

## Growing up with Ana

Rebecca Jones - 3<sup>rd</sup> Year GEM

“Mum I’ve gone too far this time.” A voice quivers from the hallway; Kate tears her attention away from her toys, the seven year old looks up, Ann is trembling, gripping her wrist with white fingers and a stream of red slowly trickling down her arm. Confused, Kate returns to her toys, unsure of the events unfolding in front of her; when mummy and Ann start shouting its better to just keep playing... Kate, now 24, isn’t sure anymore if this is a real memory or if she’s made it up. Things she knows to be true: she has never known her sister to be well, her sister has self-harmed in the past and her sister has an eating disorder.

When Kate was six, her fifteen year old sister, Ann had been diagnosed with Anorexia Nervosa. At the time this meant nothing to Kate, just that Ann wasn’t allowed to leave the breakfast or dinner table for *ages* after eating her food and Ann wasn’t allowed to run around outside with her anymore. It also meant that Kate heard mummy, daddy and Ann shout a lot; she didn’t like this... sometimes even the police came because the shouting was so bad. But occasionally, Ann would play – run around the garden when mum wasn’t looking; telling Kate secrets that she dare not share. Rarely there would be moments of solace, no shouting for a while and things would be ‘normal’ again, but then Ann would slip up, Kate would hear her being sick or spot her stealing mouthfuls of flour from the kitchen; she wanted to tell Mummy but, you can’t break promises.

At sixteen, Ann was too ill to stay at home; eagle eyed parents and regular psychiatrist visits hadn’t stopped her weight plummeting and general health deteriorating. This resulted in an admission into a local adolescent psychiatric unit; a place where Kate wasn’t allowed to play with Ann, or share secrets. She wanted to explore, but she was only allowed in certain rooms with mummy present and was told off when she tried to look around. She only wanted to see if Ann had a cool bedroom with fun decorations, or if she had a comfy sofa like the one they had at home. But they had to wait to be allowed through the front door... it was fun running to press the buzzer before mummy or daddy could get to it though. Sometimes, Ann wouldn’t want to see them; after the half hour journey (that felt like a lifetime to Kate), they’d arrive to find that she wasn’t in the mood to see them... this made Kate cry, she missed her sister, missed the cuddles and the silly games. Even when they are allowed to see her, Ann would often sit curled up on the sofa, in baggy clothes hiding her skeletal frame. She wasn’t the sister Kate was used to seeing... so often Kate would sit in the corner and do her colouring; maybe the pretty pictures will help her feel better? The only time Kate knew she would definitely get to see her was in ‘Family therapy’, a weird meeting where everyone would come together, even Ann’s daddy and step-mum would be there.

“Mummy, why is there a big mirror in here? Why does it have curtains over it?” Kate was fascinated with the big mirror, what went on behind it, but she was never allowed to see. At least there was lego to play with and books to read while everyone talked about how poorly Ann was. Some days they would ask Kate what she thought, this was hard; she didn’t want to make Mummy or Ann cry, which has happened before... like the time they were all talking about where Ann’s poorly was, no one could give the doctor the answer. Even Helen, Kate’s even bigger sister couldn’t tell them, she was just really angry at Ann for “being so silly”. But Kate shyly walked up to Ann and whispered “Ann’s poorly is all over, we just can’t see it.” – she didn’t know why this made mummy sad. As Kate got older she slowly began to understand Ann’s illness; how it worked and how it changed Ann... she

began to realise that she didn't really know her sister, she only knew Ana. It became clear that Kate's life was not normal as she once thought, it wasn't normal for a nine year old to be able to carry her 18 year old sibling, it wasn't normal for her to push her around in a wheel chair, it wasn't normal for your sister to have scars covering her legs and arms.

At her smallest weight Ann was a mere 5st 4lb, the average weight of a normal nine year old, smaller than her own nine year old sister. As she grew, Kate became conscious of her body, as all teenagers do, her larger than average frame, acne and braces... regularly she'd scrutinize herself in the mirror, despising the form in front of her. Often, she'd catch herself doing this and scold her own behaviour, panicking that she was heading down the same route. She couldn't talk to her mum; mum would definitely jump to the wrong conclusions. Whilst her friends dated and dieted, Kate would wish she could do the same, terrified of bringing a boy into the world her family live in, terrified that dieting would cause her to become unwell. She was fat. But fat was a word banned from their household; no-one could utter the word, even the mention that Ann looked healthier would trigger a spiral of despair, and further weight loss. Her tummy would concave, her bones would become more defined, her hair would fall out, and battle scars would appear across her arms and legs. The cycle restarts, Ana takes over and hospital admissions are threatened again. At 19 the threats became a reality, but this time she was no longer a child and joined the 'old biddies' in the adult in patient ward. Where nurses would shout if she didn't eat, tell her it was all in her head and that she was worthless... needless to say, in these occasions Ana only made herself more known.

In the 20 years that Ana has been a member of the family, everyone has come to accept that she is there to stay. That she has robbed Ann of children of her own, despite the fact that she would make a fantastic mother. That she has brought anxiety and angst into their home, and will always make her presence known when things start to get tough. She has changed the relationship between them, now when Kate sees her she analyses, worries; worries that she's lost weight, that she's not happy. She scrutinizes her; does that make her a bad sister? Out of habit and conditioning it becomes an automatic reaction to look at her; Kate can't help but 'judge'. She's now knows that her sister will never be well, her illness with always have some grip on her... lingering in the background, occasionally re-surfacing when things get stressful. She often is the big sister in their relationship, questioning the tablets in her bag, the frequency of exercise, how quickly she uses the toilet after meals. It becomes an interrogation when they meet.

Ana has not only affected Ann, she has found her way to Kate. Making her question her own sanity, wondering if it's okay to feel sad about her body or her life. She has become anxious and paranoid; eager to please everyone around her, even at the detriment of her own happiness. Stemming from the need to be the daughter that was stable, the daughter that didn't have anything wrong. When Helen became ill, OCD this time, Kate heard her mother cry "there must be something wrong with me". Whenever Kate feels paranoid or distressed all she can hear is her anguished mother in her head, she can't be ill too... she couldn't do this to her. So she suffers in silence, unable to make her cause known; attributing her mood, whenever she's asked, to the busy life she leads. She is the sounding board for her family to offload their troubles while quietly building up a pile of her own...

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Growing up with Ana has complicated Kate's life. Filled it with hospital visits, therapy sessions and arguments with her sister. It's made her question her own mental health, held her back from losing

weight and trying diets and contributed to her feelings of reduced self worth. Ana has fuelled countless tear filled walks around the schoolyard with her friends; made Kate snap at them when they tried 'silly' diets and grappled with self-harm. Ana has found her way into every corner of Kate's life... but Ana has also made Kate the woman she is today... She is the one who listens, the one her friends look to for advice. Ana has made Kate empathetic to those around her, and improved her understanding of mental health, not only in others, but in herself as well.

We can't choose our family; we can't control the cards they are dealt. But we can choose the way respond and react to the situations we are faced with. We can allow our experiences to destroy us and knock us down or we can face them head on, and use them to build us into a person better equipped to face the world.

*Written with express permission of the persons in this essay;  
all names have been changed for anonymity*