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The Graduate School

Department of English

Fire Hazard

A Manuscript in English

by

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## Table of Contents

Flip the Switch.....	4
Aftermath.....	13
Basement Dweller.....	16
Doctor Disaster.....	19
Bakery.....	25
Enough.....	29
First Love.....	36
Blankets Cure All.....	46
What Now?.....	49
Doctor Disaster 2.0.....	59
Self-Harm.....	63
Selfish.....	65
Death Wish.....	69
Life.....	74

## Flip the Switch

I got home around 9:30 pm after a 45-minute drive from my worst class. I was starving, so I ran upstairs and threw my backpack in the living room, stopping to chat briefly with my mom about our day and how her cat was pissed because she had taken the sheets off the bed to put in the wash. I rolled my eyes and gave the three visible cats some head scratches before I went down the hall to the kitchen to make some pasta. I placed a pot of water on the stove and turned the knob for the gas but nothing happened. Normally if the gas doesn't light I hear the clicking of the lighter and use a match to get the stove going, but this time there was silence.

"Hey Mom?" I said.

"*What!?*" she yelled.

I walked down the hallway to the living room.

"Stop shouting! I tried to get something to eat, but the stove won't work."

She sighed loudly and removed a cat from her lap so she could follow me to the kitchen. She turned the knobs on all four burners. None of them hissed to life. She shrugged and switched the burners off.

She sighed again and then said, "Well I'm not dealing with it tonight. We will call Uncle Bob in the morning. You'll have to make a sandwich or something."

She went over to the sink to pour the water out of the pot while I walked over to the fridge. I opened the door to find darkness and warmth.

I turned to mom. "Uhh... The fridge is off..."

“Bullshit.”

“Nope. It is warm in here too. I think a fuse blew.”

“Well shit. We have to go in the basement then, or all the food will go bad.”

I could see her unwillingness in the way she bobbed back and forth as though she were pacing in place. There were some crazy bugs down there and one light bulb that barely worked, so we tried to pretend it didn't exist.

“What do you mean we?”

“You aren't getting out of this. We both go, or we let everything go bad and listen to grandma for a month.”

“I'll grab the flashlight.”

\*\*\*

We went down the hall and down the stairs to the entryway. We climbed over the scooter, snow shovels, empty boxes, and holiday decorations that sat in the alcove that hid our basement door and cracked the door open. I switched on the flashlight and we saw a mass of cobwebs fluttering down from the ceiling. Something made a rustling noise as it rushed to get away from our sudden movement. Our biggest fears seemed to hold meetings in this basement.

“This will be fine! I can show you how to switch back on a breaker when they blow, and we can tell Uncle Bob we did something house related without his help!”

I didn't have the heart to challenge her bravado, so I just nodded, and we started making our way down the stairs. At the bottom, we brushed off the cobwebs and switched on the light. It barely illuminated a quarter of the room, but I pointed my flashlight around, and we watched as

mice ran out of view. I finally located the fuse box and we made our way to the other side of the basement, ducking to avoid spiders and a large mass of what we hoped were moths.

“Okay so it is pretty easy to tell which breaker needs to be flipped because it will be facing the opposite way of the others.”

“Wow thanks. I could have NEVER figured that out. I would be lost without you.”

“Shut up.”

She opened the box and had me flip a switch that was towards the bottom of the row. It immediately switched back off and mom nudged me aside and flipped it herself. It switched off again.

“WHAT THE FUCK!”

“Wow, you were right. This is super simple.”

If looks could kill I would have dropped dead on the spot. She tried two more times before she groaned and admitted defeat.

“Fuck it. We’ll call Uncle Bob in the morning and buy some more milk.”

She stormed past me, and I didn’t dare mention that I was still hungry. I resigned myself to visiting grandma in the downstairs apartment and snagging some of her chips.

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We left the basement and went back up to our second-floor apartment. Mom went straight into the living room and tried to convince her cat to forgive her, and I noticed that the other cats had wide black eyes and were running around crazy. I stood in the hallway watching

with amusement when I suddenly noticed what I thought was a fire pit starting up in a neighbor's yard. It was a familiar scent of wood smoke and I could almost feel the ash of a fire tickling my nose. This would be normal except for the fact that all of our windows were closed, so where could the smell be coming from?

I went into the kitchen. I saw nothing, but when I went back into the hallway, I heard crackling and turned to the closed door of our spare room. It had belonged to grandma before she moved downstairs, and we used it as a catchall for everything you could think of. It was full of old paintings my grandma had collected, clothes we no longer wore, old lamps, mattresses, and tins of old papers that we could probably throw away, but held onto *just in case*, so the door was always closed. I opened the door and I could no longer breathe.

The room was engulfed in red and orange flames, and smoke came wafting out into the rest of my house.

“Fire!”

“WHAT???”

“FUCKING FIRE!”

Mom ran into the hall and screamed at me to call 911 and round up cats while she got grandma out. In my panic, I somehow managed to think of shutting the door before I ran into the living room. I dropped the phone twice before managing to dial the number.

A woman answered after three rings, “911. What is your emergency?”

“FIRE!”

“Do you need police, ambulance, or fire department?”

“I SAID THERE WAS A FUCKING FIRE. 32 CEDAR STREET.”

“Ma’am, I need you to calm down so we can send you help.”

“FIRE DEPARTMENT THEN. PLEASE!”

“They will be there in five minutes. Remain calm and stay on the line.”

I hung up and screamed in frustration. I had overreacted a bit to the woman’s nonchalant tone, but I didn’t have time to dwell on that as I raced around the living room, looking for my cats. I managed to snag two of them, but one ran out of reach and up to the third floor, so I ran downstairs to get the other cats into the car for safety. As I got downstairs, I heard pounding on the front door, and I threw it open to find two women who were screaming and asking how to help.

“Grab my grandma and search for cats.”

“What?!”

“*We need to find our cats!*”

At this, my mom turned to me and realized I was not holding her cat.

“Where is Moka-Moke?”

“She ran away! I couldn’t get her without dropping the others.”

Without saying another word, she ran back up the stairs to try and find her.

