walk up the street and stand by myself in disbelief. Mum had her voices for company. She'd be giggling away on the bed like a tea party. What did I have? An imaginary life. The one I'd live if I was only given the chance. I would look at the other

houses puffing smoke and crackling with TV chatter. Why was this happening to me? I would never forgive the world for this.

27 Nan and I never came up with another plan. I think we both gave up. I was 16 now and obsessed with girls and friends and basketball cards and being liked. I retreated into a deep bunker of computers and music and school and did what I needed to do to survive. I picked up my guitar and started writing my own songs. Crucially, I began a lifelong relationship with art where I could see my mood reflected back to me. My cassette recordings were my company.

28 Structure was my salve and school was my saviour. My Grade 7 high school report suggests I didn't miss a single day of school all year. With a home life like mine, who could afford to? From primary school I was fortunate enough to have attentive teachers who recognised my intelligence and set me ever increasing tasks for my hungry brain. I was funny and well liked and popular with my "coke bottle" glasses and quick wit. By Grade 10 I was vice captain of the Student Council, swimming champion and the best writer in the school. It didn't really matter what it was, I wanted to be the best at it. If I kept showing the world how amazing I was, maybe someone would come and help.

29 I smoked a joint that I later found out was laced with LSD. It made my heart beat frantically and I thought I was going to die. I was taken to hospital in the middle of the night by my best friend's mum. I lay on the hospital bed for four hours waiting for my heart to calm down. Mum wasn't contacted and I kept the incident from my family for months. Each night I'd lie in bed convinced there was something now very wrong with my heart. It was yet another secret to keep.

30 I went to a doctor about having trouble sleeping. He gave me a checklist and within five minutes I'd been diagnosed as having depression. Nothing depressed me more than the idea of having depression. I kept the prescription for antidepressants by the radio for a week and eventually threw it in the bin. I wasn't going to be like Mum.

Leaving home: 1999–2019

31 I moved out of home at the beginning of 1999, aged 18. I had completed Grade 12 at Hellyer College, winning the English and Theatre subject awards and being elected president of the Student Council. At the careers advisor's office I found a pamphlet for a Professional Writing course at the University of Canberra. My Uncle Ken lived in Canberra and was a musician. More than anything I wanted to pursue my writing. My ambition became a catalyst to leave my friends, family and home state behind.

32 To their credit, no-one in my family suggested that I stay home to keep an eye on Mum. Nan had spent so much of my childhood imploring me to chase my dreams that she now had to follow through. Mum and I kept in regular contact by phone and she helped me

financially a number of times. This generosity generated a new closeness, without the conflict and pressures of living together. Even from afar I could tell when Mum was getting sick from the vagueness of her tone. There was little I could do but console Nan and Pop. Our worry walked on water.

- 33 In my second year of university I experienced depression. After an exciting first year a relationship break-up led to the bottom falling out of my life. I felt very hollow, as if I had no idea who I was. I had the lead role in a student theatre production, but the real acting was done off-stage, without a script. I'd been pretending to be okay for so long, I was almost too good at it. I saw a counsellor but only told her about the issues I was having in the play. I largely consoled myself through this period, writing songs and poems and going for long walks on Uncle Ken's farming property. I returned home every six months, but was usually relieved to escape the melancholy of my family.
- 34 On my 21st birthday Mum had a bad episode. I was in Burnie about to go out for dinner with friends when Nan rang up. Mum was in an aggravated state and shouting. No matter what the occasion, Mum's schizophrenia had a way of crashing the party. I began to question whether Mum was coping on her own. My biggest fear was that she might be lonely and I might be the cause. Despite my many suggestions Mum wasn't interested in joining any social groups. She'd even left off going to church. Her main outlet remained her Avon job which she'd had since I was 16. This at least kept her involved in the community.
- 35 I graduated university in 2001. Mum attended the ceremony and was in good health so it was a proud occasion for us. I was unsure what career to pursue, and Mum suggested I return to Burnie and try social work. I knew she was missing me, but I was wary of aborting the adventure I'd begun. In April of 2002 after winning a radio competition I landed myself a regular songwriting segment on Triple J's Morning Show. My talents in writing, comedy and music culminated in a flashpoint of a national platform. They dubbed me The Bedroom Philosopher, kickstarting a career that would provide a focus and outlet for the next decade.
- 36 At the same time Mum's condition deteriorated. She had a violent episode at Nan and Pop's in which she held a knife up to Pop's throat. After fleeing onto the street Nan rang the police. Mum was picked up and admitted to the psychiatric unit at North West Regional Hospital for the first time in 20 years. She stayed a week and gave the doctors no trouble. During this time her medication was altered from Mellaril to Olanzapine. I remained in Canberra, the whole incident playing out like a weird dream. There was some relief letting the rest of the family deal with Mum for a change.
- 37 After visiting home I found Mum's persona to have shifted dramatically. It was as if she'd aged 20 years overnight. She went from being a lady in her 40s to behaving like an old

