

# Living With the Unseen Battle: Loving My Son's Twin Brother

*April M. Bagon-Faeldan, Ph.D.*

Key Terms: *Bipolar Disorder, Motherhood, Rehabilitation Center, Manic Episodes*

*"One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star." - Friedrich Nietzsche*

## EDDIE AND VENOM

Before I tell you about my son, I need to tell you about two characters you may already know.

In the movie *Venom*, Eddie Brock is an ordinary man who one day becomes host to an alien creature called a symbiote. From that moment forward, they share a single body. Eddie is himself most of the time — thinking his own thoughts, making his own choices — but *Venom* lives inside him. The alien speaks in his head, takes over when provoked, and pushes Eddie toward things he would never do on his own.

At first, Eddie is terrified. He hears a voice no one else can hear. He loses control of his limbs. He does things he cannot explain and wakes up not knowing what happened. He is not sick, the world tells him. He is not crazy. But something is clearly, undeniably wrong. Over time — slowly, painfully — Eddie and *Venom* learn to coexist. Not in peace, exactly. But in a kind of negotiated survival.

That is my son.

He is Eddie. He is still himself — still my child, still the boy I know. But something lives inside him, too. Something that is not him and yet cannot be removed from him. Something that takes the wheel without warning, speaks in a voice I do not recognize, and leaves wreckage behind that my son — the real one, the Eddie — did not choose to create.



Ink and Insights by Vidia Nala (四月)

A Collection of Literary Works from the Vestibule of Life and Lessons  
vidianala09.org

The goal, I have learned, is not to destroy what lives inside him.

The goal is to help Eddie stay in the driver's seat and make the travel safely.

### **THE BOY HE USED TO BE**

I still remember who he was before any of this.

He was the kind of child who made strangers smile. Sweet, thoughtful, overflowing with a gentleness that seemed too careful for this rough world. He is cheerful and funny. He marched in the school's drum and bugle corps, his small hands gripping his instrument with a seriousness that made my chest ache with pride. Music was not something he did — it was something he was. The guitar, the trumpet, any instrument he touched became a conversation he was having with something larger than himself.

Life, in those years, felt whole. I am satisfied. I felt fulfilled as a working mother.

Then 2020 arrived, and the world paused.

The pandemic locked us inside our homes. Schools closed. Streets emptied. My son — my bright, musical, social boy — was left alone with four walls and a silence he did not know how to fill. I did what any desperate parent would do. I handed him a tablet.

I thought I was giving him a window.

I did not know I was opening a Pandora's box that I would never be able to close again.

### **THE PANDORA'S BOX**

It began gently, the way all disasters begin. An hour of games became two. Two became four. Four became the full arc of a day, and then a night, until the blue glow of the screen was the only light left in his eyes. Within two, perhaps three years, the boy who had once filled our home with trumpet music began filling it with



**Ink and Insights by Vidia Nala (四月)**

A Collection of Literary Works from the Vestibule of Life and Lessons  
vidianala09.org

something else: shouting, cursing, words so sharp and foreign they struck me like open palms every time I heard them.

I would stand in the hallway, listen, and think: Who is speaking? Who is in my house? *Siya na ba talaga ang aking anak?* [Is he really my son?]

It was not my son. It could not be.

The sweetness left first. Then the patience. Then, piece by piece, the boy I had spent years raising — pulling away like sand beneath my feet as the tide came in. In his place stood someone I did not recognize: volatile, raging, a storm wearing my child's face. When we tried to take the phone, the tablet, anything — he detonated. We tried to negotiate. Two-four hours a day. First, he complied, then he forgot and didn't honor his promise. The storm is always in our house. The furniture broke. Walls bore the impressions of his fists. The house that once held music now held only the sound of destruction.

And I would stand in the middle of it, trembling, with no answer to the question forming in my chest.

It got worse.

The vape came. The skipped classes came. And then one day, he looked at me — his mother, the woman who carried him, who had wept with joy the first time she heard him play — and he saw not a parent, but an obstacle. He had grown stronger than us, and he knew it, and he used it.

*Papatayin kita!!!! ["I will kill you."]. He shouted with all his might.  
Gusto ko ng Kalayaan!!! [I want freedom!!!]*

The first time he said those words, I told myself it was the anger speaking. By the second, third and multiple times, I was no longer sure. What I know is he is really ungrateful. *Walang utang na loob!* And then came the night he stood before me with a knife in his hand — my own child, my own blood — pointing it at the woman who would have died a thousand times to keep him safe.