As if the poor good Samaritans weren’t exasperated enough, they now had to deal with a woman running back into flames while an old lady screamed at them for being in her house and

not helping with the cats and a dopey college student stood there pale-faced with two squirming, angry cats in her arms.

The smoke had spread throughout the house, and I was coughing up a storm as one of the women guided/dragged my grandma out the door. The sirens started blaring down the street and I snapped out of whatever stupor I was in and ran out to the porch. Firemen pushed past me and I had to scream to them.

*“My mom went back in there! She is upstairs! Please find her! We have three more cats too!!!”*

I heard one of the women say, “Are you fucking kidding me,” and I decided to ask them to help me carry the two cats I had to the car so I could unlock the doors. They passed my grandma to a fireman, who ran her to a paramedic, and they each took a cat as I grabbed the key that was luckily still in my pocket from when I had come home earlier.

I pointedly ignored my house and stared straight ahead as I unlocked the car and we placed the cats in the back seat. I cracked a window for them and thanked the women, who nodded and ran into the gathering crowd to escape my crazy family. I ran back around to the front of my house and tried to go back in to somehow help as a firefighter forced my mom out the door.

“Not you, too. You all gotta cross the street and get away before the windows blow out,” he said, clearly exasperated.

“Please find the cats! We don’t care about anything else... please.”

He looked at me like I had 12 heads, but nodded and ran back in.

I guided my mom across the street and glanced at her. She was sobbing. The pure fear in her eyes reflected my own, so I had to look away. She muttered, “She was mad at me,” before she spotted my grandma sitting with a paramedic and wandered over to her. It took me a moment to realize that she was talking about our cat, Smokey, who was still stuck in the house somewhere.

Alone, I looked at the growing crowd and noticed a woman leaning against my neighbor’s fence and recording the fire on her phone just as the windows exploded. She was smiling, and I had started walking over to the woman with my keys raised over my head in preparation to hit her with them when my mom came over, grabbed my arm and told me to calm down.

“I am going for a walk,” she said.

And she left. The crowd started gathering with dramatic sympathy, and all I could think was that if one more of them offered me a coat I was going to scream. I wasn’t cold, I was terrified.

I called my boyfriend and realized I couldn’t speak normally.

“Hey, Babe, I am working, remember?”

“Fire.”

“What?”

“MYHOUSEISFUCKINGBURNINGANDIAMHOMELESSANDINEEDYOUHERE.”

I hung up and started sobbing as I looked at the house I had lived in for 20 years. My phone buzzed, and I prepared to try and explain myself, but instead I was met with a text from my neighbor and close friend Molly.

Molly: Please tell me your house isn't on fire?

Me: Sorry, I'd be lying.

Molly: OMW

She was there in what seemed like seconds. I checked the time. It was only ten pm. I felt like the fire had been burning for hours. Molly kept a hand on my arm while I talked to a detective, who was investigating some arson attacks in the area. A fireman came over to tell me the fire was out. He said it was caused by a spark from the outlet catching on some clothing that was piled up in the room. It had sparked every time we flipped the breaker.

“My cats?”

“Where is your mom?”

“She isn't here. Where are my cats?”

“I'm sorry, we couldn't find them. We are putting a lock on the door, and we will give your mom the code, but you can't go in until all the windows are boarded up tomorrow morning.”

I was about to protest when Molly tapped my arm and pointed out that my mom was back and that she was screaming at an insurance vulture who was trying to sell her on his plans.

“How *dare* you. You are using a tragedy to make a quick buck, you fucking scum.”

It looked like she was going to hit the cowering insurance man when the fireman I was talking to went over to her.

“Ma’am, MA’AM! I need you to come with me so that I can explain everything to you and your mother.”

My mom slumped and glanced at me. She looked broken and made a noncommittal sound, which sent the fireman off to deal with something else.

“I went down the street to the bank to check our balance... I didn’t know what else to do. “We can’t pay for this. I can’t fix this.”

She walked away to find my grandma before I could say anything, and I turned to Molly,

“I need to quit school.”

## Aftermath

I woke up around seven in my cousin's old bedroom with my boyfriend's arm draped around me. It took me a moment to figure out why I was there and why I would be here with Tom specifically.

Then I heard my mom.

“I need to go back to the house NOW! My cat is still there. I need to try and find her!”

Everything came rushing back, and I remembered the fire. Family seemed to fall from the sky at the end of the night as the firemen were leaving. My uncle took my Grandma to stay at his house, while my mom and I went to stay with her best friend until we could figure something else out. Tom had left work in Natick and shown up while we were getting a cat crate at a friend's house just before we left for my aunt's. Mom and I were so moved by his loving gesture that we took him with us.

He woke up just as my mom shouted she was going and closed the door. The sound made me jump, and I realized quickly that life didn't stop.

“Fuck!”

Tom looked at me with drowsy eyes, “What?”

“I forgot to call work!!!”

I glanced down at my phone and saw I had five missed calls. I worked at a bakery and was expected in at six am.

“*Fuck!* They are gonna kill me... shit shit *shit*...”

I muttered to myself as I dialed. Tom patted my shoulder in an attempt at comforting me.

My coworker answered with her customer voice on. “Hello! Thank you for calling Lyndell’s! How may I help you today?”

“Gloria? It's Jess, I—”

“Jess? What happened? Why aren't you here? We're swamped!!!”

“I'm so sorry. I can't be there today. My house caught fire and—”

“What? Are you okay? How is your family?”

For some reason the concern caused my voice to break and tears to bubble over.

“We're—we're fine. Shaken up, still looking for the cats.... We are going back to get some of our stuff today, so I can't get there.”

“Well, of course not! Don't be silly. Your family is more important right now! I will tell Karen, and you can let us know when you can be back, okay?”

“Wow... I don't know what to say.... Thank you so much. I am so sorry about this! I will call tomorrow with an update, okay?”

“Alright, no problem! I hope everything works out.”

I hung up and wiped my eyes angrily. I wasn't mad at my coworker. I was pissed at my tear ducts. I had been hoping that I would be able to keep it together. I turned to Tom, who clapped my back and said, “Way to put on the fake waterworks! You may even get a week off!”

I was tired and confused, so I let the comment slide. “I need to check in with my aunt. Mom left without me, so I need to find out when and how I am getting to the house.”

