

life lessons

The inside stories of inspiring women

a difficult legacy

Born into a family haunted by alcoholism and suicide, Oscar-nominated actress and granddaughter of Ernest, Mariel Hemingway tells *Christine Lennon* how her own anguish compelled her to shine a light on depression

*Photography by Guy Aroch
Fashion editor Deborah Afshani*

The road to Mariel Hemingway's Malibu ranch is long, winding and unpredictable, making it easy to get lost along the way. It is an apt metaphor for the path the actress and writer has taken through life. Her troubles began early. The year she was born, Mariel's grandfather, legendary writer Ernest Hemingway, killed himself after a lengthy battle with alcoholism and depression. His was one of a total of five confirmed suicides in the Hemingway family, across four generations. Anyone less stoic than Mariel might believe the Hemingways to be cursed, or at least tragically predisposed to addiction and mental health problems. But Mariel soundly rejects that, as well as any notion that she, or indeed anyone, should be doomed to repeat the traumas and mistakes of the past. >

Dress by Etro, £3,010; 14ct jadeite and diamond ring, £455, 18k gold bracelet, £3,810, and 18k gold and mother of pearl necklace, £8,530, all by Bulgari



Dress by
Alberta
Ferretti,
£4,865; 14ct
jadeite and
diamond ring,
£455, and 18k
gold bracelet,
£3,810, both
by Bulgari



Growing up in Ketchum, Idaho, the youngest of three girls, Mariel had a tumultuous start in life. Her father Jack was an avid outdoorsman, writer and accomplished fly fisherman. But he was also an alcoholic. “When he wasn’t drunk, he was so kind and brilliant,” Mariel recalls. “My father taught me more about nature than anyone could have. Now it is my passion in life.” Mariel’s mother Byra, known as “Puck”, was regal, beautiful, imperious and an alcoholic too, who battled cancer for many years. “She could be very cruel, particularly to my father,” Mariel says. “They would start drinking before dinner – they called it ‘Wine Time’.”

As a nine-year-old, Mariel believed that she could maintain order in the family by

keeping the house tidy, cleaning up the broken glass after late-night, alcohol-fueled fights. “I thought that everyone would get up and see the house in order and it would be fine,” she remembers. “That went on for years, like it was the most normal thing in the world. As a kid I tried to control everything. I would make my bed and pull the sheets so tight – I wanted it to look like no one had ever slept in it.” After her mother was diagnosed with cancer, her father had a heart attack and Mariel was forced to care for them both. “I would entertain my mom. It is all I did,” she explains. “People thought she was such a bitch. But children love their parents so much that they don’t see what is really happening.” Mariel recalls tender moments with her mother behind closed

doors, “watching episodes of *Mission Impossible* together”, although on reflection she now sees that, like Jekyll and Hyde, “she could be a monster too”.

When Mariel turned 16, she dropped out of high school and relocated to New York. Her parents’ reaction to her move came as a surprise. “I planned what I would say to convince my parents to let me leave Idaho,” she says. “I honestly never thought they would let me go. But they didn’t fight at all. At a certain level it felt like neglect.”

Although Mariel went on to carve out a highly successful career as an actress, finding people she could trust in the wily world of 1970s and 1980s Hollywood was challenging for the fledgling star. “After I made the movie *Manhattan* with Woody

Allen, he visited me in Ketchum and said he wanted to take me to Paris," she says. "In my stupid, young mind, I thought, 'We're friends'. But then I realized if I went with him, I wasn't getting my own room. That was a big realization for me. He thought I was more sophisticated and experienced than I was, but I was very young." Mariel looked to her parents for guidance. "I really wanted my parents to come in and say, 'No, our daughter is just too young,'" she says. "But fuck no! They were packing my bags." She came to the decision she couldn't go away with Allen on these terms, so their friendship remained platonic.

