

# Shall I be mother?

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**After years of violence and abuse, Tina Kotulski attempted suicide – aged just 13. Now she’s not only forgiven her schizophrenic mother for the past, but moved her in too. She tells Helena de Bertodano about their heart-rending role reversal**

Watching Millie Smiley, 65, playing devotedly with her eight-year-old granddaughter, Breigha, it is hard to believe that she is a paranoid schizophrenic and was once a terrible mother to her own children, neglecting and beating them.

Today Millie is playing at being a customer in a restaurant, while Breigha takes the role of waitress. Millie sits at a little table and orders pizza and grapes. Breigha brings a plastic pizza, which Millie pretends to eat. Then Breigha brings her the bill. 'Twenty dollars for a pizza!' exclaims Millie, laughing. 'My, that is expensive.'

Tina Kotulski, 40, Millie's daughter and Breigha's mother, watches the pair from a corner of the basement in her large prairie home in southern Minnesota, where her mother has been living for the past year with Tina's family: her husband, Jeff, and three children, Charles, 17, Eddie, 15, and Breigha.

'She's an incredible grandmother to my children,' Tina says quietly. 'She plays snooker with my sons and I see the joy in their faces. Every day she asks them how their day was. Those kids are her second chance.'

It seems like an extraordinary act of forgiveness on Tina's part to move the mother who made her childhood so miserable into her family home.

advertisement Tina says she started to forgive her mother when, as a teenager, she realised that Millie suffered from schizophrenia and had little control over her actions.



Millie with an infant Tina in 1970

'I understood that Millie wasn't well enough to be able to take proper care of me... It was this illness that had caused us so much hell, not Millie herself.'

In an attempt to educate others about the effects of schizophrenia on the 'invisible children' of those who have the condition, she has written *Saving Millie*, a book about her childhood, dedicated to 'those who have grown up in the shadow of mental illness'.

The British charity Sane estimates that one in 100 people will develop schizophrenia, a third of whom will experience severe long-term symptoms, including delusions.

In Millie's case, her illness went undiagnosed for years as she struggled to bring up her two daughters, Tina and her elder sister, Susan, in Chicago.

The neighbours and her ex-husband, Alan, who left shortly after Tina was born, dismissed her as 'nuts'.

She would veer from euphoria to deep depression, spending days in bed while she left her daughters to make their own meals and get to school.

'In bed, at least she wasn't going to become violent,' Tina says. 'But I felt so isolated. I felt like I was walking on eggshells my whole childhood, not knowing when one would crack. My sister and I would show up at school with obvious bruises and matted hair, but no one ever commented.'

In her book Tina describes her mother's outbursts. 'She looked at us without blinking – a cold, hard stare as if she were looking through us. Then, without warning, she might start yelling, ranting... Susan was a "botched abortion", I was an "awful, awful" baby...

'One time Millie pinned Susan to the floor and started to strangle her... The red abrasions were visible on Susan's neck for weeks. But no one said a word.' Sometimes Millie would forget birthdays or Christmas, sleeping through them. Tina, aged ten, came downstairs on Christmas morning. 'I looked under the tree. There were no gifts. It was awful.'

According to Tina, Susan bore the brunt of their mother's physical abuse. 'I was frightened of her,' says Tina. 'But I knew when it was safe to be around her and how to protect myself.'

When Susan was 12 she left to live with her father and stepmother. 'I was devastated when Susan moved out,' Tina says.

Left alone with her mother, Tina found life intolerable, and at 13 tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose. After her recovery, she, too, moved in with her father.

Soon Millie was being shunted around psychiatric hospitals and nursing homes, her medications constantly changing and her illness spiralling out of control, with frequent psychotic episodes, until she was taken in last year by Tina.

Millie still suffers from schizophrenia. 'My mother is in remission, so to speak, she's not in recovery,' says Tina, a striking woman with a strong personality and no-nonsense manner.

'I'm the one who is in recovery, that's what I've been doing my whole life: recovering from her illness.' Thanks to a careful combination of medications and vigilance from her daughter and Jeff, who is a physician and participates in the care of her, Millie's illness has become more manageable, and the psychotic episodes are rare.

Tina talks about these lapses bluntly: 'When she's very vulgar and calling me every name in the book, I'm not going to feel good about her, it kind of ticks me off.'

But usually she and Jeff can see the moments coming. 'There's a pattern,' says Jeff, a kindly man who rarely gets a word in edgeways.

'If she starts ruminating about something in the past, repeating it over and over again, or talking about the Chicago weather, we know we've got so much leeway and need to start making adjustments, either to her medications or her supplements. She's very fragile and very sensitive to medication.'

Photographs from Millie's youth show a beautiful woman, with golden hair and large brown eyes, gazing intensely, sometimes combatively, at the camera.

She is still recognisable from those pictures, with the same delicate bone structure, but these days her gaze seems to have softened and become more wistful.

When she smiles, it does not seem a natural expression, more like one that her face has struggled to get used to. At first she seems normal, smiling and shaking my hand and enquiring about England. 'I had the pleasure of being in London once, about 20 years ago,' she says in a throaty voice tinged by

years of smoking.

'I loved the food. We had salmon-stuffed ravioli and fresh cheeses.' Tina explains later that her mother has an extraordinary memory.