“Yeah, and I will need to know when I can get back to Natick. I don't think I will be able to miss a shift again.”

I smiled at him.

“That’s okay. You were here when it really mattered, and I don't know how much company my family will be up to. I don't know if I can ever thank you for this.”

He wrapped me in a bear hug and kissed the top of my head.

“Well duh! I would never let you deal with that by yourself. Isn't comfort what boyfriends are for? I love you Jess. Things will get better.”

I just let myself be swallowed up by the hug. I didn't want to think about the future. I couldn't bear to face reality yet. I stayed in his arms for as long as I could, ignoring the sound of my cousins pounding down the stairs to get their breakfast and their whispered conversations about what happened. I knew I needed to face it. But not just then.

## Basement Dweller

I was lying down on the small cot in the unfinished basement room I shared with mom and two of our cats. The walls were still wood framing, and we only had a tiny basement window that we left open to air out the weed smell from my cousin's room next door. It was around midnight, and Mom was asleep on the slightly larger daybed on the other side of the room.

I was staring blankly at the framing when my pulse started to race. My arm and jaw were hurting along with my chest, and I was having trouble breathing.

Heart attack

Heart attack

Heart attack

Heart attack

It was all I could think of. I was young, but clearly something was wrong with my heart. The second thing to run through my mind was help, but for some reason I couldn't bring myself to wake Mom. Even as I thought I was dying, I couldn't handle the idea of bothering her.

I got up quietly and snuck out of the room to go next door to my cousin. The room smelled of pot, and he was still awake playing video games.

“Hey Brat! What's going on?”

“Something's wrong... My heart hurts...I'm scared...”

The look of panic on his face would have been comical if I weren't dying.

"Shit I have no idea how to handle that. Did you wake your mom?"

"No?"

"I think you should. She'll be more helpful"

"Okay." Back at square one. Waking mom felt wrong. This was my issue, not hers, but I was scared. The feeling was growing, and at this point it felt like somebody was suffocating me.

I walked back into the room.

"Mom..."

No response.

"Hey, Mom?"

A grumble and some rustling before she turned around.

"*What?*"

I backed up slightly. She sounded annoyed, and I suddenly regretted waking her.

"What is it?"

"I—My heart hurts and I can't breathe and I think I'm dying."

"Jessica, if you were having a heart attack, you wouldn't be standing and walking right now."

Her answer didn't make sense in my head. What else could possibly cause this?

“What’s wrong with me then?”

“Well, you’ve been stressed lately. I am sure your body is feeling that and how hard you are trying to be strong. A panic attack, maybe?”

“Maybe? I don’t know what that feels like.”

As I said it, I knew she was right. My heart was no longer pounding, and as we talked I found I was breathing a little easier.

“Okay. I’m okay. I’m sorry. I was scared. I didn’t know what was happening.”

“This still isn’t a good thing. I think you should call and make an appointment with the doctor tomorrow.”

The idea of that terrified me. I wasn’t so sure I wanted answers. Answers would mean facing my problems head on, and who wants to do that?

“Okay. Goodnight.”

## Doctor Disaster

After my first panic attack I took my mom's advice and made an appointment with my doctor. She was a scrawny woman in her 50s that I had been going to since I was 10. She always made me a little uncomfortable with the way she would talk about dangerous diseases or issues that could happen in life as if she was discussing the weather, but otherwise I never had a problem, so I saw no reason to switch doctors when I turned 18.

Our initial conversation about depression actually went pretty well. I told her about the attack, and I mentioned that my chest had been aching since that night.

“It looks like you are having anxiety attacks. Anyone who went through something as scary as a fire could be expected to experience that! I think we should start you on citalopram. It is a reuptake inhibitor that will build in your system if you take it every day and help you get a better handle on your emotions. Do you have any questions?”

I had a million thoughts in my head. Why didn't anyone else in my family respond the way I did to the fire? Why didn't mom and grandma need pills now, too? Was there something wrong with me? Will these fuck with my personality?

All I could bring myself to say was “No.”

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What nobody tells you about anti-depressants is that they will make you extremely sick for the first week or two that you take them. I spent the first day that I took the medicine curled up on the mattress in our basement room, urging the monster trying to crawl out of my stomach to get it over with. I called my doctor and told her about the pain, but she said it was normal while my body got used to things.

So, I suffered for another three weeks with chronic headaches and constant stomach pain before I could go to my first check-in to let her know how the medicine was working. Everything seemed to pass in a blur.

School, work, home, food, repeat.

I knew that the medicine would need to build in my system, but I thought for sure that I would notice a difference after a month. The panic attacks were still happening at least twice a week. I would need to pull over on my way to school or hide in the bathroom during my breaks at work as I rocked back and forth and tried to convince myself that I wasn't dying. The pain in my chest also hadn't faded so I was hoping that my doctor would have a better solution for me. I stayed at my neighbor Molly's house the night before the appointment to make sure I could get there right at eight am and told her I would text her when I got out of the appointment so we could grab breakfast.

The appointment started like any other. I sat in the waiting room that smelled like dirty diapers and rubbing alcohol and read a *Highlights* magazine until the nurse called me in. I sat impatiently through the blood pressure and weight check and gave my standard answers to the quiz that you are forced to sit through before seeing the doctor.

No, I don't do drugs.

Yes, I drink socially.

Yes, I exercise.

Blah blah blah blah blah.

I always felt like I was being interrogated during this questioning, but I was always too afraid to ask why we had to go through this every time. When the nurse was finally satisfied with

my answers, she got up and left me to my thoughts as I sat on the exam table and waited. Within a few minutes I had worked myself into a tizzy with my thoughts.

*Tell her you can't take the meds anymore! They don't work!*

*Hear her out though... maybe she can fix the dosage or something...*

*Tell her about the self-harm!*

*Admit that you need more help handling this.*

*What if the pills don't work because you aren't going to get better?*

A particularly sharp pain jolted through my heart at the last thought, but before I could consider it, my doctor entered the room.

“Hello Ms. Brennan! How are you doing today?”

“Okay...”

“That is good to hear! So how has your medicine been treating you?”

I considered lying and saying they worked great before I decided that nothing would get better if I was not honest.

