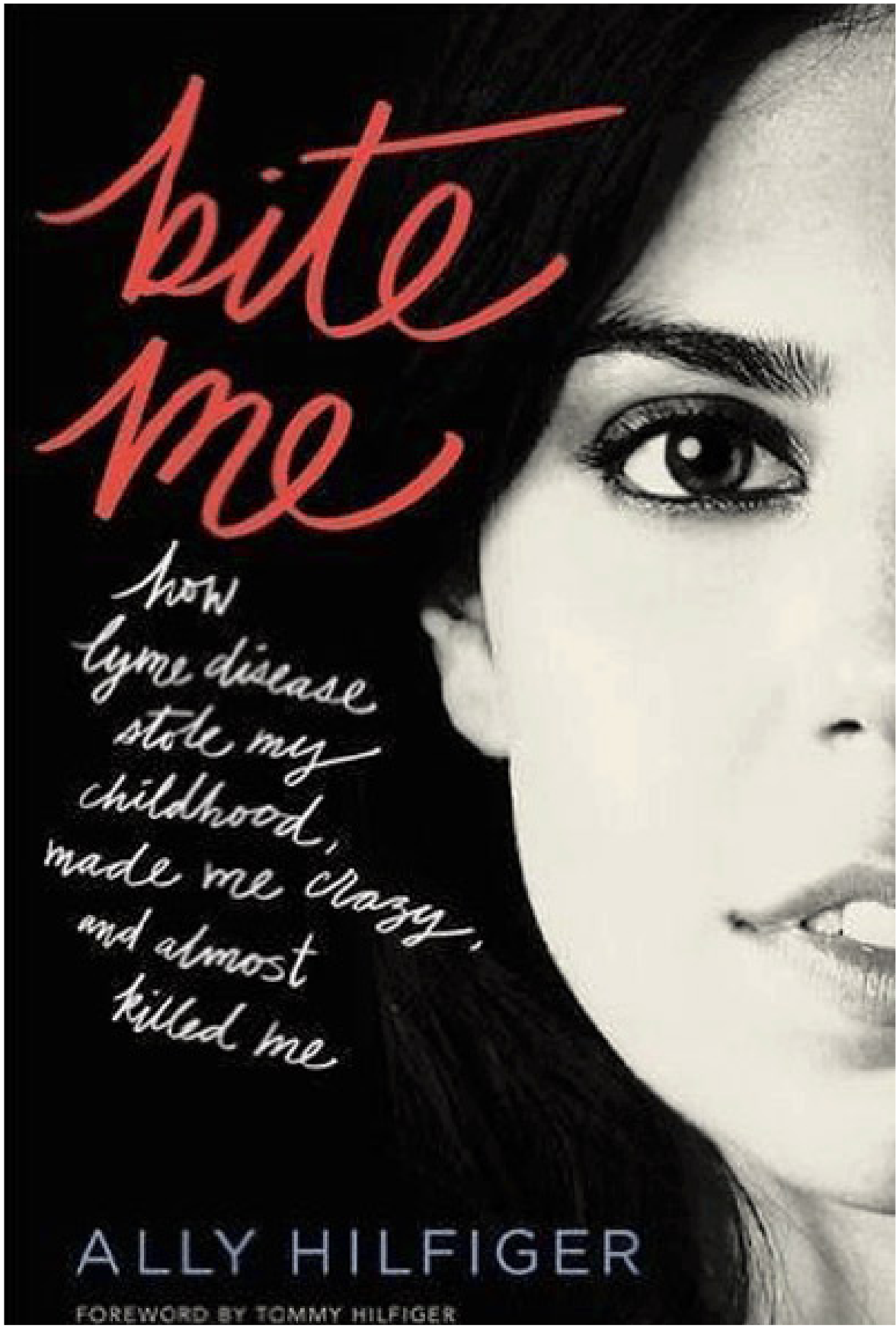


How Lyme Disease Stole My Childhood



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Hilfiger was bitten by a tick when she was seven. However, nobody connected that to the series of changes that soon overtook her life. She developed knee pain, memory problems, anxiety, learning disabilities and episodes of explosive anger, among many other symptoms.

Her parents—fashion mogul Tommy Hilfiger and his now ex-wife, Susie Hilfiger—took her to a parade of doctors, who variously diagnosed her with “growing pains,” fibromyalgia, ADHD, and multiple sclerosis. Many treatments were tried and failed to help.

