

When insanity strikes home

PHOTOGRAPH: STUART CONWAY

The author Kurt Vonnegut thought his son Mark might never recover when he suddenly slipped into 'babbling madness'. Here, they tell **Helena de Bertodano** how each coped with the crisis

To look at Kurt and Mark Vonnegut, you would never guess they were father and son. Kurt is tall, lean and wiry, with wild hair. Mark is shorter, clean-cut and solidly built. Their faces bear little similarity, apart from a certain bushiness about the eyebrows, more exaggerated in the father. Kurt – the celebrated author of *Slaughterhouse Five*, who turned 80 last week – wears a flecked jumper with holes in the elbow and shoulder. Mark, 55, is conventionally dressed in shirt, jumper and corduroys, with polished leather shoes.

Father and son are sitting opposite each other in Kurt's house in New York, reminiscing about the time Mark "went nuts", as Kurt puts it. As a hippie living on a commune in the late Sixties, Mark suffered severe delusions, believing that he controlled natural disasters such as earthquakes. He stopped eating, tried to commit suicide several times and spent nearly four months in hospital before emerging sane, against all the odds.

"It's a strange illness," says Mark, who has written about his experience in his prize-winning *The Eden Express: A memoir of insanity*, published in this country this month with a new foreword by his

father. "I'd be in this chair and have no real sense of how I got there or what was going on, so I'd make up a story that the aliens were controlling me."

His father, speaking in a guttural voice fuelled by a chain of cigarettes, describes his reaction at the time. "I felt horror. I feel horror just thinking about it now. I loved my son and I was proud of him. When I heard that he had gone nuts, I thought maybe he was dead because I knew that a lot of people, at least half, never recover. I presume that if he had never recovered I would have gone on loving him, but he would have been in an institution for the rest of his life."

In his foreword, Kurt describes how he found out that his son was ill: "Mark's most unsociable performance when bananas, and before I could get him into a Canadian laughing academy, was to babble on and on, and then wing a cue ball through a picture window in an urban commune in Vancouver, British Columbia. It was only then that his flower children friends telephoned me to say he was in need of a father."

Kurt got on the next flight to Vancouver where he met a stranger. "He was babbling," the novelist tells me. "Who knows what he was saying? It was clear I had a crazy person



Kurt Vonnegut and his son Mark 'After I heard that Mark had gone nuts, I thought maybe he was dead because I knew that a lot of people, at least half, never recover'

on my hands. The noises that came out of his mouth sounded more like saxophone music than talk. I knew that I had to find help for him. Whatever it cost, I wanted the best for him."

Until then, Mark's life had

been fairly conventional. He had had an unremarkable and happy childhood, growing up on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, as part of a large extended family, doing well at school and going to Swarthmore College to study religion. He was a product of the Sixties, with hippie ideals about peace and love, so when he graduated in 1969, he decided against a conventional career and set off in his Volkswagen with his dog, his girlfriend, Virginia, and a vague idea about buying a remote piece of land in British Columbia to farm.

He found his idyll, an old farmhouse 12 miles by boat from the nearest road or electric light. "The place was more beautiful than our wildest dreams," he writes in his book. "Lush blackberries ripening, apple trees with green fruit. A stream ran right by the old house. Mountains on all sides."

It was here that he founded his commune, which, he tells me, "was a damn good commune and if I hadn't gone nuts it would have worked very nicely".

I ask Kurt what he thought about his son's choice of a future. "I respected him tremendously for it. As an anthropologist, I looked on it as being highly respectable."

But the peace of the commune dissipated as Mark slowly lost his mind. At first he was plagued by thoughts of his own mortality, then he could not stand the company of others, then he became convinced that he was all-powerful and had met every writer, artist and musician both living and dead. "I really thought I had found some basic secrets of the universe and I remember thinking, 'Well, now I have talked with every writer, now I know how Van Gogh painted, I have it all.' I realised then of course that they [the aliens] would have to kill me."

Sometimes he would feel elated, sometimes despairing. Voices in his head told him that his girlfriend was dead and that his father had committed suicide. Did he really believe his father had killed himself? "Absolutely. Beyond a shadow of a doubt."

I ask Kurt how he felt when he heard that. Kurt shrugs dismissively. "It's something I heard the day I went to him."

Kurt says that Mark was a normal, well-balanced child. "He was lovable and interesting in many ways. He was very bright and a popular kid. But a huge event happened to him when he was about 12. My sister and her husband died and I took on her three sons. So suddenly, having been the only boy and the oldest, he had three brothers, one of whom was older than him. He got demoted from brigadier-general to corporal."