“Honestly... they make me nauseous all the time and my head is hurting constantly now. I still have panic attacks every week! I really don't see that they are working.”

My doctor stared at me for a second.

“I see...”

She paused to type something on the laptop that she had brought into the room with her, and for a moment I felt that she was assuming that I was doing something wrong that was making the medicine not work properly.

“Well I can lower your dose to 20 milligrams for now and see if that helps the symptoms, but I think your body is simply taking longer to get used to the changes than we expected. In the meantime, I do have another form of treatment I wanted to run by you.”

I should have said no right then and there. I should have said thanks for lowering the dosage and have a nice day, but I was never great at questioning authority and my meekness had only gotten worse after the fire.

“What?”

“Well you see, I'm a licensed acupuncturist and I think it would be helpful in lowering your stress levels if you are willing to give it a try. I know you hate needles but these are incredibly thin and I bet you won't even notice they are there. What do you think?”

My heart felt like it was trying to bust out of my chest and I stared blankly at her for a good minute.

I have always *hated* needles but I also hated being bothersome, and I didn't want anyone to say I wasn't trying to fix this.

“Sure! I'll give it a try.”

This was one of the biggest mistakes of my life.

The first 3 needles went into different parts of my head. Two of them I actually didn't feel but the one directly in the middle of my head hurt so badly that I yelped.

“Oh whoops! I must have put it in wrong, sorry,” she said as she removed the needle and proceeded to place more needles into my shoulders and finally my wrists. She placed the needle

that had been removed from my head back into a different position further back that still hurt a bit.

“Okay. I am just going to leave for a few minutes to let you get some peace and quiet while the needles do their work.” And with that she was gone.

I was sweating bullets. I could feel the needle in the middle of my head falling over and pressing at a strange angle just under my skin. I wanted to pull it out, but the needles in my arms wiggled and the shoulder needles stung when I lifted my arms too far, so I had to deal with it. Finally, I noticed my phone on the exam table beside me, and I was able to snag it with minimal pain. I immediately texted Molly.

*Me: She is stabbing me!*

*Molly: What? Where are you?*

*Me: Doctor's. She put needles in my head. I HATE THIS.*

*Molly: HOW IS THAT ALLOWED? Did you ask her not to? Should I come down there?*

I was about to respond when the doctor walked in.

“How are we doing in here?”

I wanted to tell her to fuck off and take these needles out of my body, but unfortunately my family had raised me to respect my elders.

“These are uncomfortable. Can we take them off now?”

“Are you sure you don't want to keep going?”

“Yes, please.”

She looked incredibly disappointed as she pulled the needles out of my skin. They were so thin that when I looked at my wrists there weren't even marks showing something had been there.

“Well. I filled your prescription for the lower dosage so come back next month and we can go forward from there, okay?”

I simply nodded and got out of the room as quickly as possible, ignoring her attempt to exchange pleasantries. I walked past the receptionist who was trying to stop me to schedule the follow up appointment, and I never went back.

I didn't look at my own actions during this appointment until I was already on my way back to Molly's house, but something she had asked when I was texting her popped back into my head. “Did you ask her not to?”

The doctor asked me if I was willing to try it, and if I had just gotten out of my own way and told her I was too afraid of needles, then I wouldn't have gotten into that mess in the first place.

Unfortunately, it would take me a long time to actually take the steps to change that about myself.

## Bakery

My job during my first year of college was as a cashier at a famous bakery named Lyndell's. My job was mostly to fill pastry trays and grab customer orders, but I still had to be in around six am to get the donuts ready for the morning rush.

After a few months, getting up and going to work so early was second nature. Even when I had to live in Billerica after the fire, I was able to get there on time. I should have known that this day was going to be different when I woke up at 5:50am.

“Shit!”

My mom groaned and rolled over on the daybed on the other side of our room.

“Shit,” I whispered.

I shot a text to my coworker Georgia begging forgiveness for being late and got dressed in a minute. I made it to the store in record time and ran through the back kitchen to clock in at the front.

“Georgia! I am so sorry about this!”

“Less apologizing and more working! We have to haul ass if we want to get everything set up in time!”

We worked rapidly to make sure the store was clean and ready to open at seven. We put all of the freshly baked donuts onto trays and slid them into the display case, took the moons and other pastries made the night before out of the refrigerators in back to put on display, and prepared the cakes that were ordered by customers to be picked up throughout the day. Things

seemed to be back on track by 6:45 AM, and I was even able to have some of our freshly brewed coffee and a chocolate donut before we opened.

The morning rush was business as usual as we raced around to get the coffee and donut orders of our regular customers. I had been there long enough that I could list off prices from memory and knew the fastest way to build the pastry boxes so that customers weren't kept waiting, so things usually went pretty smoothly.

Things were going well until one of the bakers came running into the front area of the store and said to Georgia and me in a whisper-shout, "fire."

I had been packaging a dozen half-moons for a customer. I froze. Georgia ran back into the kitchen with the baker to see what was going on. I looked around wildly and noticed that none of the customers seemed very concerned.

"Miss? Hello? Can I get my moons now? MISS!"

In a zombie-like trance I wrapped her box in ribbon and rang her up. I barely even registered the next few customers' orders, and I hadn't noticed Georgia was back in the room until I heard her speaking next to me.

"It was an oven fire. It didn't burn anything except the outside of the oven, but we're gonna have it looked at. Hey... are you okay?"

I was as white as a sheet. I could feel my fear clawing at my chest, taking over my mind. The smell of smoke had entered the front room of the bakery and it invaded my entire body. My world became blurry.

I vaguely remember Georgia guiding me over to the table we used to put cake boxes together and asking me to take a minute to breathe before she ran back to the counter to handle the morning rush. I stood there and waited for my heart rate to slow as the now-familiar feeling of my heart beating out of my chest and the inability to breathe took over. I decided that just this once it would be okay to break the no cellphones rule and call my boyfriend for some comfort.

“Hey babe! Why are you calling so early? Aren't you working today?”

“Hi Tom... I just needed to hear your voice. Something crazy happened at work, and I am trying to calm down.”

I spent a few minutes explaining the situation to him. Afterwards he was silent for a minute.

