

Bipolar Strong

By: Matty Penner

For me, being Bipolar Strong means that despite everything—despite the chaos, the highs and lows, the moments that break me—I still create. I still paint. I take everything I feel, everything I go through, and I put it on a canvas. I can't say that art has saved my life, but it has sure put life back into me. It's given me strength when I didn't have any of my own.



Art is my release. It's how I process the emotions that, at times, are far too heavy. When I paint, I'm not just making something—I'm letting something out. The good, the bad, the overwhelming. It's all there, in color, in shape, in texture. It's the only way I know to make sense of it all.

Let me tell you about one of the depressive episodes art rescued me from. This was a bad depression. It's hard to rate them on a scale, but this one was up there. I had just graduated with my MFA in creative writing from SDSU, and "life" was about to start. Instead, it came to a screeching halt.



I had been in excruciating pain for five months, but I wasn't about to let that get me down. I was in physical therapy, yoga, and surfing all the time. My physical therapist actually encouraged the idea of riding the waves. A week after I hobbled across the stage to receive my diploma, I got some news I could've never imagined in a million years. Apparently, the doctor couldn't either, because when she called me with the results from my MRI, it was exponentially worse than she expected. A torn labrum was what she had guessed. Nope. It was avascular necrosis, which I imagine might mean nothing to you—because it sure meant nothing to me at the time. I found out real quick. In layman's terms, blood stopped flowing to my hip, it decayed, and then it cracked like an egg on the sidewalk.



So, instead of taking a step forward into life, I took like nine steps back. A hip replacement, as well as a core decompression with a stem cell transplant on the other hip, was now in my future. I couldn't do this on my own, so I had to move back to my mom's house in Fresno.

It was a shock at first, for sure. I was absolutely flabbergasted. After the shock wore off, I felt grief, disappointment, frustration, and hopelessness. But that wave passed. At some other point in my life, I would've let that break me. Depression as part of a mental disorder is one thing. Depression as a consequence of circumstances is another. This was the latter. I planned to show resolve, resilience, and strength.

Right up until the day I had the surgery, I was ready to get moving again. I was going to get out from under the knife, regain my strength, and get back on track with life.

That did not happen. Not even close. Physically, I made a good recovery. Mentally, I never recovered. I had spent so much time on my back on my mom's couch in the living room that it had become my own little dark cocoon, and believe me, a butterfly was never going to flutter out of it. For a time, I was somewhat able to cope—or at least, I thought I was. I wasn't. I was simply using the drugs—the painkillers that were necessary at the time but later became unnecessary—to get high and get me through the day. My dark cocoon became my grave. Nothing was going to dig me out.

I just talked about depression in terms of a mental disorder and depression in terms of circumstances. All of a sudden, I was dealing with both. Every day became a carbon copy of the day before. I woke up, wished I had more pain meds to blur the day away, but had to settle for Seroquel, an antipsychotic used for bipolar disorder. One of its side effects was gladly welcomed—it makes you extremely tired. So I would wake up, take more Seroquel than prescribed, and go right back to sleep. I wasn't actively suicidal, although I didn't care if I died. I had absolutely no interest in living.



Luckily, I had a great support system that tried to get me back on my feet and out in the world. Unfortunately, they couldn't have dug me out of my hole, out of the nonexistence that sleep provided me, and off of the couch. And then—I'm not sure why or how everything went down—but I wanted to paint something. I wanted to paint Stella.

Stella and I met in grad school in New York. Stella was one of the loves of my life. I have loved a few women in my life, each in their own way, but I never loved anyone like I loved Andrea. To call her a firecracker would be an injustice to her and to that term. She was a firework, which I never would have guessed, because before we became what we became, I thought she was a total square. Cute, but a total square. My oh my, how wrong I was.

I must also mention that during this stint in New York, I was running high. I was manic. I think that was part of the reason she was drawn to me. I didn't know how much like me she was until one night after class when a few of us stopped for a quick drink. It became suddenly apparent that Andrea was no square. I would use a bigger shape if I knew one, but I'll have to settle for an octagon—and she had more sides than one of those. After our second hangout, which was just the two of us, it was on.