Then her conversation becomes a little unusual. 'I liked the Queen. She was my mother, she was my other mother when I was growing up. She had a little clutch purse.'

Tina used to visit her mother frequently in Chicago, particularly when she was going through a bad patch. The decision to bring her home sprang from the toll these visits took on Tina's family.

'It's less of a strain on the family to have Millie here,' Jeff says. Tina broke the news: 'I said, "Millie, we're going to bring you home with us." She started crying, "Oh, Tina, thank God, my dream's come true."

She also said, "You don't need to let me live at your home if I get so old that I need so much care. Just take me to the nursing-home."

Millie gets up with the rest of the family, at 6-6.30am, and has breakfast with them, before Tina takes her sons to school. 'We try not to see each other during the day,' Tina says.

'I'm home-schooling Breigha so I say, "Millie, this is a big enough house, you'll have to find something else to do." She listens to the radio, watches television – she loves the food channel – and reads adolescent books.'

They do not feel they can leave Millie alone in the house for more than an hour or two: 'She'll leave the stove on, or forget to close the front door,' Jeff says.

In the evening the family eats together; Tina cooks and Millie helps to clear up. 'She always does her chores,' Tina says.

'She washes the dishes and puts out the garbage.' Sometimes she helps to cook. 'I ruined the gravy last night,' Millie says, stricken.

'It's OK,' says Tina, laughing, 'it's only gravy.' They try to stop Millie going to bed too early. 'We say, "You can't go to bed at 7pm as we don't want you up at 5am."'

Tina says it is like having another child, 'but it's worse at times, because kids you can see get older and mature'.

She mothers her mother constantly: 'You must be hungry, do you need a snack?' and, before the photograph, 'Did you put some make-up on?' 'Yes,' says Millie, 'Breigha helped.'

Born Mildred Stafford in 1941, Millie never knew her father, who died in the Second World War. Her mother, Kathryn, married again, and although Millie adored her stepfather, he, too, died of cancer when she was 13.

'I had a mean mother,' says Millie, sitting on a beige sofa outside her bedroom and talking to me alone for a while. 'She had a terrible temper. She liked to be alone so much that she sent me away all the time – to camp, to boarding-school – when all I wanted to do was stay home.'

After school – where she was elected 'class beauty' in her senior yearbook – she studied nursing and met her future husband, Alan Smiley, a fellow student at the University of Illinois.

Within three months she was pregnant but was denied an abortion. She and Alan married, Susan was born, and three weeks later Millie attempted suicide, slitting her wrists.

Alan found her curled up in blood-soaked sheets on the bed and said later, in *Out of the Shadow*, a documentary made by Susan, that he determined then to leave her one day.

Millie, however, takes issue with the story: 'I don't remember trying to commit suicide when I had babies,' she says. 'I adored them.' However, she does acknowledge a subsequent suicide attempt, when she slashed her wrists and neck, leaving scars still visible today.

'I wish I could erase the blood bath,' she says, referring to this attempt in 1983, when her daughters were teenagers. 'I've had a strange life, lots of strange activities... All I ever wanted was a stable marriage, a job and retirement benefits.'

For her daughters, life was worse than strange; it was incomprehensible as they grew up, hostages to their mother's moods and paranoia. She could not hold down a job and was convinced she was being watched by 'them', keeping the curtains closed and refusing to pick up the phone, which she thought was bugged.

Even today she refers to the 'harassing phone calls' she used to receive. 'Some of it was smut and some of it was threats to kill my family and children.'

Millie still doesn't seem to comprehend that she is ill. When I ask her whether she has felt better since she moved in with Tina, she seems to misunderstand me, perhaps deliberately.

'I've always been strong, I've never been sickly, I bounce back from things.' So I ask her why she was put into institutions.

'I sold my house and I ended up homeless. I got shuffled around a lot...' Does she agree with the label of schizophrenia being attached to her condition? 'I think it's a nasty name,' she says. 'It's an ugly word. It means thinking the wrong thoughts. But I've never understood it and I still don't.'

Yet a few minutes later she says suddenly, 'I've lived a schizophrenic-manic-depressive existence, actually. Susan said I had jetlag in London, and I said, "I've had jetlag all my life..."'

Likewise, she veers from lucidity to denial about the way she brought up her daughters. 'I like children and dogs,' she says to me several times during the course of my visit. 'I'd do anything for my family.' Later she adds, 'I think that I was an awful mother. But I liked my kids' company, I don't know if they know that, but I liked having them around.'

When I ask if she wishes she had brought up her children differently, she answers, bizarrely, 'I would have dressed them in better clothes: more groovy, more with the times.'

Tina says she has never doubted her decision to move her mother in. 'I know I would have regretted it if I had turned away and abandoned her.'

Occasionally, Tina says, Millie apologises for the past. 'The other day she said, "I really am so sorry for how I treated you and Susan," and I told her – as I tell her every time she brings it up – not to be sorry, because I don't live in the past. I am who I am because of who I choose to be. My mother helped me to be the woman I am today, and for that I am grateful.'

- 'Saving Millie' (Extraordinary Voices Press, \$14.95), by Tina Kotulski, is out now. 'Out of the Shadow' will screen on 31 January at the Queens Film Theatre, Belfast, as part of the 'Movies in Mind' festival ([queensfilmtheatre.com](http://queensfilmtheatre.com))

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