“So, wait... you had a panic attack because somebody burned something... at a *bakery*?”

“Well it was an oven fire. It was more than just something burning!”

“Still, Babe, you need to get these panic attacks under control. They are becoming a real problem if you can't even work without a breakdown.”

I felt something inside me break at that moment. He was right. What the hell was wrong with me? I couldn't even do my job without a meltdown now?

“Yeah... you are probably right. I need to get back to work. I love you!”

“I love you too, Babe, and don't worry. I'm sure you can get this under control in no time! Just shut it off!”

And with that he was gone.

I hadn't had the heart to tell him that I was working to end the attacks. He didn't respond very well to the idea of taking medication daily because his mother had gotten hooked on a few different pain meds during chemo. It changed her entire personality, and he could barely even look at her now, so I had kept my own medicating a secret.

My only hope was that he would appreciate that I was trying to “shut it off,” as he said.

I shook off the conversation and headed back to work with a forced smile plastered on for the rest of my shift.

I needed to fix myself fast, or I was going to fall apart at the seams.

## Enough

When I first got diagnosed with my PTSD/Anxiety/Depression cocktail, they put me on 40 mg of happy pills. I was supposed to take one every morning with food and allow them to build in my system so that I could live somewhat normally. It took my mom a week to convince me I wasn't a bad person for needing the medication. In her words: "If you had diabetes and had to take medicine to control it you would take it. Why is this so different?"

She was right, of course, but it only took one night for Tom to convince me otherwise.

He lived in Natick, and back when I lived in Somerville, I could see him rather easily by taking the train, but after the fire I was in Billerica (the most useless place in the world) and there was no easy way besides driving. We only had one car, so I had to plan full weekend visits for when my mom could drive me over there. It had been over a month since I saw him, and I felt a phone call or text wasn't a great way to explain my situation, so I had waited until this visit. His mother had become addicted to various pills when she went through cancer treatment, and watching his mom fall apart from her addictions made him a bit biased towards medicine in general. This was why I was so worried about how he would respond to my own medication. I had the pills in my purse, and I was freaking out about how to explain it so he could understand.

I suppose the fact that I wasn't having a panic attack about telling him should have been a sign that the meds worked.

We pulled up to the old office building he lived in illegally with his cousin and some roommates. He was waiting outside so that he didn't have to explain the housing situation to my

mom. We ran upstairs, past the giant wrestling ring his cousin kept in the “living room” for his wrestling porn business, to Tom’s small office bedroom. I had barely thrown my bag down on the desk when he was trying to get me onto the small mattress on the floor. I had to get the information out before his cousin came home, so I stopped him.

“Tom. Toggy. STOP!”

He pulled away. He looked so confused that I would stop him when it had been so long.

“What’s wrong babe? Didn’t you miss me?”

“Of course I did, you nerd! But I really need to talk to you about something. Please?”

He reluctantly moved away slightly so that I could face him. I stood up and grabbed my pill bottle from my purse across the room and tossed it on the bed.

“What the fuck is this?”

“My pills.”

“Why the fuck do you need pills? Are you sick or somethin’?”

“Well... yeah... The fire *really* fucked up my head, Tom. I can barely get through the day right now. This helps keep me stabilized so I can get shit done without losing it! You can get that, right?”

He stood up and walked over to me without a word, and I looked up to face him with tears in my eyes.

“You know that is bullshit, right? Those doctors are just milking you for cash, Jess!” He threw my pills on the ground and the bottle rolled under his desk. “You don’t need something fucking with your head! These issues are gonna pass! You’ve gotta get over this.”

“Tom... I am desperate. It can’t hurt to at least try the pills, right? What if they can help? The attacks are getting worse. Remember when I called you from work last month after the oven caught fire? I could barely breathe. It felt like a monster was trying to bust out of my chest. I will *never* be able to fully explain what that is like, but if this medicine can help, shouldn’t I use it?” I was beside myself. Fists clenched but crying my eyes out at the same time. All that mattered now was getting him to accept this. Accept *me*.

“I will tell you exactly what I told you that day. You need to get over this. These attacks are getting annoying, and now they are affecting your job! You can’t just cry every time something goes wrong and expect people to deal with it, Jess. You are strong enough to get past this, and you don’t need fucking pills to do it. Look at what happened to my mom! Do you want to end up like her?”

I glanced down. He knew that he had won this round by throwing the mom card in my face. I had met his mother and knew of her crazy anger issues and obsessive tendencies that, according to Tom, only started after her addiction to pills. Trying to convince him was pointless.

“I understand your point. The medicine scares me, too. I hate not being in control, but I already have the prescription and I am going to try them for at least a month. If they are that bad I can stop, okay?”

“I can’t stop you, but I know you’ll regret this, Jess. You are gonna get dependent on these things, and let’s not even mention how many side effects you will need to deal with.”

“Side effects will only crop up if I get drunk or suddenly start liking grapefruit. I think I will be fine.”

“You can’t even drink now? Fucking lame! What are we supposed to do with the guys tonight? I can’t tell ‘em you aren’t having fun because of your fuckin happy pills! They already think it is weird that you won’t smoke.”

“So, tell them I am sick or something. I will chill in here if it matters that much to you.”

“What the fuck was the point of coming then?”

“To see you?! Seriously? I missed you, so of course I wanted to be here! Just because I can’t drink doesn’t mean I don’t love you.” I was devastated that he was implying that there was no point to me being there if I couldn’t drink. I had already upset him by killing the mood when I walked into the room, and I was sure that drunk Tom wasn’t going to allow me to sleep until I made up for that one.

“Look Jess, let’s talk about this later. We’ll grab some food and I’ll talk some sense into you.”

I didn’t have much of a choice but to nod and go along with him. I resigned myself for a weekend of taunting about the medicine and followed him out the door.

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I was sitting on the floor of Tom’s bedroom at the apartment he shared with his cousin. It had been a couple of months or so since I had told him about the pills, and I had yet to change his feelings towards them. Tom’s cousin and their other roommate were chatting with him when

the conversation turned to anxiety. I felt myself bracing as I prepared for him to bring up my “fake issues.” It was exhausting after a while.