woman. Her conversation was clouded and she now mirrored many of Nan's attributes such as going to bed at 8pm and rising early. One of the more unsettling aspects was the way her gaze was no longer able to meet mine. Her eyes looked off to the side, as if the shock of her episode had caused Mum to retreat further into herself. This change slowly devastated me. The good Mum I'd grown up with had passed on, but I'd been left no chance to say goodbye.

- 38 The positive news was that the new medication was lifting Mum out of the cycle of breaking down every three months. Her condition was more stable, albeit with a muted personality. She decided to stop her Avon work. Two years later the family received the shock news that Mum's younger brother Nigel had passed away. He'd been struck by a train in Lithgow in the middle of the night. He was an alcoholic with depression which had long gone untreated, despite Nan and Pop's pleas for him to return home. He was the only family member who had ever acknowledged my pain. "I don't know how you did it," he'd said to me a year before.
- 39 I moved to Melbourne and ramped up my pursuit of music and comedy as a career. In 2006 I fell into a positive long-term relationship and had a song getting high rotation on Triple J. In 2007 Pop passed away at age 87. This marked a turning point in the relationship between Mum and Nan. Mum now saw herself as Nan's primary carer. Even though Nan was still a very active and independent woman, Mum felt it necessary to visit her each weekend. I was eager for Mum to find a life of her own and pursue various social activities. Mum wasn't interested and would use Nan as an excuse, saying she had better keep herself free in case she was needed. Both Nan and Mum were as stubborn and independent as each other. I suppose the same could now be said for me.
- 40 At 28 my past finally caught up with me. With my career stalling and a three-year relationship ending, I had a relapse of depression. After being prescribed the antidepressant Lexapro I took it for two weeks but did not like the numbing of my emotions. Instead I finally went to see a psychologist. In my first session I opened up about my childhood. "You must have been very anxious as a child," he reflected, which is one of the most important things anyone had ever said to me. At the end of the session he concluded, "One day you're going to realise how painful your childhood really was."
- 41 I loved counselling. Regular sessions with my psychologist allowed me to process the haunting vault of confusion and trauma that had been plaguing me since I'd left home. My condition was only being aggravated by my turbulent lifestyle choices. Life as a musician and comedian meant high anxiety paired with a lack of security. The onstage validation and bombardment of praise made the whole operation worthwhile. In 2009 I took the strong worth ethic forged at school and poured myself into my career. I spent the next four years in an almost endless cycle of recording, touring and self-promoting. These

were my most successful years as The Bedroom Philosopher and a new long-term relationship marked a sign of positive change.

