

“A Masochistic Tendency”

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Note from the author:

Reader must keep an open heart in reading this piece. The events and characters in this story are fictional, however, are loosely based upon real life experiences. This story is meant to take you on an empathic ride. Remember, Charlie lives in you, she lives in all of us.

Abstract

Recent years have witnessed an accretion in suicide making it the 10th principal cause of death for Americans.¹ An important development in this context is the correlation between happiness and community. The idea that suicide hinges upon societal togetherness resonates with medical professionals, persons suffering from depression and/or anxiety, potential suicide victims, the family and friends of such individuals, and to those politically responsible for the well-being of their community. Both an analytical and literary work, this culminating project examines the necessity of compassion and empathy for building community desirous to the well-being of the human individual. Part I synthesizes the concepts of empathy, compassion, and community in relation to the phenomenon of suicide. Part II is a literary embodiment of the suicidal person and the process by which one finds solace by way of the protagonist Charlie.

¹ CDC 2013 stats <https://www.afsp.org/understanding-suicide/facts-and-figures>

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“Youth Suicide and the Dearth of Compassion in Modern Society”

In fulfillment of the culminating capstone research project for the Bachelor of Art in Humanities and Cultural Studies I wrote the novella, “A Masochistic Tendency.” The story follows Charlie— a self-deprecating, nihilistic narcissist, out of a job and living at home. After attempting to kill herself, Charlie wakes up in a hospital enraged at the realization of her failure. After recently finishing college, Charlie struggles to assimilate who she is and her purpose in this world. Frustrated at her inability to understand herself, the world around her, and her relationship to that world, and despite her mother, doctors, and therapist offer her help, she refuses. Meanwhile, she continues to return to the hospital to visit her former roommate, Maya— a young girl who won’t take Charlie’s bullshit. And yet what began as an outrageous attempt to kill oneself soon becomes an avenue for finding meaning in what seems a meaningless existence. Ultimately, this story is about Charlie’s journey from feeling lost to found and free, demonstrating the necessity of empathy, compassion, and forgiveness in the case of youth suicide.

In undertaking this project, I’ve come to understand the necessity of community for the well-being of the human individual. Moreover, this study is pertinent to the broader Humanities analysis. The Humanities aims to understand “how people process and document the human experience.”² I chose to explore suicide because it’s not only a societal issue, but one that has touched me quite personally.

The summer before my senior year of high school, my cousin, Mason, placed the nose of a .357 Smith & Wesson to his face and pulled the trigger. His parents found him in a pool of his

² <http://shc.stanford.edu/what-are-the-humanities>

blood three days later. A year after that, a boy with whom I had attended elementary and high school with-- and who eventually asked me to homecoming my freshman year of high school (I said, no.)-- shot himself. A year after that, I attempted (unsuccessfully) to overdose on barbiturates (unsuccessfully), spent two weeks in rehab, and attended Narcotics Anonymous meetings, a drug and rehab therapist, and a suicide help group for five months. Two years after that, I discovered after returning from study abroad that my friend, Will, overdosed on heroine. And, most recently, Austin Franks, a Dominican alumnus and friend, jumped off the Richmond bridge.

Literature is one avenue human of creativity and expression. With limited time and resources, I could not convey the entirety of the experience in the manner of nonfiction, or more academic centric writing. Rather, fiction served as a better format for conveying this experience. In Melissa Cahnmann-Taylor and Richard Siegesmund's book, *Art Based Research in Education: Foundations for Practice*, they explain the value in arts-based research.

We do not pose arts-based approaches to inquiry as an either-or proposition to more traditional, scientific research paradigms. We believe arts-based researchers do no service to themselves to define their methods in opposition to more traditional approaches to inquiry. Rather, the literary, visual, and performing arts offer ways to stretch a researcher's capacities for creativity and knowing, creating a healthy synthesis of approaches to collect, analyze, and represent data in ways that paint a full picture of a heterogenous movement to improve education. Every research method is a way of seeing the world-- and every way of seeing is a way of not seeing. No methodology is perfect; each comes with trade offs. It is incumbent on each researcher to know what is gained-- and what is lost-- in the method one chooses to employ.³

We, as a species, can study the brain to its fullest extent, reaching the farthest depths. But just because we make the connections between emotional state of being and environmental triggers, does not fully convey the way it feels in the moment. In the moment, one does not feel the body

³ Melissa Cahnmann-Taylor and Richard Siegesmund's book, *Art Based Research in Education: Foundations for Practice*

sending messages to the brain and visa versa. It-- being-- is more complicated than the biological mechanisms of the body. Moreover, paramount to all these things is “reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassuring our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting.”⁴ Fiction is simply another lense by which to acquire knowledge.

I chose to undertake this fictional piece because I wanted to not only to pay homage to my friends, family, myself, and furthermore those who continue to suffer from suicide ideation, but reflect upon why human beings are drawn to suicide and how to overcome this epidemic. In undertaking this project I have not only studied a human experience, I have drawn from my own experience and employed fiction as a method of human creativity and expression, which is itself a product of humanity, in order to understand our world. Thus, this topic and the methods employed embody the humanities and what it means to be a human being, to be a creative and rational being.

Youth suicide manifests as a commonplace theme in human civilization. “Epidemiological data show that [suicide] is one of the three leading causes of death worldwide among those younger than 25 years.” Moreover, “Among young adults ages 15 to 24 years old, there are approximately 100-200 attempts for every completed suicide.” People commit suicide when they don’t have any other option for coping with pain. But, pain, hurt, and threat have always existed.

Thomas Hobbes characterizes the life of humankind in his work, *Leviathan*, as “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short”.⁵ Kimberley C. Patton, in an address to the graduates of Harvard Divinity School in 2005, more eloquently describes hurt as an inevitable uniting factor in our

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 9.

humanity. She states, “[The] one thing that I truly can say I know... is the broken heart. Even if a broken heart does not lie in your past or present, it awaits you in your future, at some place, at some time when you will almost certainly be unprepared”.⁶ Human life is plagued by impending hardships: family members die, friends jump off of bridges, children raise children, mothers are unable to give their children clean water to drink, young men are called to war, young women have their hearts broken. Life is full of the unexpected, challenging humankind to rise above and learn from the lesson book before us-- life. But, unlike a tiger and its claws, a gecko and its camouflage, or a lion and its roar, human beings are not equipped with bodily weapons to protect ourselves from threatening elements found in nature. When a single human is faced solo with a tiger, the tiger will surely be the one licking his chops in the end. However, if a community of people face a tiger perhaps they have a chance at surviving the encounter if they work in unison toward the same goal.

A healthy social network looks like the root mass of a tree. From the most important relationships at the heart of the network, thinner roots stretch out to contacts of different strength and intensity. Most people’s root networks are contracting, closing in on themselves, circling more and more tightly around spouses, partners, parents, and kids. These are our most important relationships, but every arborist knows that a tree with a small root-ball is more likely to fall over when the wind blows.⁷

Thus, a strong correlation exists between strong communities and survival, and visa versa. Thus, a strong correlation also exists between a dearth of community in society and suicide.

As suicide becomes more prevalent, people become farther removed from each other and communities dissipate. People are no longer concentrated in cities, but live in suburbs, or more remotely, decreasing the number of social interactions one can have; a majority of communication is done via social media, rather than face to face; we are discouraged from a

⁶ Kimberly C. Patton *Harvard Divinity School Graduation Address* (Cambridge: 2005), 2

⁷ Charles Montgomery, *Happy City*, 54.

young age not to talk to strangers. Thus, relationships are harder to come by and maintain resulting in dissipating communities.

With crippled social networks, empathy and compassion-- for both the self and the other-- has gone unpracticed, creating a dearth of these fundamental human characteristics in society. From this failure of expression of our humanity, we have become less of ourselves, which creates confusion and identity crisis. Left unattended, these predicaments become overwhelming to the point where the body is in physiological pain, the heart crumbles, and suicide is the only answer.

These trends exhibit a cultural shift that has resulted in the dissipation of real life, face-to-face, human connections. Moreover, advancements in technology accelerate this shift faster than ever before, making the transition even more unnatural to cope with, becoming overwhelming instilling a feeling of hopelessness. Community is indispensable to human survival because human beings are communal beings. Moreover, without community, loneliness will ensue. And relationships are ultimately the key to survival.