Mariel vowed to do things differently with her own children, but in an effort to provide a stable home for them she admits that she ended up staying in an unsuccessful marriage for far too long, unconsciously repeating the patterns of her youth. "I was so haunted by my childhood that it took years for that switch to flip on in my mind, and for me to decide that I wanted to live a different life and be happy," she says. "I didn't realize that it was OK to allow that relationship to finish. Like my dad, I thought, 'I'm in this for good, until the end.' So I waited until my girls were older before I divorced, because I wanted their lives to be normal and happy."

Mariel's daughters – Dree, 27, and Langley, 25 – are both successful models, and radiant proof that she succeeded; there is no trace in them of the anguish that plagued their ancestors. Mariel raised her girls in the suburbs of Los Angeles, and the family spent their summers on the Hemingway ranch in Ketchum. She is clearly delighted that they got to enjoy a normal childhood, growing up out of the limelight and untouched by the family's past; Mariel recalls with laughter the first time she took them to see Ernest's books at the library. "That guy is our great-grandfather?!" they said. "Anonymity was not something Mariel enjoyed when she was growing up. "Going to a school named after my grandfather – the Ernest Hemingway elementary school – meant that people quickly realized who I was," she says. Not only did the other children bully her, but her teachers' expectations were high. "My English papers had to be really good."

When her daughters were old enough, Mariel told them about the mental illness that ran in their family. What she didn't discuss was her own fear, her inability to let things go and relax. "I talked about everything that happened to my grandfather, but I never told them that I was depressed," she says. "My survival mechanism was just

to think, 'Life is rough. We get through it. We will figure it out.' Because that is what I had always done. Then I got so exhausted that I couldn't do it any more."

While Dree and Langley are close, Mariel's relationship with her own sisters

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Below, from top: Mariel Hemingway with Woody Allen, filming *Manhattan* in 1979; Mariel with her older sister Margaux



"I want to let people know that *telling your story* can set you free"

was turbulent. Her older sister Margaux, a successful model in the Studio 54 era, struggled with drug addiction for decades and eventually died from an intentional overdose of sedatives in 1996, aged 41. Her eldest sister Joan suffers from bipolar

disorder and schizophrenia (possibly linked to excessive LSD use in the late 1960s); she now lives with a carer in rural Idaho.

After her 24-year marriage to restaurateur Stephen Crisman ended in 2007, Mariel made the decision to speak out publicly about mental health and share her family's story; she felt a profound sense of catharsis afterwards. In addition, she says, pursuing an active and healthy lifestyle has helped her overcome the demons that plagued her. "Through physical activity, the right mental health care, good nutrition, doing what makes you happiest, you can change things," she insists. "It was an internal shift for me. I realized that I was in a place where it was OK to be happy. It is about living, not dying."

She also found love with former stuntman and fitness expert Bobby Williams. "Before I met my boyfriend, I really thought that the way I live my life now only existed in storybooks and movies," she says. "I would watch a romantic comedy, roll my eyes and think, 'Whatever. People don't really kiss like that.' Then we got together and I realized you can be happy every day."

Though Hemingway has written a number of books, including a yoga handbook, a health-conscious cookbook and a series of wellness and nutrition self-help guides, her forthcoming memoir, *Out Came the Sun: Overcoming the Legacy of Mental Illness, Addiction, and Suicide in My Family*, addresses her own life and family history for the first time. Mariel says the book is designed to encourage other people to tell their stories, and to start an open conversation about mental illness. Mariel has also written a young-adult novel, *Invisible Girl*, which deals with the same themes, because she feels it is important to start the conversation early, and to make a connection between lifestyle and mental wellbeing at an early age. "When I speak out about having a family legacy of depression, or being a child of parents who had issues with drinking and a very dysfunctional marriage, and the sibling of two sisters who struggled with addiction and mental illness, I am amazed by how many people relate to my experience," she says. "The fact that I come from a famous family doesn't make me less human. I want to let people know that telling your story can set you free. That is why I started telling mine." ■

Invisible Girl and *Out Came the Sun: Overcoming the Legacy of Mental Illness, Addiction, and Suicide in My Family* are both published on April 7 (Simon & Schuster, £13, £17)