“Yeah, these idiots all feel like their silly problems are something that needs medicine to be treated. Just suck it up!” he said.

“Ha, yeah. Don’t they know that doctors are just giving them drugs to shut them up? They aren’t helping. Just creating a generation of sensitive pussies who need a safe space,” his cousin chimed in.

“Right!?! I mean look at Jess. She was a little upset over the fire at her house a few months ago, and her mom made her go to the doctor! They gave her some pills and told her not to drink and sent her on her way. My baby is smarter than that, though! She isn’t taking the pills, right babe?” He was looking at me pointedly. He wanted me to back him up. It made him feel big and important when I did. I used to think that was endearing.

“Tom, please... I told you I needed that medicine. I wasn’t just a little upset. I was having panic attacks every night!” I looked into his eyes, begging him silently not to start an argument about this. I was so tired of smiling and nodding at everything he said.

“Jess, you know I told you that stuff was shit. I can make you just as happy! You don’t need pills. You need to get outside and push away your worries and stop having these silly attacks. It is really becoming a bother, babe.” They laughed as if he just told a joke instead of telling me I was a hindrance. I felt something inside me snap.

“No.”

“What?”

“I said no. I will not stop taking my medicine. I need actual help. It is a real disease. My doctor says I have PTSD and Anxiety. I told you that, or did you decide that was fake, too?” I stared him and his cousin down, and I saw his cousin and their roommate slink out of the room.

“Whoa, you need to chill out. You know that diagnosis is bullshit. You panicked a couple of times, sure, but you can just push that shit aside, and those ‘attacks’ will go away on their own. Get out of your own head and you will get over it. You know how terrible my home life was growing up, and I didn’t take meds to get over my shit.”

“No, you pushed it all aside and now you take it out on everyone around you on a daily basis. I want to be better. If I could shut off the fucking attacks you know I would. Do you even listen when I talk to you about how this feels? Whenever I see a flame I am back in that house. I feel smoke filling my lungs and my chest feels like it is going to explode. It constricts and I genuinely believe that I am going to die. That. Is. Not. Normal. It is a legitimate disease and I need help.”

“What you need is a drink and maybe some weed to chill you out.”

“That’s it. Call me when you gain some concept of sympathy and knowledge of what a mental illness actually is.” I walked out and ignored him screaming at me to get back there and stop being crazy.

I wish that I had walked to the train station and gone straight home instead of just wandering around downtown Natick for a couple of hours. I wandered past the Comida’s Pizza that had just opened down the street from Tom’s apartment and headed to the park in the middle of downtown Natick. I sat and watched the teenagers at the park play ultimate frisbee for a while and wished that I had brought my wallet so that I could grab an ice cream at the small candy

shop next to the park. After a couple of hours, I realized that it was now almost 10 o' clock, and I couldn't do much without my purse, so I had no choice but to go crawling back as I always had. As I crawled into bed next to a sleeping Tom, I found myself regretting that I hadn't learned my lesson from the first time I dated someone who wouldn't listen to me.

## First Love

He liked to bite.

We were in a study period the first time he asked, and while I was confused, I didn't want to offend my only acquaintance at this school by saying no. I always thought it was weird, but he was older and I needed a friend. I allowed him to bite my arms, and sometimes the teeth-shaped bruises would stay for weeks, and I would cry if it was too painful.

He treated me well. My fear of crowds crippled me to the point where I spent most of the lunch periods of my freshman year of high school shaking in the corner of the cafeteria in fear. Several of the kids in the cafeteria had a tendency to throw their food at me when they saw me. I assumed it was because I appeared anti-social and was, therefore, an easier target. He saw me, and instead of throwing food or laughing like others, he guided me to sit with his friends.

My family doesn't hug unless somebody dies, and it bothered him that I was unwilling to hug him.

"I am going to hug you every day until you hug back."

I started hugging back when the bullying got worse. Kids I had known my whole life had suddenly decided that I should be the punching bag. They would shove me in the hallways, throw pencils and erasers at me during my classes, mimic me whenever I answered questions in class, and spread rumors about me picking my nose and other gross things to keep people away from me.

He gave me a little black cat plushie named Shadow a few months into the school year and told me it would protect me. I knew it was silly for a 14-year-old to carry around a stuffed animal, but Sam had always been good to me and it made me feel better to carry Shadow around. This cat became my guardian when he couldn't be around, but in the end, it only increased the bullying.

“Give us the cat” said my worst intimidator, Tony Vanders.

I turned to find him and his crony James Mink standing in the doorway of our physics class gesturing to Shadow.

“We just want to rip it up. Maybe then you can make some friends!”

They lunged into the classroom and started grabbing at Shadow, and in the process, they managed to rip up my homework for the day and one of my favorite folders. James had me by the arm while Tony was trying to snatch Shadow from where he was stashed in the crook of my other elbow.

I snapped.

I only really remember that I punched Tony in the face, and when James let me go I grabbed Tony and started punching him in the head.

“What the fuck?!” James cried as he tried to get a hold on me again. Just then a massive 6-foot-tall bulky mass filled the doorway of the classroom.

“Get your hands off her, shithead.” He grabbed James and shoved him into the radiator that was under the nearby window.

By now our classmates had also entered the room and were either staring in confusion or cheering at all the excitement. Our teacher finally walked into the chaos.

“What is going on? Jessica, put him down! Sam! Stop pushing James! I don't care what happened. GO TO YOUR HOUSEMASTERS. NOW!”

The Housemasters were assigned to us by our last names and so I had to go down to the first floor where A-H names belonged while my “savior” and my assailants went to the 3rd floor to the I-N and the O-S houses.

My housemaster had taught my mother, and so she was confused when I walked in. She would have been much less confused if my mother had been less discreet in her class skipping and general shenanigans, but in the eyes of teachers my mom had been an angel.

“Mrs. Barry called down. *You* were fighting?”

One benefit of looking like a 6-year-old in a 14-year-old body was that I appeared pitiful. I started sobbing.

“Mrs. Jones! I am so sorry! I just got so tired of all the bullying and I snapped! Please don't let Sam get in trouble! He just wanted to protect me!”

She sighed and passed me a box of tissues.