Regardless of how much fun and recklessness I was capable of through the help of mania, I somehow still couldn't keep up with Andrea. I couldn't even hold a candle to her. I loved the way she burned. It's an overused cliché, but clichés are clichés for a reason, so I'll allow myself to say it... but just once: We were fire and gasoline.

Was that a good thing? Especially in the throes of a manic episode? Honestly, yes, I believe so. Even though I made some very head-scratching decisions—like lighting all of my student loan money on fire to pay for shopping sprees and subsidize our outings. Dropping out of school to move to Buenos Aires a month before the semester was over probably wasn't the smartest thing to do either.

However, that didn't really have an impact because Andrea and I had almost stopped going to class altogether. We didn't have time for stupid things like school. Why waste time sitting in class when we had way more important issues at hand? We had beautiful chaos to cause and trouble to make.

She referred to our adventures together as "going out to play." She would call or text me: "Do you want to go play?" And I would answer her, "Is that even a question?"

So that's what we did. We painted every corner of that city red together. All day and all night.

If and when we finally did make it to bed, I got to enjoy one of my favorite things—looking over at Stella while she lay on her stomach and read her books, the love letters we had written for one another, poems, and all of the other nonsensical stories that made us ignite in laughter. Boy, did I love her, and I still do. I will forever love Stella and what we had.

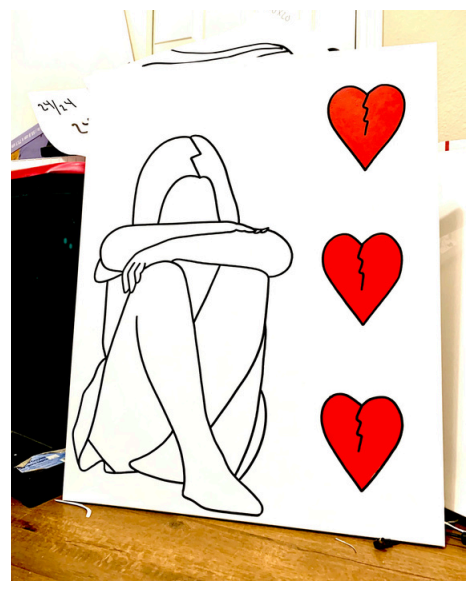


Now, let me get back on track—back to that day when art unknowingly gave me the strength to pull out of my depression. Stella has always been my muse, and it was she who wanted to paint, so I went down to the art store and bought a single canvas. I painted Stella that day. Later that night, I went back and got another canvas. Then another. Then I started buying two or three at a time.

Where I used to not want to be awake, now I didn't want to sleep—and probably couldn't have even if I tried. I didn't realize it then, but I had started to become hypomanic, which I don't want to glorify, but secretly (or maybe not so secretly), I love being hypomanic. I wish I could stay there forever.

However, that is not possible. But in that little timeframe when I'm standing on the cliff of sanity, before I fall off into full-blown mania, I can harness that energy, that high, that creativity, and achieve feats that would never be possible when stable—and especially impossible when depressed.

That single painting of Stella spawned a whole series. I'm not sure how many paintings that series consisted of, but it was in the thirties, maybe even forties, and it all happened in the span of no more than a few weeks. That series had a theme, at least for the most part. It started with Stella and then expanded to include every woman who has profoundly shaped my life—not only those I've shared romantic relationships with, but all of the women who have left a lasting impact. There was Mari, Alena, Kara, Alexis, Nayeli, Madi, Lilly, and Milly.



In any case, the story goes on. There was never a plan for any of these paintings—there was no end goal. I simply wanted to create. Then an opportunity presented itself. My friend, who owns a restaurant, was hosting ArtHop—a Fresno event that happens every first or third Thursday of the month (I forget which). I was telling him about my paintings, and he said, "Why don't you come show them here?" And so I did.

Was that awesome—to show my work, to show what I had done, to show what I created? Yes, of course it was. All of my friends and family came. But that is not the point I'm trying to make. The point is that I know depression is unavoidable. But then again, so is art.

I know that the next time I fall into the abyss, I won't go looking for the light. I'll go looking for art—or rather, art will come looking for me. And I know it will give me the strength to pull me out of the abyss.

And that is what makes me Bipolar Strong.