- 42 By age 33 I was a workaholic, checking email from my phone and clogging my inner space with activity. My hypervigilance which had once fretted over Mum was now obsessed with my career direction and what my audience might think of me. Although I was already experiencing burnout and working through a broken arm, the concept of a holiday was a foreign one. Growing up poor, I was hopeless at saving and uncomfortable with long-term goals. Like many artists, I didn't want to know what I might find if I stopped. After losing money on the 2012 Melbourne Comedy Festival, I experienced a heaving exhaustion. Instead of giving up, I changed up, and began writing a tell-all book about life as an artist in Australia.
- 43 Despite my desire to concentrate on writing, I couldn't afford to stop performing as a musical comedian. Meanwhile, I was managing a lingering depression while keeping up appearances as my witty self. It was a time of much gear-changing between my introverted and extroverted personas. To cope with the increasing pressure I stopped drinking and withdrew socially. This put a strain on my relationship, especially now I was living with my partner for the first time. I proposed marriage but changed my mind a week later. My anxieties had a way of destroying any momentum I built.
- 44 I was sinking beneath the weight of all aspects of my life. Financially, I was accumulating huge debts as a self-managed artist in the high cost world of show business. Despite 10 years of a national profile and considerable success, I was still unable to pay rent from my creative income. I relied on Centrelink benefits and the demoralising demands of job network meetings. This only fractured an increasingly vulnerable sense of self.
- 45 Living a double life had me seeing double. From child carer to responsible student. From quiet family member to extraverted performer. From crazy comedian to introverted writer. From successful artist to a Centrelink number. I no longer had the energy to swap between the two. My accumulated despair was spilling out in my onstage performances. My failing energy was disappointing my partner, which led to feelings of guilt. The cascading failures multiplied as I said yes to a request to create and film station IDs for the ABC while directing my partner's Fringe Festival show and meeting an imposing book deadline.
- 46 At 33 I had a nervous breakdown. It started with shooting pains in my stomach. Over the course of the next three months I lost 10 kilograms. I relocated to Sydney with my partner, but our relationship of five years had soured. A feeling best described as chronic fatigue crossed with a hangover enveloped me. The world was too bright and too loud and too much. By 2014 I was back in Melbourne and living alone for the first time in my life. I stopped going to parties and gigs and was so exhausted I was in bed by 9pm almost

every night. I experienced panic attacks in large groups and there were days when my head was so tender I was unable to leave the house. I'd been burned out before, but this was profound. I was a different person.

47 I developed IBS and found myself unable to eat half the foods I usually enjoyed. The slightest trace of spice or herbs made my heart beat so fast I wasn't able to get to sleep. I tried everything to treat the problem from acupuncture to Chinese medicine. Thorough exams of my stomach couldn't find anything wrong. A naturopath suggested I had an overflow of the stress hormone cortisol and it was affecting my ability to process protein. A lifetime spent in "fight or flight" mode had ravaged my nervous system. It was now in a fixed state of panic. My body was eating itself.

48 It was at this time that I began writing a book about my childhood. As a professional writer, I had thought about my memoir for years, but been too overwhelmed to begin. I woke up at 4am and with tears in my eyes began writing about Nan. This coincided with seeing a new psychologist as my previous one had retired. In our first session she asked, "Why didn't you go and live with your Nan and Pop?" My face fell as I pondered a question no-one had ever put to me. From that point my childhood was turned on its head. My life story was repositioned as one of neglect. A community of adults knew what was going on and failed to protect me.

49 From 2015 onwards I began to distance myself from my family. I had a new sense of anger and wariness towards them. Nan and Uncle Ken seemed incapable of having any emotional understanding and became defensive when I challenged their narrative about my childhood. When I reminded Nan about asking her and Pop to come and get me she said she couldn't remember. She insisted they did everything they could and that the weekends in Wynyard were enough. When I questioned why I never lived with her she claimed a nurse from the psychiatric hospital came to her door and snatched me away and said a baby should be with its mother. Nan said she was terrified of interfering after that.

50 With Mum's permission, I accessed her medical records from her time in the psychiatric hospitals. I wanted to understand more about my infant years, which is a hazy period in the family history. Mum was first admitted to a psychiatric unit in 1980 when I was three months old. Mum was experiencing post-natal depression and was very anxious about her ability to look after me. The report made for dramatic reading and suggested that Mum was contemplating suicide on the night I was conceived. There were alarming details in a statement from Nan which I didn't know about. "There are no secrets in this family," she'd once told me, but this was a lie.