Today, death by a tiger is the least of our worries. However, humanity still faces harm and we need each other in order to survive it, especially in cases where such harm is self inflicted. This predicament illustrates the importance of building strong communities. Moreover, community hinges upon groups of people trusting one another. Charles Montgomery reports the mechanisms of the human body as they pertain to this phenomenon in his book, *Happy City*,

we are hardwired to trust one another, in spite of our natural wariness of strangers... In a study conducted by Paul Zak, an economist working out of a lab at Southern California's Claremont Graduate University... found that the blood of players who engaged in cooperative, trustworthy exchanges was awash with the molecule oxytocin.⁸

⁸ Charles Montgomery, *Happy City*, 41.

Oxytocin is the molecule that leaves the body feeling warm and fuzzy, safe. This molecule is released when trust is born. If we are biologically disposed to being rewarded for trusting other, then what would follow is that building trust makes us happy. And, moreover, the whole point of living at all is to be happy and enjoy the gift that life is. Montgomery describes this well when he notes that, “Happiness is a house with many rooms, but at its core is a hearth around which we gather with family, friends, the community, and sometimes even strangers to find the best part of ourselves.”⁹ But, if one is unable to neither realize nor garner trust, the community is not possible and the physiological consequences follow as such. Such discontent emerges out of individual's lack of happiness. If the suicidally inclined were happy they'd have no inclination for suicide because we are biologically hardwired to protect our lives.

Moreover, in a 2014 study published by PLoS ONE, *Qualitative Approach to Attempted Suicide by Adolescents and Youth*, the authors findings suggest “that for adolescents suicidal behavior represents a means of establishing a connection between their personal distress and the others, through the act itself. Moreover, failure to establish that link appears to be a major factor responsible for keeping the adolescent in the same state of mind that led to the initial act and thus keeps him or her at risk for repeating it.” Suicidal behavior then is born out of an inability for empathy and compassion, an inability to practice one's humanity. Eating, sleeping, intercourse are mechanical functions of the body in order for it to meet its basic needs for survival. But, these mechanisms do not embody practiced humanity. Being a human being, again, is about member in society, membership hinges upon relationships, and relationships hinge upon one's capacity for empathy and compassion.

⁹ Ibid., 39.

Empathy hinges upon “being present to another in a rich and vibrant way, being able to be with her emphatically by ‘getting inside’ or ‘grasping’ her felt experience.”¹⁰ But, how does one cultivate such a skill? Krznaric notes six habits for cultivating empathy: cultivate curiosity for others, challenge prejudices and discover commonalities, try another person’s life, listen and share, inspire mass action and social challenge, and try ambitious imagination. All these suggestions are excellent ideas for creating a more empathic world > Are they “ideas” or strategies which an individual can employ to increase their capacity for empathy? However, they all begin with the first suggestion-- cultivate curiosity for others -- which I believe determines the success of the following five.

The challenge in cultivating curiosity for others is embedded in our social structure. In the United States it is considered rude to ask another person how much money they make or describe your social circumstances. Stick to “Hi.”; “How are you?”; “Good weather today.”

We spiral into these situations because we aren’t connected to community and how is one to develop compassion if they don’t have an example to live by. The reason why people choose to commit suicide is rooted in an overwhelming feeling of loneliness, as if no one can understand your pain, thus moving one to question their own pain, whether or not it exists. Otherwise known as antipathy, or a dearth of compassion.anger/rage/rebellion (due to insecurity): Beverly Wildung Harrison describes anger in her article, *The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers*,

Anger is not the opposite of love. It is better understood as a feeling-signal that *all is not well* in our relation to other persons or groups or to the world around us. Anger is a mode of connectedness to others and it is always a vivid form of caring. To put the point another way: anger is-- and it always is-- a sign of some resistance in ourselves to the

¹⁰ Alisa L. Carse, “Vulnerability, Agency, and Human Flourishing,” in *Health and Human Flourishing: Religion, Medicine, and Moral Anthropology*, ed. Carol Taylor and Roberto Dell’Oro, 44. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown UP, 2006.

moral quality of the social relations in which we are immersed. Extreme and intense anger signals a deep reaction to the action upon us or toward others to whom we are related.¹¹

When one does not feel important, significant, or valued one can feel really alone and depressed because there's a sense that it's as if your life does not matter -- would anyone miss you if you suddenly were gone?. One might argue that the individual is responsible for their own happiness and that one needs to find happiness for oneself no matter the circumstances. To a certain extent this is true: we are responsible for ourselves, but that does not mean we do not need help, that the quest for happiness in life must be a solitary one. Moreover, asking for help is a responsibility for practicing self-care of the human spirit.

Being responsible for oneself entails asking for help when we need it and reaching out to our community. Roman Krznaric draws an insight in his article, *6 Habits of Highly Empathic People*, stating that,

The 20th century was the Age of Introspection, when self-help and therapy culture encouraged us to believe that the best way to understand who we are and how to live was to look inside ourselves. But it left us gazing at our own navels. The 21st century should become the Age of Empathy, when we discover ourselves not simply through self-reflection, but by becoming interested in the lives of others. We need empathy to create a new kind of revolution. Not an old-fashioned revolution built on new laws, institutions, or policies, but a radical revolution in human relationships.¹²

I chose this practice, a practice of empathy, as the solution for a lack of community thus support causing a national epidemic of loneliness, as a cause of suicidal behaviors. This is exactly what Charlie does at the end of the story. She takes responsibility for her life rather than submitting herself to thinking that suicide is the only option, an option she didn't think possible until the bonds between she and her peers were strengthened.

¹¹ Beverly Wildung, *The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers*, 220.

¹² Roman Krznaric, *6 Habits of Highly Empathic People*. The Greater Good. Berkeley. http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/six_habits_of_highly_empathic_people1

In exploring suicidal behaviors and the process by which one finds solace, I've discovered that both the problem and solution for addressing this issue are one and the same. Human beings can only survive in communities; these communities are built upon a foundation of compassion and empathy, the connective tissues of relationships. By exploring postmodernist themes, this narrative isn't about suicide; this narrative is about being an individual in a cruel world; and learning to reinterpret one's experience to transform one's consciousness. This narrative is about finding joy, despite the circumstances, and sharing that joy. Charlie makes the transformation from a stubborn worldview where suicide is the only way of relieving her suffering to actively choosing to live and to create a new life for herself. She makes this transformation by employing her own agency, but that agency grew from her realization of community. Moreover, the community taught her that she was worthwhile despite her relentless attempts to refuse their. After all, happiness must be shared; it is not a lonesome experience.

Part II: “A Masochistic Tendency”

A novella about what it means to choose to wake up the next day

Chapter 1: Meet Charlie

I don't have many memories of my father; only a few spare memories exist from toddlerhood in which I remember him even touching me. He died when I was three or four. I don't know. My mother and I never talk about it, about dad. No, never. But, anyway I remember him yelling at me because I would cry when my mother wasn't home. I wouldn't eat when my mother wasn't home. I was difficult to say the least.

Back to what I was saying... My mother has several pictures of me red faced and swollen, curled with my knees to my chest. This position-- me crying with my knees to my chest-- has become a commonplace trademark characterizing my life.

I remember once-- when I was in the third grade-- I had to pee really bad, but I didn't want to ask my teacher because, you know, for some dumb-fuck reason, they don't trust us to go to the bathroom without asking. I peed my pants and sat in my pee till recess, twenty minutes later. It was a horrible experience. I couldn't go back to class. After all, I peed my fucking pants. My dignity had dissipated entirely at that point. So, I went to the girls room and laid on the bathroom stall crying with my knees tucked into chest, my arms wrapped around my knees.

When I was ten, the neighbor-kid pissed me off because he had called me a pussy, or cunt, or some dumb-fucking word I could care less to repeat now. So, I uppercut him with a rusted, blue, tin bucket. He had to go to the hospital, and I felt like shit afterward because I had hurt my friend and I was scared that he wouldn't want to be friends with me anymore. I fell to the floor of my

bedroom and tucked my knees to my chest, and cried, wepted with my whole body. After all, I just saw the neighborhood-kid bleed bloody mercy out of his face for a half hour and it scared the shit out of me.

When I was fifteen my best friend killed himself because he was gay. I curled to my knees and sniffled sweaty, wet tears, for hours until I was so tired I'd fall asleep. I did this everyday for a year.

When I was 20, I let someone use me for sex... on purpose. I cried like this every night for six months.