All I could do was cry. Everything else — my words, my authority, my sense of who we were to each other — had already been taken from me. I failed as a mother.



## Ink and Insights by Vidia Nala (四月)

A Collection of Literary Works from the Vestibule of Life and Lessons  
vidianala09.org

## THE HANDS OF STRANGERS

At the bottom of that suffering, we made the hardest decision a parent can make. We brought him to a rehabilitation center. We placed him in the hands of strangers because we had run out of hands of our own.

And for a moment — a moment so beautiful and so fragile I am almost afraid to write about it — I saw him again. The boy behind the storm. He would look at me with clear eyes and say, softly, as if he meant every word:

*"I'm sorry, Mommy. I will change. I promise I will do better."*

Every single time, I believed him.

What mother wouldn't? What mother could look into the face of her child — the real child, the one she recognized — and choose not to?

But the storm always returned. Multiple times. It is really tiring and exhausting.

Two years of rehabilitation. In and out, in and out, like a tide that never truly recedes. Promises made and then unmade. Hope extended and then shattered, each time from a slightly lower height than the time before. I began to wonder, in the quiet hours, if I was the one who was lost.

## THE WORD I REFUSED TO HEAR

When the doctors sat me down and said it — bipolar disorder — I almost laughed.

Not because it was funny. Because it was impossible!

*Walang sakit ang anak ko!* [My son is not sick!]

My son did not have a disorder. He was just a stubborn teenager, a normal and naughty teenager. He was just addicted to his phone. He was going through



Ink and Insights by Vidia Nala (四月)

A Collection of Literary Works from the Vestibule of Life and Lessons  
vidianala09.org

something millions of boys go through, and when he was older, when he became wiser, when the world settled into a shape that made sense to him, he would be fine.

That is what I told myself. That is what I needed.

So I begged his doctor. I am holding my phone and talking to him via Telekonsulta. I keep on pleading, the way a person begs when they have nothing left but words. Please reduce the medicine. Please remove it. Look at him inside the facility — no smartphone, no triggers, no episodes. He follows the rules. He eats. He sleeps. He is calm. He is my son again. Surely that is proof. Surely the phone was the problem, and without the phone, he was already healing.

The doctor listened. I could see it in his face — that quiet, patient expression of someone who has heard these exact words from a hundred other parents in that same chair. He did not argue with me. Maybe he understands me. He simply waited for me to understand on my own.

It took me a long time.

It was the third time my son came home from rehabilitation that something finally gave way inside me. Not in a single moment of clarity — life rarely grants those. It came slowly, like rain: soft at first, then impossible to ignore. I looked at my son — truly looked at him — and I stopped trying to see the problem I wanted to fix and began to see the reality I had to face.

He has bipolar disorder.  
He will always have bipolar disorder.  
And that is not his fault. And it is not mine.

### **TAI LUNG LIVES HERE TOO**

Living with him is like walking on a floor you are never certain will hold. Living with him is like the weather. It is truly uncertain.

Some days it holds perfectly. And on those days, he is extraordinary.



**Ink and Insights by Vidia Nala (四月)**

A Collection of Literary Works from the Vestibule of Life and Lessons  
vidianala09.org

He cooks — not carelessly, not out of hunger, but with genuine intention. He wanted to impress me. He wanted to show how much he loves me. He knew I did not like salty, oily, and too-sweet foods. He plates his food the way an artist composes a canvas: each element considered, each detail deliberate. When you ask him to do something, he does it. When he is in the right space, he is the most attentive, most genuinely kind person in any room. The kind of kind that does not perform itself for an audience. It simply is.

On those days, I see the boy from the drum and bugle corps. The boy with the trumpet. The boy I raised. He is still in there, still very much alive, still capable of more beauty than I can find words for.

But then the other one comes.

We named him Tai Lung.

If you have watched Kung Fu Panda, you know him — the leopard who cannot be reasoned with, who operates by rules no one else can follow, who arrives without warning and leaves ruin behind. We did not choose this name to diminish my son. We chose it because we needed language for what was happening — a way to name the storm without naming my child as the storm. Because they are not the same, even when they share one face.

When Tai Lung arrives, we feel it before we see it. The air shifts. The house tightens. We have learned, slowly and at great cost, to read those signs.

But when he does not come — when an entire day passes, and my son remains my son, calm and present and kind — we celebrate. Quietly. A glance was exchanged across the dinner table. A held breath is finally released.

*Hindi nagpakita si Tai Lung ngayon! [He did not come today.]*

It is a small victory whenever Tai Lung just sleeps all day. That is enough.