51 From 2016 I stopped talking to my family. I negotiated with Mum to only communicate through letters. I couldn't write a book about my past and deal with Mum in real life. In a

childhood forged by a lack of boundaries, this was a big step. With the support and guidance of my psychologist I began a separation from these self-aggrandising and dysfunctional people who had been put in my care. I felt duped—like a puppy dog who had been trained by my family to look after Mum. No wonder my sense of self kept collapsing. My life had never really been mine to live.

- 52 During this time I worked hard to manage my own mental health. I maintained a daily routine of writing, exercise and self-care with weekly appointments to see my psychologist. I took a long sabbatical from social media and work commitments. A breakdown was the closest I'd come to a holiday—or at least some time off. This condition made dating difficult and I wasn't able to maintain a relationship beyond a few weeks. I realised my adult life was mirroring my child life in that the only person who was going to have my back was me. I was an only adult. Solitude was home.
- 53 In 2018 I published my second book and childhood memoir *Get Up Mum*. It covered the years 1992–93 and was written in the voice of my 12-year-old self. I didn't ask for permission to write the book. As far as I was concerned this was my story to tell. During the process I did my best to communicate to Mum that the book was coming and that it was something I needed to do. To her credit, she was mostly supportive. When I sent her the cover art and blurb for approval she suggested I change the title to "My Teenage Years", but I did not feel obligated to do this. One measure to maintain Mum's privacy was to decline any media from the local Burnie newspaper.
- 54 The reaction to the book was overwhelmingly positive. I was taken aback by the support the book was shown in the Burnie community, which I'd often felt estranged from. It was surreal and confronting to share such a complex secret with everyone. The confronting task of being interviewed was acknowledged by my publisher who guided me through a series of practice questions. It was the first time I'd been offered any media training. I was approached by various mental health organisations including Families where a Parent has a Mental Illness (**FaPMI**), Tandem and Satellite Foundation (for which I am now an ambassador) who support children with mentally ill parents. I even had an opportunity to address a workshop of child carers. It felt like my twin selves were becoming more aligned. My inside life was now my outside life.
- 55 In 2019 I returned to Tasmania for the first time in two years. I found Mum in very poor physical health. What had begun as a limp five years ago was now a full-blown disability. She was hobbling on a walking stick, had lost weight and seemed to have aged 10 years. Her GP had recently left the practice without informing Mum and I saw no choice other than to take her to emergency at Burnie hospital. Mum was diagnosed with a developed case of rheumatoid arthritis. She was also suffering incontinence and her bed was in a shocking state. Nan, now 92, had sold her home and moved to live with Mum in my childhood bedroom. She claimed everything was under control.

- 56 As is common with schizophrenics, Mum had been in total denial about her health needs. Troublingly, no-one else around including her neighbour had picked up on the condition. My only warning was an email from a cousin who had seen Mum at the supermarket. I was reliving a world of neglect and denial consistent with my childhood. The key difference was that now I really was a man. I could take control and get Mum the care she needed while, crucially, protecting myself. I spent the next three weeks in Burnie trying to rescue my childhood home from chaos and rally support. Despite Nan's best efforts to interfere (while assuring me she didn't like to interfere), I secured social workers, found a new GP and applied for the NDIS.
- 57 In 2019 I developed *Get Up Mum* into a 10-part radio series for Radio National. This included samples of my childhood cassette recordings. I was now sharing my most personal possessions with strangers. In July 2019 I packed up my things and returned home to Burnie for the first time in 20 years. I could no longer afford to live in Melbourne and felt drawn to be closer to Mum. I'd read that schizophrenics have a life expectancy 20 years shorter than the average population. I had a sense that quality time with Mum now would be worth the effort. While Mum's physical condition had deteriorated, mentally she was the most stable she had ever been.
- 58 After being rejected for the NDIS twice, I reapplied, adding a heartfelt carer's statement. Mum was accepted for the scheme in December 2019 and we are currently in the process of implementing her care package. I have accepted that I must carry the burden of being an only child who cares for his mum. At least now I am able to do so with the support I've always needed. I'm still based in Burnie and able to assist Mum, now 65, through the covid-19 pandemic.
- 59 Mum and I are closer than we have ever been.