I am 22 now. I just graduated from college, but didn't get what I was looking for. I didn't figure out who I am. I did, however, realize that everything I knew to be true about myself to be fallacious. "I have no purpose. I can't change anything," words I utter to myself as a daily mantra. I feel like a dissipating cloud. The day is a little hazy, but the sky still looks blue. You don't know I'm there. I can't differentiate my pinkie toe from my nose. Call me sub human.

And this is why I want to die. I'm not even sorry. I have nothing to be sorry for. Nothing exists.

This time I don't curl up into a ball with my arms wrapped around my knees and chest. No, this time I take an eraser and rub the back of hand until its raw, something my classmates and I did

when we were in the sixth grade. Sometimes I can even get it to bleed. It doesn't hurt. I don't feel it anymore.

I do this often. I escape to my room-- my childhood bedroom-- and sit at my desk and just erase my hand away. Sometimes I cut myself with the razor blade my mother keeps under the sink to clean shit off of counters or in the bathroom. I always thought it was weird how some people go all the way to hurt themselves. I get it now. You can surrender yourself and become a victim. There is no responsibility in submitting oneself to victimhood.

Chapter 2: Charlie Wakes Up

A drowsy unconsciousness pours over me as I attempt to pry open my mucous-crusted eyes. In front of me stands an off white wall that may have been called something elegant like “Antique Lace”, but nothing about it echoes the refinement of neither “antique” nor “lace”. “This must be purgatory for wristcutters,” I think to myself. A place where we come to purge our souls from the impurities of our earthly beings.

The wall in front of me appears speckled, like craters on the moon. Less blurry now, I realize that I am looking at... Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no... the little-fucking-trifling craters typifying the decorative travesty of popcorn ceilings.

I did everything right. I cut the radial arteries in both my wrists lengthwise rather than across. I drank three fingers of everclear to thin my blood; I even remember hitting my head on the fucking sink and falling to the floor. I remember the blood beginning to pool in my mouth, warm and syrupy... My thought process trails off as I attempt to recollect the last conscious moments of my life.

A steady, “beep-beep-beep,” catches my attention and I turn my head toward it—an act seemingly alien as I use a body whose mechanics I had hoped to abandon. The noise seems to emerge from a heart rate monitor to my left set against an artificial sage colored curtain hung on a track.

I attempt to soothe myself with the hope that this is purgatory. Or, hell. I will take hell over being in a earthly hospital plagued with the disparately diseased and the oxymoron of western medicine any day, year, second, whatever measurement *they* use for time here.

Western medicine is the biggest joke the world has ever seen (in which people who were “smart” enough to be dragged through the tedious time saken task of attending medical school only to learn how to prescribe medications whose side effects are worse than the actual disease... If you intend to enter into an occupation to reap hopelessness despite advances in technology become a doctor).

The swoosh only a hospital curtain could make revealed the crushing realization of what I hoped was an angel, but knew was a troll with a medical degree. “How are you feeling?” she asked all cheerful and bedside-mannerly as if this situation warranted it. “Fuck, You,” I replied with what I imagined was the attitude of a five year old who didn’t get what they wanted for their birthday. “Heart rate looks steady,” she continued pointing at the monitor. “You’ve really outdone yourself with this wrap job,” I respond holding up my forearms as if I were indicating the ironic touchdown of a coed flag football game, raising my eyebrows and pursing my lips, “touchdown.” “Give me that clip board and point me to the discharge papers, please.” “I am the doctor, I will determine when your heart rate is stable and seeing that your mother is the one who checked you in she’s the one who is going to need to check you out.”

I didn't expect her to discharge me right away, after all I had tubes and wires protruding from crevasses in my body I didn't know existed, but I was still taken aback by her reply, at the thought of being subject to the whim of my mother's signature.

"Where is she?"

"Where is who?"

"Mother?"

"So, you cut yourself pretty bad there didn't you?"

Annoyed at her rhetorical question, "Didn't you swear an oath to protect the health of your patients? I believe it is in my best interest," hands pressed against my heart, "to be released from this prison so that I may pursue alternative means of healing. It looks like you've done everything you can..." turning away now, "And I absolve you from your sins. You may go now to love and please the lord." Staring at my fingernails, eyebrows raised by the pulley strings of annoyance. She blinks and scribbles something on her clipboard. I feel pathetic, yet admire her for her persistence.

Chapter 3: Meet Charlie's Mom

“Hi mom.” “Hi, Charlie. How are you feeling, honey?” She smiles, a smile similar to one she wore when I graduated from college or when I won first place in the California State Fair for wreath making 10 and under when I was seven.

“How am I feeling?” I retorted, grimacing my face out of the stupidity of her inquiry.

“I’m only asking a question, Charlie. I came all the way from the Haight to visit you. The least you can do is be polite and humor me. Don’t be ungrateful.” “How do you think I’m feeling, MOM? I’m in the hospital because of a botched suicide, and you want to ask me, ‘How am I feeling’? Well, I am *feeling* bright and jubilant like the rays of sunshine dancing on my window sill,” I point to the curtain on my right. “Except there isn’t any sunshine. And I haven’t been shitting rainbows. You probably would be happier if you were visiting me in a morgue.” She turned her face away from me, her eyes budding with tears, lips turned into a grimace, shaking. “Don’t say things like that. It’ll only make you unhappy.” “What do you know of happiness? Dad died when I was three and you’ve been depressed and alone ever since. The only happiness I can imagine you having.” I say I’m sorry, but I don’t mean it.

She continues sniffing, as she always does. I find it terribly hard to empathize with her. I understand that she’s sad, but she’s always crying. And when she isn’t crying she’s artificially jolly. And there isn’t anything quite worse than being around someone who’s artificially jolly. It’s like eating something cherry flavored, expecting to taste early summer and all you get is a coating of cough syrup in your mouth. That’s the way it always is with my mother. Nothing

resembling the traditional, ideal relationship of a mother teaching her daughter the ways of womanhood, but something more like a therapist, or a friend for hire.

Chapter 4: Meet Charlie's Neighbor

The curtain to my right is drawn, revealing a young girl who can't be a day over twelve with sandy blonde hair that seems to reach her waist. "Hi!" she says with a certain quickness, leading me to believe that saying hi to me was something she felt she better get over with kind of like ripping off a band aid or going to the dentist. "Hey," I say, unimpressed. "What's your name?" "My names Charlie," I say, annunciating each word with a certain irritation that she'd have the nerve to speak to me. "Isn't that a boys name?" she asks. "Traditionally." "How old are you?" "I am twenty two," I say with same embodiment of irritated annoyance. "Are you sick?" "Well, I am in a hospital aren't I?" "I was just asking. You don't need to be rude." And with that she began to close the curtain, yet she'd sparked a curiosity in me that I hadn't felt in many years.

"What's your name?" "Maya." "And how old are you?" "Guess!" she retorted with an annoying jolliness. "Eleven." "Nope!" "How old are you then?" "GUESS!" she yells, a little too enthusiastically now. "Have you been infected by the crimson wave?" "What's the crimson wave?" "You know the red monster, red scare, that special time of the month where you bleed bloody murder out of your vagina to harbor the unborn?" "EWW, NO!" "That makes sense. You've got nothing a training bra could carry?" she rolled her eyes as at me, which I appreciated. "You're supposed to be guessing my age, remember?" "Maybe I don't care how old you are. Maybe age is just a construct, and, moreover, time." "What's a construct?" "A construct is something you're born into, but doesn't really exist." "So, age and time don't really exist? You just told me you are twenty-two. How come you get an age and my age is just a construct? That's not fair." "Well, of course it doesn't make sense to you. You're a kid. You don't understand the

real world.” “Yes I do.” “Umm, no you don’t,” more demanding this time. I stare down at my finger nails.

“I’m nine.” “Why’d you bother talking to me?” “Because I want to know who the person sleeping next to me is. You could be a serial killer or a rapist and I’d just be laying here by myself ready to be murdered. Haven’t you ever heard of Megan’s Law?” I laughed. Her concerns seemed practical and well informed. Maybe she knows a little more about the real world than I’ve given her credit for. At this, I sat up on the edge of my bed facing her and held out my pinky finger, “I’m not a murderer. I pinky promise.” She smiled and we shook on it.

Chapter 5: Jello

There are so many things wrong with hospitals. First of all, they smell, reeking of a cocktail of decay, disease, and industrial cleaning supplies, giving it its unique sterile yet dead smell.

Second, the food is shit. Honestly it is worse than an underfunded public schools subsidized lunch. For example, today, I was served dry “chicken”, which probably had more probiotics injected into it than I.