### **HE JUST GRADUATED**

He graduated from Junior High School.



**Ink and Insights by Vidia Nala (四月)**

A Collection of Literary Works from the Vestibule of Life and Lessons  
vidianala09.org

Such an ordinary sentence. Such an ordinary milestone — the kind that millions of families mark with cake and photographs and proud, awkward handshakes. But for me, those three words carried the full weight of everything we had survived together. Every broken thing in that house. Every sleepless night. Every knife. Every tear I cried on the floor, alone, wondering if I still recognized my own life.

He graduated.

I sat with that quietly, the way you sit with something too large to fully hold.

But even then, even in that moment of grace, the question would not leave me.

*Kaya ko ba talaga siyang alagaan? [Can I really handle him?]*

I ask it more than I would like to admit. Not because I do not love him — I love him beyond what language can reach. But love does not dissolve exhaustion. It does not shorten the episodes or lift the heaviness that lingers in a house after Tai Lung has passed through it. When I wake already tired before the day has begun, I ask that question in the dark, and I am not always sure of the answer.

There are moments — and I say this honestly, because this story deserves nothing less — where I find myself thinking about the rehabilitation center. Not as a punishment. Never that. But as a kind of rest I am ashamed to want. Inside those walls, he is structured, supervised, and calm. The people there are trained to do what I sometimes cannot. And we — the family at home — breathe.

Is that selfish? I have asked myself. I do not have a clean answer. I think it is simply human that exhaustion and love can live in the same body at the same time without one erasing the other.

But then the other feeling comes. And it is always stronger.

I want to cook for him. I want to be the one who sets the plate before him — not a stranger on a schedule, not a caregiver following a protocol, but me. His mother. The one who knows how he likes his food, who remembers the sound of his laugh at the dinner table when the world was still simple and small.



Ink and Insights by Vidia Nala (四月)

A Collection of Literary Works from the Vestibule of Life and Lessons  
vidianala09.org

I want to see him in his school uniform. That image alone — a uniform, a backpack, a boy walking out the front door toward something ordinary — is enough to make me cry. I want to sit in a plastic chair at a school program and wave too eagerly from the crowd. I want to argue with him about homework and curfews like a normal mother arguing with a normal son.

I want the ordinary. I want it with an ache that has no bottom.

### **WHAT THIS STORY IS FOR**

Two years. This disorder has taken two years from us — from his youth, his freedom, the life he should have been living. Two years of rehabilitation, returning, and leaving again. In two years, neither of us will recover.

He is not the only one who lost them. I lost them too. I lost the mother I thought I would be by now. I lost the quiet life I had imagined — the one where my musical, gentle boy was busy with weekend rehearsals and school programs and the beautiful, unremarkable chaos of simply growing up. I did not get that life. I got a different one. One that leaves marks.

I will not pretend I am not still in the middle of it.

But I am writing this down. And that means something.

I am writing this because somewhere out there is another parent reading these words in the middle of the night — sitting outside a closed door, or on the floor of a room that was whole before today — who believes they are completely alone in this.

*Hindi ka nag-iisa.* [You are not alone.]

Bipolar disorder is not a failure of character. It is not a consequence of bad parenting. It is not something a child chooses or a family deserves. It is an illness: real, invisible, exhausting, and misunderstood by a world too quick to judge what it cannot see.

My son is not defined by his episodes. He is the boy who plates his food like it is art. He is the boy who was once small enough to carry, who marched in a corps



## Ink and Insights by Vidia Nala (四月)

A Collection of Literary Works from the Vestibule of Life and Lessons  
vidianala09.org

and made a trumpet sing. He is the boy who, on his best days, is so genuinely kind that I remember, in my whole body, why I have never once stopped fighting for him.

He is suffering too. I know that. Behind every episode, behind every threat, behind everything Tai Lung does when he arrives — my son is still in there, tired and undeserving of all of it.

We are both trying to survive the same storm. We are just standing on different sides of it.

If this essay reaches even one person — one parent, one teacher, one friend, one stranger who has ever looked at a difficult child and reached for the word bad before the word struggling — then every painful sentence was worth writing.

Look closer. Ask what they are carrying before you decide what kind of person they are.

Because behind every Tai Lung, there is an Eddie.

And Eddie is still there.

Still worth everything.

Still deserve to be loved and understood.



## Ink and Insights by Vidia Nala (四月)

A Collection of Literary Works from the Vestibule of Life and Lessons  
vidianala09.org