Reflection

- 60 I come from one of the most isolated regions in Australia. Burnie is a culturally and socio-economically impoverished place with high rates of disability, mental illness and suicide. My story is one of inter-generational trauma and despair. Mum was treated poorly by her own mother. Nan grew up the second eldest of nine children and experienced emotional abuse as a child. If I had children I can only imagine the struggle I would have not affecting them with my own anxiety and depression.
- 61 When I look back on my experience I am struck by the complete lack of support I received. At school there was not a single lesson spent on educating us about mental illness or self-care. At no point was the role of the school counsellor adequately explained to us. I was never prompted to tell anyone about any of my problems at home. Meanwhile Nan was delivering the message that I had to remain strong and carry on. There was definitely

a stigma around mental illness and our family kept a tight lid on the silence around Mum's story.

- 62 It's inconceivable to me that a doctor would have listened to me speak in detail about my situation with Mum and proceeded to do nothing about it. I've been told that if such an event happened today law would require her to inform my school and social services. This was a massive effort on my part to go directly to the authorities for assistance and my pleas were ignored. The message I received on that day was that there was nothing anyone could do for me. It would be a breach of Mum's confidentiality. This was an appalling result which discouraged me from seeking help again for a decade.
- 63 As Justin Heazlewood, son of Maureen Heazlewood, my whole life has been forged by schizophrenia. It has shaped and misshaped the person I am. The secret life of being a child carer has taken a personal toll on me. I now experience mild depression and generalised anxiety disorder as a result of my complex developmental trauma. This has made it virtually impossible to sustain a long-term relationship. It also makes it difficult to sustain any role other than being a self-employed part-time artist. I continue to accept my limitations while believing that recovery is possible.
- 64 I have found the greatest comfort and healing has come through my creativity. There is much I can do as a professional writer to share my story with others. I know from the positive emails I receive that my work has helped others process the heartbreak and confusion of caring for a loved one with a mental illness. It is surely one of the most confusing and complicated subjects in society—an often overwhelming task when you are in the throes of exhaustion and sorrow—no wonder there is such an all-pervading culture of silence. There is no beginning to the tangle.
- 65 Having survived my experience I see this is a vital opportunity to contribute further to the mental illness conversation. I hunger for more in the media landscape that speaks to the complication and challenges of being a child carer. In my ideal scenario I imagine a mental health organisation employing me to devise intelligent, humorous and uplifting material targeting young people and carers of the mentally ill. I hope my talents and passions can be utilised for a cause I'm told is more urgent now than ever.
- 66 My psychologist once suggested that one of the reasons I remain so driven to care for Mum is because of how much love she showed me as a child. In a childhood so lacking in security, I've never had to doubt for a second how much my mum loves me. I know how lucky that makes me. It's taken a lifetime to separate Mum from her illness. Love is a constant. Mental illness is the storm. A single parent and her child are the heroes.
- 67 I know there are still children around Australia imploring their parents to "Get up." There is more work to be done. It encourages me that Victoria is answering its call to action.

There are people that need our help. I'm honoured to be able to contribute to this brave new world. I hope the Royal Commission report can make waves from butterfly wings and pour light on the darkest hours of the human mind and the systems that govern our hearts.