I’m a vegetarian. It’s an automatic no on this entrée, leaving me with a serving of mashed potatoes (i.e. rehydrated potato starch and corn meal) and frozen vegetables. I scoop up some of the mashed potatoes with my spoon and flick it, but they don’t budge. This is shit.

I resort to the artificially flavored cherry flubber dessert perched in the far right corner of my tray. The lid doesn’t even read “Jell-O”; this shit isn’t just artificially flavored Cherry flubber, it’s off brand artificially flavored cherry flubber. I tear off the aluminum lid bending it in the shape of a shovel to scoop it out. After one bite I was reminded of all the reasons I tried to kill myself, Jell-O being just one of them.

“Fuck this.” I say out loud to myself. Eyeing some cotton balls on the medical tray to my left, I am reminded of a TV show I had seen a long time ago where someone committed suicide by suffocating from a constricted throat because they had attempted to swallow a bunch of cotton balls. I began to shove a handful at a time down my throat when the nurse came in to take my food tray. “What on earth?” she’s puzzled, confused and shocked all at the same time. She freaks

the fuck out, calls for help, and tries to clear the fluffy balls from my mouth, but I resist. I pushed her into the curtain on my left and continued. Another nurse appears in the doorway. “She’s trying to kill myself! Call security. We need to strap her down and remove the cotton.” I’m sort of confused at this point because I’m not suffocating as I had hoped and they are reacting as if I am. The second nurse left and came back moments later with a doctor and a giant needle of some sort which he stabbed into my thigh. “WAAA DAAA FUUU?” I attempt to yell, but the words are distorted with all the cotton balls in mouth. I suddenly feel drowsy, and fall. I can’t tell whether I hit the floor, the bed or someone’s body.

Chapter 6: Meet Ted, Ph.D.

He's wearing mismatched socks with sandals, his beard is cross cropped and peppered, and his office is a mess, teeming with self help books with titles like, "How to Get YOUR Life back" and "Why Do I Hate my Kids?". "Hi there, I'm Ted." I take a seat on the old leather sofa crammed in a corner of his office. "I'm Charlie, but you already knew that."

He looked over his glasses, condescendingly, waiting for me to chime in with something less rhetorical. I settle for a, "So, how can I help you?". He looks impatiently at me. It makes me uncomfortable. "Why'd you try to kill yourself?" "Because I don't want to be alive." "Why don't you want to be alive?" he won't relent. "Because I'd rather be dead." "And why would you rather be dead?"

This isn't something I am used to. Normally people just stop asking questions, but he won't. It's irritating. I just want to be let alone. "Look, stop asking me the same questions over and over again. You've got your answer. If you've got some enlightening questions off of the topic of my failed suicide then by all means share." He doesn't respond perhaps out of a lack of answers or maybe he's just as stubborn as me.

The silence "It was too painful to be alive. I was alive with panic, fear, all held together by tears". I began to tear... "I don't want to be alive because whatever is on the other side can't be more painful than this. This is too much. This hurts. Living the days marked by the stabbing pain of a million sharp knives beneath my feet. Nothing can hurt more than this. If this is all being alive is than I don't want to be apart of it. Did I answer your question?"

“Why do you think you feel so much pain?”

“Or, what do you think is causing all this pain?”

“Ok, I know they taught you in MFT school to ask questions in the hopes that the patient comes to the conclusions on their own without interjecting your own interpretation, but its real annoying. It’s real annoying that I have to be here... It’s real annoying that I didn’t cut deep enough.”

He looked at me over his spectacles and wrote something on his clipboard raising an eyebrow either out of concern or interest... I assume it was shock.

Therapists are the dumbest people in the world. They walked on this planet attempting to

Three weeks later...

“How do you feel?”

“I don’t feel. You guys have me sedated like a horse gone amuk.”

“What do you mean you don’t feel.”

“I don’t feel sad, I don’t feel glad. I don’t feel ecstasy, I don’t feel overwhelmed. I just am.”

“Have you tried killing yourself since you went home?”

“No.”

“Are you still having suicidal thoughts?”

“Yes.”

“But you said you don’t feel sad anymore.”

“Maybe it isn’t sadness that drives one to suicide. Maybe it is something else.”

“Like... what?”

“Like now it’s different. I don’t have the same eagerness for suicide. I’m not in as much pain anymore, but I still want to die. I don’t see the point in living?”

“Do you see the point in *not* living?” ... “Previously you had described life as too painful, but now you’re not feeling pain. Whereas before you found that the meaning of death would be freedom from pain, what is the point now?”

“The only reason I don’t feel, genius, is because I’m jacked on opiates.”

“Our time is up. I will see you the following week.”

“See you then.”

I went outside following each step from the seventh floor office of Dr. Theodore Richards, MFT, PhD, MD. Dr. Richards, or Ted, as I like to call him, is the most over priced retard to walk this earth.

Stepping outside into the fog I posted up against the building to take a few drags from a stoge.

Chapter 7: Seeking Asylum

"Home," as they'd have it, is no asylum, but rather a collection of bad memories. I remember walking home from school one day when I was thirteen, passing all the pretty houses with their white fences and tire swings, envious. I thought about how in three blocks (or so) I wouldn't find myself so envious because envy is almost hopeful. I'd find myself bitter, resentful because my mom wasn't a doctor, or lawyer, or business executive, except she was a business executive: Melina R. Engstrom, CEO, CFO of The Team Cleaners, Inc, "a domestic janitorial service aiming to accommodate YOUR household needs!"

My mother's biggest fault is her inability to cooperate and compromise-- she can't work for anyone. Most employers, in her fine opinion, are either too stupid, too corrupt, or too perverted. First, of all my mom flirts with everyone; it's embarrassing; she's asking for it. Second of all, no one's good enough for her; she blames her pill pushing father (the pharmaceutical salesman) who provided her with an easy, exuberant life until she turned 18 and kicked her ass out. Like, mom, you've been talking about this for thirty years... with a therapist. Figure your shit out and take responsibility for yourself. God knows it costs you. Anyway, that's why she decided to start a domestic cleaning company. Because, apparently, she's the perfect balance of stupid, corrupt, and perverted.

I came home from school that day and heard her and her boyfriend at the time (we'll call him Fred because that's what I call all her boyfriends) yelling in the kitchen. I mostly heard her screaming about something or other that he had done. The kitchen door swung open and he

marched out with heavy footsteps, my mom screamed at him, "But, I love you!" She had a peach in her hand, caulked behind her right ear ready to chuck.

I didn't try to stop her. I'd learned my lesson about trying to fight her battles. She is unsavable. I went into the kitchen after "Fred" had left and found peaches splattered over the walls and cabinets. I grabbed a rag and a big mixing bowl and began to run the tap. I jumped on the countertop and started wiping the walls down. It would only make my mom more upset if she were to see this mess...

Going back to that place now, I'm continuing the vicious cycle of bringing home bad memories. A few years from now, i'll be walking home, and I'll think, "remember the time I failed to kill myself. " That reminds me, I have a mess to go home to.

Opening the front door, my stomach begins to churn, preparing for the blood stained tile in my bathroom. Mom closes the door with more force than what's necessary, "Oh, Sweetie. I moved your things into my room. I thought some change would be nice." I knew it was bad if *my* mom went all the way to change out both our bedrooms than do a deep clean. I never thought till now that there wasn't a problem that diluted Clorox and OxyClean couldn't solve.

Sitting on my bed, I'm flooded with feelings of loneliness. I don't belong here. This isn't my room. She may have moved everything from there to here, but the walls are bare; my art is gone; my heart is empty, but heavy. Or, is it heavy, but empty? I don't know. "I gotta get out of here."

When I was kid my mom would take us to the liquor store next to the bus stop after church and buy me a 50 cent candy bar. I would always get a sugar daddy or butterfinger because they'd always last the longest and it would be another week before I'd get another candy bar.

Eventually, I just started stealing them whenever I got a sweet tooth or just felt like stealing something. Waiting in line now, I see that nothing is 50 cents anymore. "I can help the next person in line." "Marlboro Reds, please." "Can I see your I.D.?" I hate how my ID always sticks to the plastic screen in my wallet. I hand it to her. She doesn't even read the date and hands it back. "That'll be \$5.70." I hand her a ten I found on the sidewalk on my walk over. I figure that it's a good sign that this is what I should be doing. The cashier tears a receipt, gesturing it at me, "and \$4.30 will be your change. Have a great day!" She said "Have a great day! a little too cheerily. "I'll try. Thanks. You too. Bye." I walked out, "Fuck. I don't have a light." I pivoted my left foot to turn around, eyes still rolling from my unpreparedness, and walked back into the store, "Hey, sorry, can I get a match book?" she hands it to me, flashing a smile.