“Normally this would mean a week of suspension of all involved parties, but you do seem to feel terrible... I think in this case mediation would suffice. I will go call the other Housemasters and the Mediation office. You are a great student, Jessica. Don't let this happen again.”

I sang a chorus of “thank yous” as she left the room and then snuck out my phone to text my mom.

Me: So... I just got into a fist fight...

Mom: YOU REALLY ARE MY DAUGHTER!!!

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After we had endured mediation (where we all pretended to suddenly love each other) Sam and I wandered down the hall to our respective classes.

“Thank you for helping me back there.”

“Thank you for getting us out of suspension!”

He grasped my hand and gave it a quick squeeze before running into his class. I stood there stunned for a minute before skipping off to English.

\*\*\*

Our first kiss was also initiated by bullying. Good ol’ Tony and James were in our photography class and spent the time before class started telling me that I was worthless and ripping up my photograph of the train tracks near the school that I had taken for an assignment. I ran into the adjoining Xerox room and started crying. Sam walked in.

It all happened in slow motion. He hugged me close to him and then he leaned over and kissed me. It only lasted for a few seconds, but I felt like I was walking on air. We didn't even say anything as we walked back into the classroom, but all I could think was *He kissed me. ME! He could have any girl and he chose me!*

I sat through class barely noticing the pencils that Tony was throwing or any of the assignment information. After class Sam pulled me aside.

“Hey... meet me at the library later, okay? We'll make out.” and with a kiss on my cheek he was gone.

And so began my very public entrance into sexuality. He could talk me into just about anything (except for actual sex, which still scared me), and he always seemed to know exactly where to go where we couldn't be caught. The dark room at school, the dark corners of the public library, the hidden landing of an apartment building...

The biting that had started on my arms when we were just friends started moving to other areas and I tried to hide that it hurt. The first time I yelped at a particularly hard bite to my clit he yelled at me.

“Stop whining! I can't enjoy myself if you whine!”

So, I would lay back and let him do as he pleased. The fact that I had anyone in this school at all made me willing to look past any pain.

\*\*\*

My mom thought Sam was the best thing that could ever happen to me. He bought me a beautiful necklace for Valentine's day, he would help us do yard work at the house, he was polite to my extended family, and he was always willing to spend time with me. She thought he was the sweetest boy and that I should never let him go. His parents and his sister felt the same about me and showed this by kissing my cheek when I came over (which I learned was reserved for close family members).

So, if none of them saw an issue then we were actually fine, right?

\*\*\*

My friends did not like Sam. They were a ragtag group of weirdos who were all still in middle school that I affectionately referred to as “the blob,” and Sam did not appreciate that a majority of them were male. My best friend at the time was Bill (affectionately nicknamed Brat), and Sam was especially adamant that I stop spending time with him.

“You hang out in his house! What the fuck am I supposed to think? I'm not stupid, babe. He wants to fuck you and you probably let him. You won't let me, but I bet you let that shithead do it.”

I would try to explain that we watched anime or played guitar hero pretty much exclusively, but he wouldn't hear it, and when Bill started going to the high school, Sam put his foot down and asked me to no longer spend time with Bill. When I explained Sam's feelings to Bill, it was the only time I ever saw him genuinely angry.

“He is abusing you.”

“What? No. He is a little jealous but—”

“Listen to yourself! Jesus Christ, Jess, he leaves scars and bruises on your arms and God knows where else, he keeps you from seeing friends, he pushes you into things when you aren't ready—”

“Stop. I am fine. I love him and he loves me. I am not abandoning you, Brat! I just need to stop coming over until he cools down.”

“I will help you pick up the pieces when you realize what is happening, but I can't stick around and watch you burn.”

He walked away and I felt like I had pushed a nail into a coffin. We stayed friends, but for a long time, things would stay strained between us.

\*\*\*

I spent an amazing week during the summer before sophomore year with my cousins Brandon, Corey and Emma. We went to Six Flags New England, and by the time we made it back to their house in Wakefield, my aunt didn't feel like driving me home, so we decided to make a vacation of it! We spent most of the time loafing around their house or biking to the park, but one day we went to Hampton Beach with a few friends, and I made the mistake of not responding to Sam's texts.

I checked my phone later that night before bed so I could post pictures from the day on Facebook to find 10 messages and 3 missed calls.

Sam: *Hey babe.*

*Babe?*

*Hey answer me.*

*Who are you with?*

*You are supposed to answer.*

*I am worried about you*

*What the fuck is going on? Answer me.*

*You are with someone else aren't you. You fucking liar. They aren't even really your cousins.*

*I bet you are letting them do whatever the fuck they want.*

*Ignore me all you want. You are making it all worse.*

I responded frantically.

*Me: Sam NO! I was just at the beach! My phone wasn't on me! I'm sorry. I promise nothing bad happened. Brandon and Corey are family!!! I love you, please don't be mad!*

All I could do was beg. Brandon and Corey weren't biologically related to me, but we were raised together and would always be family.

*Sam: Then why have you been away all week? If you actually loved me, you wouldn't have just disappeared. Be home tomorrow and we can talk then. Night.*

I started sobbing, and my cousins had to come out to the living room and keep me company until I calmed down.

I wasn't sobbing because he was mean. I was sobbing because I deserved it.

\*\*\*

Sam was always begging his parents to set up the basement apartment to be his bedroom, and after about a year they finally gave in. We spent a lot of time there because there was a massive TV and a king size bed. He always asked me if we could finally actually have sex, but I just didn't want to, and usually he would drop it. This time was different.

We were watching *Naruto* because it was his favorite, and we were lounging on the couch in the small living room area of the apartment. He started getting handsy, which was nothing new, and I humored him for a while until he reached into my pants.

I pulled out his hand and told him I didn't really want to go any further today, but he just started kissing me again and put his hand back where it was.

When I pulled it out the second time he got angry.

“No. You don't get to do this anymore, you fucking tease.”

He grabbed me by the hair and threw me onto the floor in front of the TV. I yelled and tried to crawl away, but he was much bigger than me and had pinned me at the waist.

“Sam, please. I don't want to do this. I'm not ready. Please.” I was wiggling under him in an attempt to get out of his grip, but if anything, that made things worse.