Mark sees things rather differently. He identifies the break-up of his parents' marriage as one of the factors that tipped him over the edge. He says: "I went to the mail and I got a letter from my girlfriend saying she was taking off with one of my friends, and a letter from my sister saying that my

who now works as a paediatrician in Boston. "People would say it was my childhood or it was my culture or the war in Vietnam or trying to be a good hippie or not getting a job. I remember a friend who was into meditation, who said if I'd just meditated more I wouldn't have become psychotic."

Mark, who slowly recovered with the help of medication and electro-convulsive therapy, now firmly believes that his illness was hereditary. "I think I have a biochemical disease called manic depression, which runs in the family, and I can point to a lot of other people who have it."

Do you have it? I ask Kurt. "I do have serious depression. My mother committed suicide and Mark's maternal grandmother was in and out of loony

dealership, too, which I tried, I wouldn't be a writer."

The fact that Kurt's reputation was not established until his son had left home – *Slaughterhouse Five*, the satirical novel that made his name, was published in 1969 – made Mark feel less daunted about writing a book himself. He embarked on his memoir soon after he became well and *The Eden Express* was first published in 1975 to great acclaim. "During my childhood and adolescence my father was not a successful, famous writer and that helped me a great deal," Mark tells me. "I think if he had been I would have been a little bit afraid. But I grew up feeling I should go into book stores and make fake orders for his books to try to up the sales."

of famous people to do well." Apart from this one book, Mark has not felt tempted to follow in his father's footsteps as a writer. "I wanted a career that was a little more grounded. But I think I'm as good a writer as anybody in my generation."

"Horseshit!" exclaims his father. Mark roars with laughter. A joshing humour and good-natured rivalry mark their conversation. I ask Kurt if he encouraged his son to write about his experience. "No," says Kurt, "I had no part in it at all. I didn't know what he'd be able to do. It could have been gibberish."

Mark says he feels no shadow of depression these days. "I'm a pretty optimistic person." Indeed, he believes his illness has made him more robust. "I didn't have a real sense of self-preservation before. I was indifferent to things... It's almost like a separate person wrote that book, but I feel very grateful to the person who survived all that."

Kurt seems to bear more scars. When I ask if he enjoys life, he answers baldly: "No. I think it hurts too much and it hurts other people too much... It's so complicated. We are such impractical animals. Our brains are much too big and everyone's carrying around a separate agenda."

His grim sense of humour carries him through – but only just. "Making jokes is just a way of dealing with life. But finally I've reached a state – and Mark Twain reached it and I think all humorists do – that suddenly it isn't funny any more because it never was funny."

Yet Kurt takes great satisfaction in the recovery of his son and says that it really dawned on him last summer how far Mark had travelled since those terrifying days of insanity. They were sitting on the back porch of Mark's house, having a very sane conversation about how difficult life is for children today.

"I said, 'Doc, you were so crazy a third of a century ago. How come you're so obviously OK now?'"

"And he said, 'My case was a mild one.'"

■ *The Eden Express* by Mark Vonnegut (Seven Stories Press) is available for £9.99 plus £1.99 p&p. Call Telegraph Books Direct on 0870 155 7222



'When I was about to marry Mark's mother, my mother said: There's insanity in that family. Don't do it'

Lovable Mark as a baby with Kurt in the late 1940s

parents were probably going to get divorced. It was grist to the mill but the mill was ready to roll." In hospital he hallucinated and thought his father was saying to him: "Don't you see I'm responsible for all this pain you're going through? How can you not hate me?"

I ask Kurt if he felt in any way responsible. "Yes – when I was about to marry his mother, my mother told me, 'There's insanity in that family. Don't do it.'" When I press him further on whether he felt he could have done anything to prevent his son's illness, Kurt turns to his son: "Wasn't there a line in your book about there being blame enough to go around?"

"That's right," replies Mark,

bins." Mark adds: "My mother would have periods of hallucinating, never bad enough to be hospitalised but she was out there at times."

I ask Mark if he would describe his father as a family man. Mark guffaws. Kurt interjects: "Well, I was. I wasn't a big adulterer. I didn't hit the kids."

Kurt says that when his children were growing up, his priority was to support the family. "I took all kinds of jobs [he was a PR man for General Electric, a fireman, then a car dealer] and became one of the first Saab dealers in the United States – because you could get a dealership by asking for it. If I'd been able to get a Volvo

Both father and son found Kurt's subsequent fame difficult to accommodate. Kurt describes it as "inconvenient" and Mark as an "annoyance". "People assume they know a great deal about you because you're Kurt Vonnegut's son," says Mark. "Some friends used to introduce everyone by their first name and when they got to me, they'd say, 'And this is Mark Vonnegut'."

"The funny thing is, people say 'Are you related to Kurt Vonnegut?' And I say 'Yes', and they say 'No!' – they can't believe it. I remember once I said, 'I'm Mark Vonnegut' and they said, 'I heard you killed yourself.' I don't think people want the sons or daughters