Forward recommendations for the future

Reaching out in schools

- 68 There should be an increase in targeted education of children from primary school age about mental illness. This should coincide with a proactive attempt to identify any children who may be caring for parents with a mental illness. This could be done through a questionnaire or interviews. A special performance or talk could be created with the express purpose of educating children and encouraging them to come forward at the end of the session and nominate that they may be in a position of needing help. (Similar to the Life Education vans, we need a mental illness "mothership" which could trundle from school to school and be unusual and exciting in its design, like a huge alien brain.) Again, it would be devised solely for the purpose of educating about mental illness, mental health and self-care.)
- 69 It should be school policy that any child known to have parents with a mental illness must have at least one appointment with the school counsellor.
- 70 From conversations with people in the sector I get the impression that (speaking for Tasmania) there is a lot of red tape and jurisdiction which inhibits how proactive services can be in reaching out to vulnerable children. I say wholeheartedly that any tip-toeing and political correctness must be put to one side and everything within reason done to get the message on the desk in front of kids that if things aren't okay at home then they have people they can contact to help them.
- 71 The statistics suggest that this a pressing enough issue to implement some more bold strategies. According to the Satellite Foundation approximately 250,000 children in Victoria live with a parent or carer who has a mental illness.
- 72 There seems to be a culture of waiting for children to make the first move. I am telling you, this will never happen. Children like myself are well trained at staying silent. Boys especially are champions of locking their feelings away and remaining strong, as they've no doubt been told at home. So it goes that if we are serious about reaching out and helping child carers, we, as the adults in the equation need to assert our duty of care. I have little time for hand-wringing around issues of privacy or upsetting parents. There is no policy that can justify emotionally abused children going under the radar, as was the case with me.

- 73 If this is currently how the system operates and there are restrictions on what outreach workers, school psychologists and teachers can do to ask children point blank whether things are okay at home, then I'd suggest that the system could be failing our children.
- 74 If school psychologists and counsellors are positioned on the fringes of the school infrastructure and unsure about how to connect to students or make themselves known, it's not real help as it's tucked away. It seems to me there is room for a mental health mediator to act as a guide for both sides. Services are useless unless they are suitably advertised.
- 75 If someone had come into my class and asked about whether things were okay at home, I'm sure I would have considered the box that said "no". Who knows, perhaps it's an action as simple as this that can be the catalyst for steering children towards a path of care and support.
- 76 In Victoria there are already excellent organisations dedicated to helping children with mentally ill parents such as the Satellite Foundation (of which I am an ambassador). They have camps and workshops for young people to get accurate and age-appropriate information while nourishing their emotions through shared experiences of creativity.
- 77 I was most taken by a booklet created by a co-ordinator at FaPMI called *Let's Talk about It* (published in 2014). It was filled with helpful advice and heartfelt stories from children of parents with a mental illness and the parents themselves. It even included a "care plan" section for when the parent gets sick. It brought me to tears to think how helpful such a resource would have been for me as a kid. Both Satellite and FaPMI are obviously providing excellent resources for children and I'm sure would benefit from increased funding and exposure. I would think that a book such as *Let's Talk about It* would be a helpful thing for all children to read, regardless of their situation.

Carers register

- 78 Create a national register of child carers whom a support worker follows up with throughout their lifetime, even if it's just a phone call. Similar to Veteran Affairs, you could have Carers Affairs, who are a portal for carers to access support and advice. Crucially, this service would be proactive in reaching out to carers who may be too exhausted or depressed to seek help for themselves. We know carers are the most likely sector to sacrifice their own health for the sake of the person they are caring for. This is why there needs to be a more proactive, targeted approach.
- 79 It should be said that of all the causes, raising awareness of "child carers" is perhaps the most overdue of all. This is such an obscure term that it wasn't until I published my memoir at 37 that I first heard it at all. According to the Young Carers Network there are about 270,000 young carers in Australia. Perhaps there are young carer advocates who have

been nominated in the Australian of the Year or Young Victorian of the Year Awards, who you could work with to give this idea more traction or at the very least raise more awareness of the role of young carers and their need for support.