After a psychotic break at age 18, Ally landed in a mental hospital. Eventually, her psychiatrist came to suspect Lyme, and then her life took a sharp turn in a different direction.

The following is an excerpt from her book, *Bite Me: How Lyme Disease Stole My Childhood, Made Me Crazy and Almost Killed me*.

A BITE OF CRAZY

In late December 2003, just a few weeks after the last airing of a reality television show I’d starred in, I opened my eyes in a strange, dark room with cinder-block walls, and in a bed made for an elf. Perhaps most disturbing was the fact that my orange and red Adidas sneakers were missing their laces. I looked down at the inside of my arm, which was itching, and saw a piece of gauze being held in place by a Band-Aid.

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Am I in a hospital? Did I try to hurt myself? Am I in a mental institution? Am I in jail? I could barely think because my head was pounding so badly.

I managed to pull myself up but my head started to spin, so I lay back down and tears began to roll down my face. Where am I? I felt alone, scared, and I could not remember a thing. I recognized the familiar confusion, loneliness, fear, and head pain. I needed to wake myself up from this dream, this nightmare. The nightmare I had been living my whole life.

I walked into the hall, a brightly lighted, carpeted corridor. There was a window with bars, and outside these windows I saw snow-covered trees. The landscape looked like somewhere

on the East Coast. Maybe I am close to home. I wanted to go home and just be held and comforted in my mother's arms. As I turned around I wiped away tears and suddenly a large redheaded man was guiding me toward the end of the hallway to a chair.

"Where am I? Where are you taking me?" I asked the man.

"We have to take your blood pressure and temperature," he said. "Why? Where am I? What's happening?"

"You are at Silver Hill Hospital in the Acute Care Unit.

My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach and I was in complete shock. I have been totally misunderstood, I thought, and thrown into a nuthouse without my consent.

My dad did this, I thought. A father should walk you down the aisle, not walk you down a locked corridor. How could my dad do this to me? I had always trusted him more than anyone. He had always been the one I called when I felt lost, sad, and uncertain. So the question of what had happened to me became, what had happened to me and my dad?

Our relationship was never like this when I was younger.

When I was four years old, every Saturday morning my dad would put me on the back of his bicycle to go for a ride through the back roads of our pretty town. He would stop near the water, and we would sit and stare in awe and amusement. After the bike ride, he would take me to the mall for curly fries and an A&W root beer. Saturdays were my absolute favorite because I was with my favorite person in the world. My father understood me like no one else, stood up for me, believed in me, and encouraged me. I always felt safe when I was in his presence. Always.

Not, however, today.

At night, after my mom sang me her homemade lullabies, put me in my foot pajamas, and tucked me in, I would wait for my father to come home from work in the city and give me a kiss good night. He would rush to get home before I fell asleep and I fought to keep my eyes open until he was home.

Now at eighteen years old, I was curled up at the bottom of a bed waiting again for my knight in shining armor to come and save me. Save me from the nuthouse. It was my knight,

however, who drugged me and locked me up in this place. I tried to remember if Christmas had passed but couldn't. Everything was a blur.

The last thing I remembered was going to a church to beg a priest to bestow sleep upon me. Sleep was a battle, and I rarely won. I wanted so desperately to be able to put my head on a pillow and easily drift into a dream world, but instead I was living in a state of wide-awake paranoia. The last episode of the TV show that had ruined my life had just aired, and I couldn't walk into a gas station without being recognized. I thought someone was out to get me and that stalkers waited around every corner to attack me. I felt alone, frightened, and convinced that some dark force was keeping me from sleeping or having any sort of appetite, not to mention giving me the persistent nausea and joint pain I was unable to ignore.

I remembered walking into a little stone church in the center of Bedford Village, New York, on Christmas Eve carrying every spiritual book my mother had ever given me, a few pine tree branches that I smelled to relieve nausea, and a head of grungy hair that featured two dreadlocks. I had become that person, that homeless woman you see on the sidewalk passing out pamphlets on Forty-Ninth Street, talking to herself.

After the mass I decided to go up to random people I thought might need spiritual saving and hand them a copy of *The Power of Now* or Mother Teresa's *In My Own Words*. These books had given me hope and it was my assumption that they might help other lost souls in the crowded Christmas Eve mass.

