

The Art of Not Dying: A Story for Suicide Awareness Month.

It didn't take much to realize I hadn't truly been trying to kill myself.

The faint and erratic gashes across my wrist had only been a test to see if I was even there anymore. I was half-convinced I would scratch the surface and nothing would come out. Did I still bleed? Could I really feel anything through the suffocating ache of my loneliness?

I could.

The handful of Tylenol PM went down quickly after that. Now sure I was alive, all I could think about was falling back asleep. It seemed to be the only thing that numbed the searing emptiness in my chest, that cold hammered stake splitting my very soul in two. Maybe I could at least *dream* about being happy again.

I waited. Thirty minutes passed. My eyelids growing heavy with over-the-counter impulsivity, my words slurring, and then... the reality of what I'd just done set in.

An hour later, now moved from beneath my own sheets to a hospital bed, I was met by a middle aged-nurse with an offering of pre-packaged charcoal sludge and a bucket. She smiled softly, stabbing a pink plastic straw into the oddly peppy looking carton. "Drink," she said—more suggestion than demand. That's good, I thought, clearly they weren't very concerned about the status of my liver.

Relieved yet empty, I drank.

It tasted of fire, of absence, of cherries. Someone had thought it kind to make this vomit inducing cocktail taste tolerable for the four-and-a-half seconds it stayed inside you. Hah. Little did they know the added flavor alone was enough to make me retch.

I was seven the last time I'd eaten cherries, and gravely unaware of moderation. I

devoured a large silver mixing bowl-full before my mouth began to swell and it became apparent I was allergic. Minutes later my vomit came back the soul-jarring color of fresh blood. I hadn't touched cherry-flavored anything since then... at least not until now, this acid-tongued climax in the story of my rapid descent into serious depression.

I had spend the last five months of my life in excruciating pain. I'd been periodically and superficially depressed before, but never anything like this. I couldn't get out of bed, I couldn't go to class, I barely ate. I felt as if leaving the safety of my darkened room would be the end of things. The sky would fall, the sun would explode, some impending doom was imminent. I couldn't pinpoint what exactly would happen, but I knew that all I could do to avoid the dreaded "it" was sleep. I was living in a self-imposed version of *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

It had all started in July upon accidentally discovering that the then-supposed-love-of-my-life had spent a four day trip to Vegas in bed with someone else. That summer, with the truth in all its gory detail slowly unravelling in our tiny Santa Monica apartment, it became very clear that for the last two years, I had centered my emotional stability around the validation of another human being.

It was the most juvenile of cardinal sins; I'd found relative happiness and used it like a bandaid over a bullet-hole in an attempt to put off dealing with the darkness within me. Now the bandaid was off and the hole was still there, bigger now. Rapidly gaping with the infection of betrayal that came with showing my entire raw, broken-ish self to another and having it spit on and salt-filled.

Sure "love" was never supposed to fix me, but I also didn't expect it to make things so much worse.

The next day, after the taste of cherry-flavored vomit had long since dissipated, I checked myself into McLean, a Massachusetts psychiatric hospital made famous by *Girl, Interrupted*. Being mid-December, suicide season was in full swing, and the short term unit was already full of people who had made "real" attempts on

their lives. Luckily, they had a spare bed in the bipolar and schizophrenic ward and so there I went. Out of my element. Silent. A cliché in my stocking-foot shuffles across the cold tiled floor.

I don't remember much from that week besides the fact that I knew I didn't want to die, but I also wasn't sure how to survive living. I remember the sound of the bedroom door opening every fifteen minutes to make sure I was still breathing. I remember the blank, desperate stare of my roommate, a mother of three in her late 30's, with long, deep scars and staples up and down both arms from multiple attempts. I remember the day her children visited and how even their innocent levity couldn't pierce through her isolation. I remember watching the second half of Walk the Line with a man who thought he was Jesus and a young Australian woman who liked to climb very tall bridges. I remember a bag full of quarters and a single payphone with no one to call. I remember feeling like a shadow. Floating as if lead by the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, watching closely as mental illness and silent-suffering tore apart the strangers around me.

It was there, in the stillness and sterility of our shared, naked truth, that I finally woke up. I would not give in. I would not let this be it. I would figure out how to live, even with an ache.

I wasn't cured the day I left the hospital. It took close to two years to settle the discord inside me. With therapy and time, shifting doses of medication and good friends, I was able to start over from the beginning. I reconstructed myself from the inside out, finally processing years worth of generalized anxiety disorder, socially conditioned low self-esteem and self-doubt. I slowly pieced together a life that supported and fulfilled me, free of co-dependance and conducive to healthy and meaningful emotional connection.

Almost six years later, I am new. I am happy, balanced, fully-functional. But at the end of the day, that person who couldn't bear the idea of living is still inside me. Like new mothers after childbirth, my body shields me from remembering the pain of that year, the faint echo of a memory is all that's left, serving as a

depth marker for how far down I can go. I have seen my rock bottom, shone light on the unimaginable, so I may never again sink that low.

The greatest misconception of depression is that we think we are alone. But there are millions of us who have all felt that same crippling ache. We're all in this together, no matter how different our stories, and the the pain we share demands attention, compassion, and strength. There is a way out of the darkness, and it starts with fighting to live, and seeing one another through the fog. We're all here, right beside you.

(Originally posted on the author's blog: www.marymumbler.com)