The 22 won't arrive for another 30 minutes. I sit curbside, pulling a drag at a time, waiting. The 67 slows down to pull over. I lift my knees to my chest to avoid getting hit and put out my cigarette. "Hey, does this route pass the hospital?" "Which one?" the driver asks snarkily. "The one off of 29th and P?" "I can get you there. You're going to have to walk a couple blocks though." "That's fine. I put two dollars in the meter, " Shit. I've only got 30 cents in change." I say out loud, but mostly to myself. "We're good." I smile, "Thanks." I begin walking to the back of the bus until my moral compass kicks in and I have to turn around, "I actually have two

dollars in cash. Do you have change?" "I said we're good." I look down and smile shyly, "thanks again." Then take a seat on the right side, behind the driver.

Chapter 8: Realization of Solace

I knocked on her door-- just to be polite-- and walked in. She was sleeping, still, and breathing heavily. Looking at her, I questioned why she was here in the first place. She's nine years old. The two short days we spent together as bedmates, my mother visited, but neither her mother or father showed up. Yet, she didn't seem bitter at all. I was bitter that my mom had visited, but I would have been angry if she hadn't.

It was a small room. It had a single window with a view of an adjoining brick building. They say having a dreary view increases recovery time. I went over to her bedside and sat on the chair to her right. "I'll wait until she wakes up. I have no where to be," I thought to myself.

I sat there for three hours until she woke up. Groggy-eyed and surprised, "Hello." "Hi," I chuckle. "I bet you never expected to see me again." She smiles, "It's nice to see you." We say nothing for a while.

"So, I never asked you," I look at the palms of my hands, touching each with the other, "why are you here?" "It's kind of complicated actually. My new foster mother accidentally burned me with a cookie sheet." "What?" I'm alarmed, "A fucking cookie sheet put you in here?"

"Language," she says and points a finger in the air and gives it a flourish all sassily. "I told you, It's complicated. The floor was wet in the Kitchen-- she'd just mopped it-- and I swung through the kitchen door like a chimpanzee excited about my new home. I scared her. She jolted and wiped around, cookie-sheet in hand, and accidentally hit me in the face. Then I slipped and fell, rolled my ankle, and, apparently, started bleeding out of my ears. I got a concussion from hitting

the kitchen floor.” “And that’s why you’ve been in the hospital for this long?” I don’t believe her.

She goes on, “I’m always falling: falling out of trees, slipping on leaves, crashing my bike into fences. I always seem to be getting myself in trouble. That’s why my last foster family decided to give me back. Well, kind of.

“I came home from school one day and walked into the house, meeting Leslie (“mom”) in the kitchen. It was around 4:30 and she was making me a special dinner since it was my first day at my new school, Gracechurch Elementary. I wanted to help with dinner and so Leslie let me cut the carrots for the salad. But, the knife was really sharp and she didn’t even tell me. And I was thinking about how silly my new school was because first of all, it’s not a church-- not in a church around a church or church based; and second of all, it’s on Grace Street. Why didn’t they call it Grace Street Elementary? That seems the most normal thing to do, I remember thinking. and anyway, my new dad came in the kitchen super loud and it scared me and the knife fell out of my hand. Well actually I kind of threw it... and it kind of hit him and got stuck in his shoulder and so they gave me back to the ‘state’,” she throws bunny hands in the air when she says “state.” I love this girl. “But, now I have a new mom, no dad, but a new mom so, I’m ok.

“That’s what they tell you in the orphanage. As long as you get adopted then you’ll make it out ok... the big kids think they’re all doomed. That’s why they pick on us, or used to.

Street names are so odd. I mean, where do they come up with this stuff? My new home is at 2335 Ocean Avenue Apt 5. If you walk down and in front of our building and go left, you'll run into Shell street. If you go right, you'll run into Starlit Circle. The funny thing is, is that you can't really see the stars here at night. And there aren't any shells anywhere because we are no where near the ocean. I think you call that a paradox." "Paradox?" I smile. "That's a big word for a nine year old." "Why's that? It has fewer than nine letters." She rolls her eyes, "I heard that word once in a infomercial for Dr. Oz... something about the paradox of weight loss and having an eating disorder. I had no idea what he was talking about, but that's where I learned the word.

"But, anyway, back to how I got here. So I had my head in the clouds, as they say, and I walked into the kitchen, super excited, and Maggie-- my new new mom-- hit me with a cookie sheet. and, yeah..."

I buried my head in my hands and startled to chuckle hysterically. "You're hilarious! O' my god. Put it here!" I threw up my hand for a high five. She laughed and nearly fell out of bed trying to slap my hand. "See! I'm soooo clumsy."

Her hair's a mess. Always a mess. Even when we were "roommates" her hair was a mess. "Do you have a hairbrush?" I asked without hesitation, or any resistance toward appropriateness. "Umm, no. I don't." She kind of looked ashamed as if she was supposed to have a hair brush, but didn't. I jumped on the edge of her bed, "Let me," I said. "why? what are you going to do?" Maya seems excited and curious. "I want to braid your hair." "I've never been able to braid my

hair! I always see the other girls with their hair braided at school, but their moms do it for them.”

“Here. Let me sit behind you so that I have a better angle.” I swoosh my hand, indicating for her to move and she scoots over making room for me on her bed. I run my fingers through her hair. She has beautiful hair: long, straight, and deep auburn that celebrities only wish their ‘designer’ hairdressers could pull off with a box of L’oreal. “When I was a little younger than you, my mom would always put my hair in pigtails or braids before church, but it would always get messed up because my mom and I would ride our bikes to church and the combination of wind and helmet would leave it in a disheveled and tangled mess.” “How’d you learn to braid?” “Well, actually, it was in Church. Immaculate Conception Catholic Church. I was just about six or seven. And, I was attempting to braid my hair, but I couldn’t. And, I turned around... because I was always looking around, wherever I was, just curious about my surroundings, and this girl with deep brown hair similar to yours, looked at me, and pointed at me to get my attention. She took a few strands in her hands and started to braid her hair. I watched, trying to figure out how she was doing it and I just couldn’t figure it out. Finally, she held up three fingers and mouthed, ‘three.’ I tried it with three strands, pulling each strand over the other, making the inception of what was a braid. It was magical. I jolted my body around on the pew to show her that I did it. She smiled at me and then my mom told me to knock it off. And, I’ve been braiding my hair ever since.” I pulled three strands of finger combed hair into my hands, just at the root and began to french braid Maya’s hair down the middle of her scalp. Folding it between my fingers, remembering what it felt like, the accomplishment of, braiding my hair when I was a little girl.

“When I get to the nape of your neck, I’ll show you how to braid your own hair, so that you can

do it any time you like too.” I smiled at her, though she couldn’t see my smile. “That way you can go to school with braided hair whenever you like. Just like the other girls.”

I kissed her on the back of her head. She flinched a little, as if this were an unnatural gesture.

“I’m sorry!” I said, not meaning to make her feel uncomfortable. “Nobody kisses me. That’s all.”

I feel her relax back into position. “No one really kisses me either,” I tell her. “Finish my hair so

I can do the end part!” I bopped around on the bed a little getting comfortable again, sitting criss cross apple sauce, as if I were a little kid, and continued to braid her hair.

Chapter 9: Charlie gets Coffee

Fuck. I need coffee. There's always a residual doom about waking up in the morning. Something about having to fight the shittyness of yesterday and awaiting the shittyness of today. Coffee just makes that process a little more bearable. That and cigarettes. There really isn't anything else quite like a gas station breakfast: coffee and cigarettes, I think to myself, as I lie in bed, waiting for the motivation to strike.

"Hi, honey! It's so nice to see you out of bed this morning." My mother looks pleasantly surprised to see me. the kind of surprised in which some hope, rather than expectation, was filled, a sort of genuine surprise. I open the refrigerator to seem minutely purposeful, but mostly to avoid making eye contact. I choke out a "Hi, mom." as I rummage through the condiments. It's sometime in between seven and eight in the morning, a time when condiments other than maple syrup and ketchup would appear to be utterly inappropriate... especially for someone who has neither the desire nor genius for using things like mango chutney or tamarind paste. I close the refrigerator.