Awareness Day

- 80 Each year there is “mental health awareness week” which is the closest we get as a community to gaining attention to our cause. There never seems to be a targeted, organised flagship event during this week, which I feel is a missed opportunity. It would be good to see a day where everyone has a “bed-in for depression” or wears their strangest outfit and marches through the town to represent those on the fringes of the mental health spectrum.
- 81 In 2015, the ABC had its themed week “Mental As”. I thought this was a fantastic idea and was disappointed when it didn’t happen again the next year. I think this should be an annual week of specialised TV programming. Think of the opportunities to utilise the ABC’s national audience each year.
- 82 Schizophrenia Awareness Week is May 13–19 this year. For the past two years I have monitored it. Apart from a single website on the organisation’s homepage, there is virtually no media presence for the event. Schizophrenia affects one in 100 people, which is the same ratio as autism. While the latter has received an explosion of education and awareness of late, schizophrenia remains a veritable black sheep, even amongst the mental illness spectrum.
- 83 “Why is this?” you could ask. I would argue because it is an unnerving subject for people. There is no greater stigma than that around those with schizophrenia. We call out bias against other minorities, yet it’s acceptable for schizophrenia to be politely ignored. How about subverting this through a themed day of “putting on your thinking cap” for schizophrenia. Or perhaps an online simulation that mimics the “hearing voices” syndrome which people could experience online? I think back to an episode of Andrew Denton’s *Enough Rope* (“Angels and Demons”, Season 6, 2008) which was dedicated to schizophrenia and included a simulation of the voices. I thought this was an innovative and entertaining approach. There is a link to the segment on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyx-XksGcHA.

Humour

- 84 I think a dedicated, funded body which includes writers, artists, publicists and social media strategists should be employed with the express purpose of raising awareness of schizophrenia, and in turn other aspects of mental illness. It isn't always enough to provide dry, corporate information. The material needs to be dazzling, intimate and original enough to excite people to engage with a subject they are used to putting to one side.
- 85 When I look at the content generated for social media by various mental health organisations, the one thing I always notice missing is humour. Being depressed is depressing. I personally don't need a constant stream of grim statistics reminding me how tragic and fallible everything can be. This approach must be balanced with lightness, playfulness and humour.
- 86 A good way to facilitate this could be to do a callout for expressions of interest or material from the humourists, poets, writers and cartoonists of Australia. Perhaps an 800-word personal essay competition about your experience of mental illness could be a good way of generating content and identifying which writers and practitioners around Australia could be the most appropriate champions to enlist for the cause.
- 87 Similarly, a competition in the style of Heywire (the ABC's regional documentary competition) or Fresh Blood (the ABC's original sketch comedy initiative) could commission short, entertaining videos designed to educate about mental illness in a funny and positive way. Let's face it, a well-timed video or joke could actually save the life of someone who has reached their lowest point.
- 88 I feel that mental health organisations underestimate the intelligence and oddness of their audience. People with a mental illness often have a highly-attuned and somewhat warped sense of humour. Their tastes are likely to be skewed towards the abstract and avant-garde. It could be a good opportunity to try a more creative approach in tackling the all-pervasive heaviness of the subject while enlisting the services of our highly talented but underemployed artistic community. I'm certain music and comedy is an almost guaranteed way of engaging teenagers.
- 89 For some time I have been working on a "comedy album about depression" as The Bedroom Philosopher. I have 10 songs picked out for an album I would probably call *Hey Hey It's Sadder Day*. I have a dream that my album could be prescribed to a teenager instead of antidepressants. Perhaps it can be filed under "laughter therapy". A relatively cheap and easily accessible form of medication which can also be transmitted online.

90 In Hobart last year psychologist and comedian David Bakker engineered a "Mental Health Week Comedy Roadshow" which toured around Tasmania. Five stand-up comedians performed material relating to their own lived experience of mental illness. As a participant in the event I was struck by the warmth and appreciation shown from the audience. It was an inclusive event which covered some difficult ground. I think this is an excellent template for the kind of event which could take place nationally.

sign here ► Justin Heazlewood

print name Justin Marcus Heazlewood

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