As I lay on that little elf-sized bed, I remembered, too, a few weeks before Christmas, when I was on my father's bathroom floor crying in pain, and he choked up and asked me, "What can I do? How can I help? Anything, I will do anything to help you and make you feel better."

"Pot," I said to him. "Get me some pot. It's the only thing that will help me."

The excruciating joint pain and flu-like symptoms had been part of my life since I was a little girl.

My parents and doctors dismissed my complaints about my knees feeling achy and hot. I was told they were growing pains. They treated the constant bouts of strep throat with bubble-gum-flavored antibiotic and never looked into my health in any comprehensive manner.

As the years went on, I felt as though my brain was not working as well as the other kids' in my class. When I got tested, they told me I had attention deficit disorder, ADD. When I stopped being able to read, they said I had a learning disability and sent me to a specialist. When I couldn't remember the information I had studied for four hours the night before a test, they told me to study harder. When I couldn't wake up for school or keep my eyes open during class, they told me I needed to go to bed earlier and exercise more. When I told them I had pounding headaches several days a week, they told me to drink more water or "pop a couple of Advils," even when the headache was so strong I couldn't lift my head from my desk. When I was in agony from severe hip pain and random joint pain, they said, "It's probably rheumatoid arthritis. Or maybe it's multiple sclerosis. Or it sounds like fibromyalgia. Or it could be . . ."

Who is "they," you ask? My parents, teachers, doctors, and the people in between.

Speaking of doctors, the one at Silver Hill was a piece of work. Let's just say he took himself really seriously. When he walked into my room, the first thing I noticed was that his suit was a little too nice, and his shirt was a little too pressed, and his tie matched his socks. He arrived with an arrogant disposition, which made me feel immediately judged and belittled.

My cousin had come to visit me the day before, and she'd brought me a crazy orange and fuchsia hat with those wild pom-poms with long tassels sticking out all over the top. Ha! Little did this stern, buttoned-up doctor know he would be forced into wearing this hat atop his ensemble or else I would not speak or even look at him.

I just needed this guy to drop back down to earth. Or slightly above earth in my case, in another realm of playfulness and spirituality (or just plain old psychosis) that was my defense against the pain I was in on a daily basis. I wasn't being silly because I was incapable of being serious. I was being silly because I was terrified. I was not sure what he was treating me for or what he thought was wrong with me.

In my room at Silver Hill, I had my necessities: one tiny wooden Ganesh, a Hindu deity with an elephant head who removes obstacles, a book on infinity with the 8 symbol on the front, a deck of cards, a journal, a sketch pad, Chapstick, and a pack of Marlboro Lights. I didn't care about showering or clothing or any of that superficial madness; yes, showering is superficial when you're on lockdown. I was so tired of image and material things.

On one of the first days at the hospital I had a flashback of a day that had certainly led up to my being in this place. I had been angry at my parents for not listening to me when I said I didn't feel well; they seemed too preoccupied with work and money and making the house look good. I exploded and raged and screamed and cried, and I broke one of my mother's favorite plates. (You can't have a nervous breakdown without breaking expensive plates. Ask Edward Albee.) All eighty-five pounds of me was coming undone. For days I hadn't been able to eat, shower, or sleep. I was convinced that bugs were crawling in my body. I could feel them eating at my organs, my stomach, and especially my brain. I wasn't me anymore. I was a weakly projected image of myself on a wall, crying out for someone to help me and figure out what was wrong.

Well, my dad did just that, but never in my wildest dreams did I think he would help me in the dramatic way he chose.

Staring into the eyes of this doctor in his shiny suit made me feel crazier and more emotional. The colorful snowboarding hat only went so far. I realized no one was going to help me get out of here, no one was going to listen to what was really going on. No one was going to believe that I used the marijuana found in my blood to help me eat something without feeling as if I was going to vomit, and to help me sleep. No one was going to understand that this wasn't the place that I needed to be.

Except the one person who would. I'd had a vague dream of someone who had the power or authority to get me out of here and find the missing piece to my health puzzle. This person was the answer and the key to my ultimate freedom from it all.

I had no idea I had to go through weeks of hellish existence in order to figure out who this phantom person was.