

MOVIE: BRAIN ON FIRE

WRITTEN BY: GERARD BARRETT

REVIEW BY: KARENA DINDIAL



Brain on Fire is a Netflix movie based on the true story of a woman's experience with brain inflammation. The movie dives into the life of Susannah Calahan, a writer for the New York, and immediately shows how her seemingly normal, everyday life is thrown into chaos after she starts to have what others perceive to be a mental breakdown. At the start of the movie, we see Susannah arriving at her birthday party with her musician boyfriend, Stephen. Her divorced parents, Rhonda and Thomas are also present, along with their respective partners and here, we see Susannah struggle to blow out her candles after experiencing a wave of vertigo.

From there, things start to get progressively worse, with Susannah experiencing a similar bout of vertigo on her way home on the subway. Later that night, she appears to have trouble coordinating her fingers to type on her keyboard, and she begins to hallucinate seeing bumps on her skin. These symptoms begin to affect her work when she submits a poorly written article to her boss, Richard, days past the due date. This inability to keep track of the days, along with the numbness she felt in her left leg and arm prompted her to go to the doctor's.

However an MRI scan saw no abnormalities in her brain, and Susannah was sent home with some prescriptions to help her sleep. Here, Susannah is then shown to hear a leaking faucet, however her dad arrives at her apartment to find it in disarray, and the faucet unbroken. Susannah then exclaims her thoughts while interviewing a senator who had an affair, which results in him leaving the interview and causes her boss to have her friend, Margo watch over her.

The movie progresses to show Susannah continuing to lose touch with reality, followed by a violent seizure in her sleep. Her boyfriend Stephen takes her to the hospital where again, the doctors diagnose her as needing rest from overworking and advise her to stop drinking. At this point, her parents arrive and agree to have her stay at her mother's.

However Rhonda, Susannah's mother notices that her daughter isn't quite present, and her concern only grows after her daughter displays an erratic change in behavior, exclaiming that she wanted a new job, and to return to school. Seconds later, she exclaims the exact opposite, and then falls into another seizure. Susannah then has an explosive episode at work, and is sent home by her boss.

Following this, she visits a psychiatrist where she expresses her belief that she has bipolar disorder. She is then prescribed medication, and after a heated argument with her mother, grudgingly takes them. It is at this point Rhonda pleads with her former husband to take their daughter, as she is unable to handle her erratic behavior. Thomas, Susannah's father only truly understands after Susannah becomes angry at hearing something Giselle, her father's wife, for claiming that she called her a 'spoilt brat.' However Giselle had not said a word. Susannah grows violent, and smashes the dishes in a fit of rage, before suddenly becoming scared and screaming when her father approaches her.

After this, her parents admit Susannah into a ward where three different doctors attempt to diagnose her, all to no avail. Susannah speaks of hearing thoughts and voices, and makes numerous attempts to escape her ward, all likely signs of schizophrenia or manic behavior. However her parents are adamant that their daughter is not crazy, and push for further testing. Just as it seems Sussanah will be institutionalized, Dr. Khan, one of Susannah's doctor's, is able to enlist the help of one of her friends, Dr. Najjar.

At this point, Sussanah is fully catatonic and unable to move or speak without great effort, that is, she has catatonia. After many exercises, Dr. Najjar is able to glean her affliction after asking her to draw a cloak, of which she could only draw the numbers on the left side. From this, Dr. Najjar was able to ascertain that the right side of Susannah's brain was inflamed, meaning that her affliction could not be bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

After this, a brain biopsy is performed, and it is discovered that Susannah has an autoimmune disease called anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis. Basically, her body was attacking her brain. Thankfully, as it was detected in its early stages, she was able to retain 90% of her cognitive abilities. Unfortunately, she has to relearn all her basic motor functions from scratch –how to walk, how to talk, how to love. However, Susannah is able to overcome these obstacles, and eventually returns to her job at the NY Post where she agrees to share her story with the world.

Brain on Fire was a truly riveting story of how a woman who was dealt a very bad hand was able to overcome her dismal circumstances thanks to the support of the people she loved. Her divorced parents were a united front as they stood faithfully by their daughter's side through her diagnosis and treatments, and were steadfast in their belief that her illness was not a psychiatric disorder or anything of the sort. Their perseverance and belief in Susannah is the very thing which saved her from having to live her life catatonically in a psychiatric ward. The movie not only showcases the consequences of misdiagnosis, but also shows that it is possible to overcome dire circumstances and come out stronger for them.

***“The brain is a
monstrous, beautiful
mess”***

Sources:

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Neuroscience
F o u n d a t i o n