"So, do you have any plans for the day?" I grab a banana from the fruit basket perched in front of mother on the kitchen table and take a seat with my knees to my chest, my left arm wrapped around. "Not really." I shrug, peeling the banana. "Well, you've seem to be feeling a lot better. I haven't seen you out of bed before noon in ten years." She laughs, thinking she's made some inside joke. I ignore her move, looking straight ahead into the refrigerator door and take a bite of banana. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her fidgeting with some papers in front of hers. She

settles upon taking another sip of her coffee and smiles at me despite my retort. “You’ve been out and about the last few days. What have you been up to? I’ve hardly seen you.” “I’ve been going to visit my friend, Maya.” “Maya? The little girl in the hospital?” “Yes.” “Oh.” The awkwardness is palpable. Neither of us know what to say. “Yeah, I, uh, taught her how to braid her hair, yesterday.” Knowing that I have just opened the door for my mother to ask more questions makes me nervous. I’ve always been weary to tell her about what I do when she isn’t around, resolving on saying as little as possible as the ultimate solution for preserving my own boundaries. “I’m going to get some coffee. I’ll be back later.” “Oh, but I’ve just made a fresh pot. Let me fix you a cup.” “That’s really ok. I feel like a walk anyway. I’ll see you later.” I shuffle out of my seat, throw away the remnants of the banana, and walk away with a haste that could have been insinuated by the need to escape the possibility of rape, if you didn’t know any better in the first place.

At my sidewalk curb, coffee in my left hand, cigarette in my right. I feel a little uneasy. So, I take another drag, deeper this time. I can feel the cigarette smoke fill my lungs, a tingling sensation spreads from the middle of my back to my arms and stomach. I shiver. There’s nothing like a little nicotine poisoning to make you feel alive and well. I laugh out loud at my own joke.

[...]

At this point I am just roaming now. Down the street, make a left, down the street a little more, make a right. The cycle continues. I am on autopilot. My phone rings. It’s an unknown number. Normally I wouldn’t answer, but this time I give in. “Hello.” “Hi, Charlie. This is Ted. We were supposed to meet at ten this morning. Is everything alright?” “Oh, yeah, uhh, everything is fine. I

totally forgot.” “That’s ok. I figured so, I took my lunch break a little early. I can make time at noon. What do you say?” “I wasn’t actually planning on ever seeing you again.” “Oh?” “But, since you caught me, I guess I can make it by that time. Yeah, I’ll, uh, see you then.”

Chapter 10: Charlie Voluntarily goes to the Doctor

“Hi Charlie.” “Hi, Dr. Richards,” I say with a yippie attitude and swinging, flourish of the arm. He chuckles, “How are you, today?” “I’m doin’ alright.” I sigh and take a seat while he rummages through papers in an attempt of what seems like a quest for his therapists thrown. He settles in, “The last time we spoke you were fairly adamant about dyeing.” “Yes, I was.” “You were?” “That’s what I just said.” “So, do you feel suicidal still?” “Well, a day doesn’t go where I see a moving car and think about how easy it would be to walk right in front of it and BOOM,” I punch my fist into my hand with a little too much enthusiasm, “I’m dead. But, I have not acted on it. So, no. I have yet to act upon my suicidal tendencies.” I raise an eyebrow and let my eyes roam about the room a bit before I let myself acknowledge any triumph. “That’s excellent news. What do you think has helped you?” “Look. I don’t know. I just have been keeping myself busy.” “What have you been up to?” “I’ve just been going around town... Smoking cigarettes, drinkin’ coffee.” I snicker at my joke and so does he. “The life, eh?” We both laugh. “I’ve also been visiting a friend of mine who I met in the hospital when I was admitted. Her names Maya. She’s ten. She’s real cute. She has this almost innocent jubilance about her.” Just talking about Maya makes me feel shy.

Chapter 11: The Dream

“Charlie? What’s going on? Are you ok?” My mother shakes me, “Wake up, baby! It’s ok. Everything is going to be ok.” I’m sweating. My hair is matted to the touch. I brush it off of my forehead. “Baby, are you ok? You were screaming, Sweetheart.” “I just had a nightmare. That’s all.” My mother’s face is grief ridden and tired, “But, you never have bad dreams. What’s going on baby? How are you? Please, honey...” She weeps. Usually I resent her for crying. I hate crying. I hate seeing people cry. It makes me feel vulnerable. But, this time I know she’s just worried about me and I empathize because, well, I’m worried about me too. I take a sip of water from the glass on my bedside table, and then finish the glass.

When I was a child, I’d always have this reoccurring dream. It would start with me being in this infinite white space, sort of like a basement with a white linoleum floor and fluorescent lights, except there aren’t any lights. I can’t go anywhere, yet there is everywhere to go. And then I grow. I get bigger, filling the space around me. The room is becoming too small and I can’t breathe. I expect my heart to race, but it doesn’t. I expect my hands to start shaking, but they don’t. I expect my palms to start sweating, but they remain dry. My body doesn’t respond. My body is detached from my feeling state. And I am trapped in it. I can’t get out. Then I wake up.

I haven’t had this dream for many years now, but, tonight, I had the same dream again. But, I’ve never screamed in my sleep before. I’m scared now too. You know what they say, depression is just anger turned inwards. You know what else they say, dreams represent the unconscious.

I see her, I see me. She puts her hands on her chest and rocks back and forth, crying with such despair, lying in my bed, my mother, knees on the floor, bedside. "It hurts so much," I tell her. "I just want to get away from the pain. I just want to be dead, I just want to be dead, I just want to be dead. I never finish anything." "You never finish anything? You just finished that drink, you finished traveling from home to college to home again. So we have established you finish things. What is it you haven't finished that has so much value that you are now in the middle of an anxiety attack?" "I haven't finished any goals." "What goals haven't you finished?" "I don't have any goals." "So you say you haven't finished any goals because you haven't identified any goals you want to finish?" "Yes, I am a aimless and worthless human being that doesn't have any goals." "And you want to end your life because you feel anxiety that you don't have any goals you have finished yet?" "Yes and no. Don't you see (very testily) that's why I am incapable-I have nothing to be capable for, I have no goals no ambition." "You have no ambition? I don't, I was pushed into this assignment, into this reality by you, not by my own design. I am not worthwhile; if I don't have at least a degree and do something impressive." I feel this pressure, like I am suppose to contribute in a significant way to society and this challenge is too much. Society is too fucked. There's too much fixing to be done.

"It's too much to be having all this pushed on me. I don't make choices, you make those choices for me, I'm not allowed to think for myself." "You don't make choices for yourself?" "NO, mom, I don't!" I finish my sentence tears mopping my face.

“You wanted me to finish college, so I did. But, now what? HUH? NOW WHAT? I don’t know,” I say sobbing. “The struggle is just too hard. I just want to stop struggling, I want to be dead.” “Baby, no...” she wipes my face and kisses me. “I love you sweetie. You have so much to give.” She cries. “What can I do, baby?” “I want to know how to get away from the pain, the pain that fills my heart and pins me down into total inaction. I feel I should be able to make myself better but I can’t figure it out, it’s just too hard, too painful. This is why I would rather be dead. I see no way out.” “What if there was a way out but it’s hard and it’s painful, but you have to go through it-would you?”

“No, I just don’t want to. I don’t want to do hard things. I want to be dead because it is the easiest thing to do. I want the struggle to stop.” “What if you could make it stop?” She’s urgent now. “I told you I don’t want to do hard things.” “What if it wasn’t that hard and it wasn’t that painful, you just need to learn how?” “I don’t know... I still think suicide is easier.” She doesn’t say anything now. She looks more mad and frustrated than sad. Filling the silence, “It doesn’t mean I am leaving and going out and killing myself right now. I don’t have a plan. I just don’t know how else to express how I am feeling.” I stop crying and sniff up the snot hanging from my nose.

“I am getting a little concerned. Are you planning on killing yourself?” “I already told you, no.” “So, you don’t have a plan of how you would kill yourself?” “The plan is not to have a plan, ok-got it.” I say testily. “Do you want me to put you in a facility to watch over you?” “What? No! Why would I want to go somewhere uncomfortable so they can drug me up because they

can't offer anything more substantive than that, due to lack of funding because I don't-- nor does my parent-- have the kind of money to put me in a facility to actually do anything helpful."

"That makes no sense. Feelings of suicide aren't permanent like a tattoo, more like a sticker that you need a few healing baths to loosen up and drift away. You won't be feeling like this forever. Sometimes a facility that can keep an eye on you to keep you safe is the best we can do for now. You may not see it right now, but your important and worth keeping from destruction." She pauses and looks at her hands.

"Sweetheart, just a few days ago I called 911 because I found my daughter lying in a pool of her own blood!" She says screaming now, gritting her teeth in frustration, in desperation.

I see myself looking at my iPhone, looking for anything that can make her smile, even if it's just a little. She shows her mother a picture of a meme that says, "Don't feel sad" and the reply is "Thank's I'm cured, heart". This is funny to both of them. The acknowledgement is that it is such a fruitless gesture.

"I tried to overdose on barbiturates once. I took a lethal dose. I did not get hospitalized, Chris, my roommate, saw me take all those pills and made me throw it up. I also took Vyvanse, it's for ADHD from my best friend Alex. She get's a ridiculous amount of prescriptions. I really just wanted to get high. I took a lethal dose, I didn't mean to I just wanted to get high. I ended up crying for 48 hours while five people just laughed at me." I laugh, trying to make light of my wrestles with the devil, but my mom sits shocked staring at me. She looks at me and I see hurt in

her eyes. She feels betrayed. She doesn't know who I am. Her daughter disappeared and left her with a deranged copy cat. She looks down and moves from her knees to her ass, sitting criss cross applesauce, picking the dirt beneath her nails.

“Why do you take those drugs?” “Well, I used to take drugs because they made the pain in my heart bearable, you know reduce down the anxiety so I could live with it.” “Why don't you take drugs now?” “They don't work anymore. It just makes me paranoid, making me even more anxious.”

“When you feel the anxiety what comes up, where do you feel it.” “It's in my chest, in my heart.” “What are the thoughts behind it?” “Thoughts? I don't know. There aren't any thoughts.” “I bet if you dig down a bit you will find thoughts. Thoughts that demand things of you. Overwhelm you.” “I feel angry, really angry.” “What do you feel angry about?” “I don't know. I have to go to the bathroom, I've been holding it in since I woke up.” And then I see myself get up and storm off to the bathroom.

She passes the kitchen and sees her mother sipping a cup of hot coffee despite the fact that it's nearly four in the morning. She holds back tears but composed with a bored look on her face and sits facing her mother at the table, “Can I have a sip?” She continues and describes how corporate america is selfish, governments are convoluted, candidates aren't there for the people they say they represent and it stifles progress. The idea of progress seems to really mean

something to her; she's tearing up as she says this. "Are you angry because the world isn't as you would like it to be or are you angry that you don't know what to do about it?"

"You asked earlier but said you weren't interested in knowing what you could do to calm your anxiety. There is a class at the nearby university run teaching hospital on coping with anxiety by utilizing CBT. Would you be interested?" "No, sounds like too much work besides I don't think my healthcare would cover it." "What if your healthcare did cover it, would you be interested in it then?" "Not really." "Would you do me a favor and read over this brochure and ask me one question?" Big gesture with rolling of eyes, "Ok, what-just give it to me." And after giving it a rudimentary glaze, all she says is, "Ok, my question is-why the hell should I go?" "Why should you go?" Confusion defines the lines around her mouth, frustration fixing the wrinkle in her forehead. I agreed to see Ted in the morning.

My thought at the moment is "I hate you. Fuck off.", asking me questions when all I want to do is escape. For someone charging my mother \$140 for an hour for his precious time, he doesn't seem to know a whole lot. I feel just as lost but not enough to kill myself today. He fills the silence with babble about CBT. That stands for cognitive behavioral therapy. It's suppose to train me to slow down, identify the thought that is making my heart hurt and challenge it.

Currently I don't hear words when my heart hurts. I am thinking he is full of shit. I wish drugs worked right now. Numb would be ok. It would get me through this moment right now. So I can have a break, just a little break with the pain. I tune out for the next 45 minutes and wait in the lobby for my mother to come pick me up.

We have all read those stories about people walking through fire to come out feeling enlightened and stronger. Oh, the irony. “The world breaks everyone, and afterwards some are stronger at the broken places”, Ernest Hemingway. The same man who after writing this, shot himself. Nitsche is credited with, “that which does not kill us, makes us strong”. That’s the thing. I don’t think I can make it.

“Mom I really don’t know why you’re doing this, I guess I do understand why... I just...” “Why do you think I’m doing this?” “Because you want me to be okay.” “Is it working? You look sad why?” I give her no answer, she deserves no answer. I am silent as I stay glued to my phone.

My poor pathetic mother, she looks so desperate trying to do what she can. She is so sad. Oh, god great, now she’s crying. It’s all my fault, I just love having her issues rubbed all over me. I don’t want to be the reason, or be the cause for her to be sad. I don’t like the responsibility of it. Why is she always putting her expectations on me? Why can’t she just hold it together? I don’t want to be like my snivelling mother, I don’t want to feel like I can’t control my feelings. I feel so powerless. I just want to get away from the overwhelm, then the tears, then the shame of showing my tears to the world leaving my heart for everyone to see and not the good side either. I wish I could be like those people who never cry, never wear tears like a badge of shame. I wish I could tuck it all away and at least look strong, together and competent. Instead I am left with the reality that I don’t really know my path or anyone else's. It’s that feeling of not knowing how to take care of yourself, all the while looking like you’re taking care of yourself I would like to know-I think that at the very least would make traveling through life bearable. They say that

crying is your body's way of releasing intense emotions but all I feel is humiliation at being so damn transparent. I hate myself.

I have given up and decided to surf pinterest. My mother is annoying. She is trying to "help" me become more aware of my feeling (arms flapping in the air like an annoyed bird). She keeps checking in with me about how anxious I feel between one and ten. Right now with the sedative effects of Pinterest I am a cool 5. My mother observes that I look exhausted and tired but not anxious. I want to slap her but I am too tired.

She pipes up with ramblings about a movie she had just seen. Something about Marilyn Monroe and some guy that spent a week with her while in England as she was shooting the movie; "The Prince and the Showgirl" or something like that. All that therapy my mother has dosed herself with, a solid 40 years worth, has enabled her to diagnose people. I think it is rather narcissistic of her-- pun intended. So, she goes on about how this movie was a clear study of a borderline personality disorder. My mother then, of course, relates it all back to herself and her trials and tribulations. She says something like "everyone has bits of all personality disorders, it becomes a disorder when those traits become the most predominate". I think she is just trying to placate me with the knowledge of the "everyone goes through this too, your not alone" bit. I don't see everyone else going through a mental breakdown. I feel alone. Very alone. This is the worst car ride ever.

Chapter 12: Charlie Escapes

I need to get out of here. I grab my mother's keys and go to her car across the street, get in and toss a bag containing a few clothing items, my purse, and backpack into the passenger's seat. I checked my phone. It's 5 pm. Fuck. Traffic. Well, I might as well hang out for a bit rather than sit on the freeway. I text my mom and ask her if I can go to the gym with her and she says yes. She walks to the driver's side window, "I'm driving. Scoot." I do.

We both feel so anxious you can practically taste it. We get on the freeway. The traffic isn't as bad as I thought it would be. All of a sudden, I feel especially upset and hopeless in this moment. "I think I need help, mom." She pulls off of the freeway and takes a left at the light, which can only mean one thing. "Are you taking me to the hospital?" I declare alarmed. She says nothing.

We park in the parking garage; I am having second thoughts. I don't want to spend the rest of the day in the hospital waiting to be seen, so I can be scheduled for an appointment at some other time. "I don't want to be here mom. I don't see how this would be productive." "Here, are your options: you can a) walk into the emergency room with me; Or, b) I am going to call the police and I'm going to have you 5150'd. Your choice." "Doesn't sound like much of a choice to me. I'm out of here." She grabs her phone as I reach for my bags. She dials 911. "Hi, yes. I'd like to state an emergency. My daughter is trying to kill herself... I'm at the general hospital in the parking structure behind the emergency room... Okay, thank you, officer." I watch my mother as she makes this call. She makes the only decision she's known how.

I see a police officer coming up the stairs of the parking garage. “What’s going on?” I start crying. “Crying isn’t normal. I’ll walk you in and the doctors will help you. We are here to help you,” he insists. I believe him and let him walk me in.

He has me sit in a hallway with my mom. A youngish man comes up to me with a mobile computer to check me in. He finds my name in the system and prints a wristband. I sit there for 15 minutes or so and a nurse approaches me, takes my blood pressure and temperature. Then I wait another 30 minutes or so and a different nurse comes up to me and says, “Hi I’m Sunshine. I’ll be your nurse. If you’ll come with me.” She signals for me to follow her and I do. She shows me to my gurney and hands me a purple gown that’s as big as I am and a pair of yellow medical socks with silicone grips on the bottom. There’s a security guard sitting across from the gurney. She asks him to escort me to the bathroom.

He takes me to a small bathroom the size of an awkward hall closet you’d find in an old house and hands me two plastic bags, “So, remove your headband, earrings, and nose ring in this bag. Do you have a hair tie in your hair?” “Yes.” “Put that in here as well. In the larger bag place all your clothes except your underwear. I’ll bring you another gown to wear on your back that way you’re all covered on both sides, okay?” “Okay.” I start crying and go into the bathroom to change. Nothing is really settling in. I take my clothes off and my jewelry. I look in the mirror. I hardly recognize myself. My eyes are puffy and red. But more than that they’re lifeless. The person I see in the mirror isn’t the person I am. I’m scared.

I walk out of the bathroom and the security guard takes the plastic bags with my things and escorts me to my gurney, settled in a hallway of what looks like a hospital under construction. I sit in the gurney and he raises the outside rail, “locking me in”. He sits across from me, while two other security guards stand at both the foot and head of the bed.

I’m freezing. It’s cold in here. I wait for an hour or so and Sunshine comes back to tell me that they’ll be taking a few blood samples and a urine sample. A half hour after that a second nurse comes to take my blood. She draws three vials and then hands me a sterile cup to pee in. I go to the bathroom again, escorted by a different security guard this time. I can’t pee. I try and sit on toilet until I feel the urge. I feel nothing, but helplessness. I pee a fingers worth and then wash my hands and hand the urine sample to the nurse who drew my blood. The security guard escorts me back to my gurney. I lay down crying, cold. I don’t know what’s happening. I bury my head in my knees, curling up. I’ve lost track of the time. Nurses pass me by as well as doctors and clinicians. It’s like I’m invisible. I recognize a volunteer as a girl I used to hang out with in High School. She walks by as if she doesn’t know me. “What’s going today? Why are you here?” a she-doctor, who’s name remains a mystery, and who’s so thin you can practically see through her skin. “My mom told me I had to come here. A police officer escorted me into the building. I was talking about suicide. I didn’t try anything,” I say through a tear streaked face. “Okay, sweetie. Sit up so I can check your lungs.” I sit up obediently. “Take a deep breathe in.” My chest fills with air, but I don’t feel alive. “One more breath.” She moves the stethoscope to the opposite side of my back. “So, we are running a few tests on your blood and urine. After the results come in, our clinician will come to talk to you about how your feeling and figure out what

to do next. He'll come around in twenty minutes or so." "Okay." "Do you want a blanket? It's freezing in here. Trust me I know. Look. Two layers. I have to it's so damn cold ." "That would be nice. Thanks" She walks away and a minute later hands me a warmed blanket. I wrap it around myself. It's warm, but the thickness of a sheet. I lay down waiting. And waiting.

An hour probably goes by and I look around for someone: Sunshine, the doctor, anyone. One of the security guards leaves and comes back with Sunshine, "Can I get you anything? Do you want some anti-anxiety medicine while you wait?" "I want to leave, but no. I don't need anything." "Ok. The clinician will be out soon to talk to you ok?" "Ok." And she left. I sat in the gurney crying to myself for the next 5 hours.

I thought I'd be committed. I couldn't do anything but stay within the confines of my gurney. I was so scared. Finally, at 11:30 they released me, determining that I hadn't tried to kill myself and that I wasn't at risk. The clinician, who turned out to be a social worker, made me an appointment with a social services company for the next day at one.

He left to fax the appointment over and type a report at his computer. Sunshine (the Nurse) came shortly after and told me that my potassium was low. "I'll just put in an order for potassium and then we'll have you discharged."

Leaving the Emergency Room felt like walking out of prison. Not that I'd know what that felt like or anything— after all, I've never been imprisoned, held, or even charged. But, knowing that

I no longer have to sit in that fucking gurney while three tall black males stand over me, watching my every move, makes me feel some way... some way free. I walk with a quickness out of the emergency room toward the my mother's car in parking structure next door. My mother answers a phone call. I b-line it up the stairs.

I pull the handle of the passengers side door of my mother's Volvo station wagon. It's open. I hope in the car, brooding with anger at her for making me go through this. She takes her time and hasn't even made it up to the second story, so I get out of the car and charge down the stairs. I see her— still on the phone— on the fifth step. She sees me and starts walking a little faster up the stairs. She smiles a grin to herself. She's always had chubby cheeks whether she was skinny or fat at the time, which is annoying because even I think she's cute and I resent her for always getting her way. We both get into the car. "So, did that guy make you an appointment?" "Yes." "When?" "Tomorrow at one." "Ok." We drove home in silence. Both of us looking straight away.

Chapter 13: Discovering Freedom

I feel so angry that my body has seceded from my mind. I want to kill my mother. I want to smash her head in with a cinder block. My hands shake. We get home and I run into my room, shut the door, and scream. I scream louder than I've ever screamed before. I use my entire body to scream. I grab a pillow and start beating it with my fists as hard and fast as I can. I fall over and start crying, my knees to my chest once again. I'm laying on the hardwood floor of my home, the only home I've ever had, and I feel like I did lying on the gurney. I feel trapped. I'm scared. I can't get up. I don't know what's going to happen in the future. I don't know what's going to happen right now. I don't know if I'll ever stop feeling this way. All I want is to stop feeling this way. I curl deeper into myself, my head turned into my armpit. I stink. I smell like a dead rat. My skin stained with sweat and tears, feels hot and sticky to touch.

I could die. I could slit my wrists again. I could swallow a bottle of aspirin. I could hang myself from the tree in the front yard. I could electrocute myself in the bathtub with a toaster. I can kill myself. I won't feel so defeated. I won't feel anything and then it'll all be over. Fuck that. I'll probably fuck up again. And who knows what the fucks down there.

... I remember what Ted told me about thinking about my best day. He asked, "What does your best day look like, Charlie?" "My best day?" I responded with an obtuse sigh. "Seriously! What does your very best day look like?" He squeezes his eyes shut when he says best. "My best day, huh..." I look around the room. "I've always liked the beach. I mean who doesn't like the beach." I giggle, "I'm pretty unoriginal already. My best day," I say looking at my feet now, with

half my bottom lip in my mouth. “I think it would start early. Right before the sunrise when it’s still a little grey out, but you know it’ll get brighter. I always like that time. It feels like some new hope, as cliché as that sounds. But, I’d run... in some wild grasses... fighting the sand dunes beneath my feet... just running... I feel free.” I start crying because the thought of freedom seems so far away. I look up at Ted, with what I know are bloodshot, swollen hideous orbs for eyes. He tosses his head to the side. “You know, Charlie. you just lived that freedom by imagining it. It was real. It was a real feeling. It’s not so far away, freedom that is. You just have to think of your best day.” He pauses for a minute. “So, what else? What else makes up this day?” Sniffling words come out of my mouth. “I think I’d meet Maya at the bus stop before school to braid her hair that way she could be like all the other girls.” I smile, but tears still escape my eyes, rolling down my cheeks and into my mouth. They taste salty. “The air would have that salty, sea mammal poop smell.” I laugh, “It’s my favorite smell. And the sun would come and go, because it can’t be sunny all the time. The sun needs a break too. And, of course, I’d have to have a hot gas station coffee and a Marlboro Red.” I feel better just thinking about the irony between death and life, between smoking a death stick and living your best day. Ted giggles, too— most likely about different things. But, he laughs with me and that feels good...

I remember this conversation with Ted. I remember the way the my best day feels and I feel with it. I realize that the anger I feel right now, is the most expressive I’ve felt in a long time. There’s no point in resorting at that depressive place. I don’t have to entertain this place. I’m not going too. I fear death, or maybe that’s what respect is after all. You have to respect death. Death is permanent. I’m not going to die; not this way.

I'm exhausted. I have to go to my appointment tomorrow. I fall asleep and know that I'll wake up, this time in my room, and that feels good, too, because it's my choice. I think this is freedom.

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