“If you don't want it then stop fucking grinding on me,” he said as he grabbed my shirt and tossed it across the room. His hands were everywhere and I had no way of getting out. He moved his body down to my knees so he could begin undoing my jeans.

“Please don't do this...”

“SHUT UP!” He got off so that he could pull my jeans down the rest of the way and I tried to take the opportunity to move away, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me into a kiss. I never cared for French kissing before, but it felt especially disgusting in this moment. I kept wiggling even though I knew it was useless.

He had managed to undo his pants while he was invading my mouth and suddenly I felt something hard against my stomach.

“Sam stop. You need to stop. STOP!”

I went lax. My breathing slowed and I stared into his eyes as I resigned myself to what was about to happen, but then I heard a shout.

“Sam! Is everything okay down there? I heard screaming.”

It was his mom. I had never been so happy to hear another voice in my life. I felt tears on my face as he hurried to get off of me and shouted “Ya Mom! You know how Jess gets about being tickled. She just forgot to keep it down.”

“Okay. Just try to be quieter, please.” She shut the door, and suddenly I realized that I wasn't safe.

“You happy, pussy? You fucking whine and get your way again.” He had zipped up his pants, and I was trying to pull mine on as inconspicuously as possible. Tears had started to silently pour from my eyes as he threw my shirt at my head.

“Go ahead. Put this on and get the fuck out. And stop fucking crying. We are supposed to do this shit, and you are acting like it's torture.” He grabbed my arm and pushed me towards the door that lead to his backyard.

I turned to him and managed to stutter “I-I'm sorry” before he slammed the door. I couldn't get myself to stop crying now that I had started. I felt bad for not being able to be a good enough girlfriend.

It was almost a month later when I realized that I didn't cry until he stopped. I have thought about that ever since.

## Blankets Cure All

I tiptoed out of my dorm room in socks and closed the door behind me as quietly as possible. This was becoming a common occurrence, and I knew my roommate Britney would be upset in the morning if she found out I didn't wake her *again*.

Britney had sat me down after the last attack and yelled at me for not coming to her for help when she was sleeping in the same room as me. She had made me promise that I would go to her the next time it happened, but I couldn't bring myself to bother her.

My heart felt like it was trying to escape from my chest. Two pieces of my mind were battling for dominance. One side felt like we were dying and that we needed to freak out because this was the end. The other side was freaking out because it was afraid of bothering anyone in the building and was convinced that we weren't dying, but even if we were we probably had done something to deserve it.

Despite my inability to breathe or see through my tears, I managed to stumble to one of the couches in the lounge next to my room and curl up there.

I had attacks frequently, but this was worse than usual, and it was harder to snap out of because it had come out of nowhere with no real "triggers." The side that knew I wasn't dying also knew I would probably not be in a good state to make my eight am class.

I glanced at my phone and saw that it was two am. If I emailed my professor now he would probably think I had spent the night drinking and didn't want to show up. My friends Hadley and Rick were both in the class. We had only met this semester, but if I told them something had come up and to let the professor know that I couldn't make it, they would get the text in the morning and, I hoped, cover for me...

Hadley had mentioned that she was a light sleeper and I didn't want to risk waking her, so I decided to text Rick instead since he had a tendency to silence his phone.

*Me: Hey Rick, Sorry to bother you. Can you let Professor Smith know I can't come to class tomorrow? I have had a rough night and don't think it would be a good idea. Thanks!*

I threw my phone aside when another sharp pain stabbed at my chest and I lost my breath again. I hunched over in a fetal position and didn't notice my phone buzzing on the other end of the couch until it was too late. I unlocked the phone a few minutes later to find a few missed texts.

*Rick: Jess what's going on can I help?*

*Hey I'm getting nervous is everything okay?*

*You're so cryptic do you have the flu or are you gonna explode or something???*

*I am just gonna pop by your room and see if you are okay...*

I jumped off of the couch in a panic and rushed to text him back,

*Me: Hey I am okay! Please don't come down, I didn't mean to bother you!!!*

I was too late. A moment later, Rick walked into the lounge area, carrying a fuzzy, gray blanket.

He took one look at me and my frazzled appearance and plopped himself down on the couch beside me. As he wrapped me in the blanket he asked, “Do you want to talk about it.” I was still confused and uneasy, so I just shook my head. He nodded and settled in with me under the blanket. We just sat there until my heart rate slowed down and I was able to catch my breath more easily.

A million thoughts ran through my head. I was worried about what he would tell the professor, or what he would ask me once he realized I had calmed down, but for the moment I allowed myself to appreciate the fact that he came to help even when I didn’t know I wanted him to.

This would become a common theme in our friendship and eventual romantic relationship. A few weeks later he sent me his own panicked rant and I went up to his dorm room and watched *How I Met Your Mother* with him until he fell asleep. The fact that we were both willing to sit with each other without asking a million questions about what was wrong meant that it was easy for us to find comfort in each other. Rick was reserved in public and appeared extremely unfriendly and anti-social to most people to the point where they would ask Hadley and I why we spent time with him, but it is amazing how much you can bond over something as terrifying as a panic attack.

## What Now?

*“MY BEST FRIEND VISITED ME AT WORK!” I’m slurring my words, clearly tipsy as I fling my arms around her, whisper-screaming, “I’M DRUNK!”*

*The best friend in question, Hadley, turns from me to look pointedly at my manager, Jane, who simply shrugs and says, “What?” I am just being a good manager! It’s our busiest night of the year, we deserve a little fun.”*

*I laugh and force a soda into Hadley’s hand and tell her she is forbidden from paying. She laughs and says she will never let me live this night down before giving me a hug and heading out of the store and into the wildness that is Salem on Halloween night.*

*Later that evening, I ran into her and her two roommates while taking the mile long walk back to Salem State’s campus from the downtown area. I lived in the junior apartment style dorms on North Campus, while Hadley lived in the new Viking building that was meant for both sophomores and juniors. As we walked by North Campus, I exclaimed, “I don’t want to go to my classes tomorrow!”*

*Hadley and her roommates were silent for a split second before they burst out laughing. Hadley put her arm around my shoulders and said “Sweetie... it’s Saturday... you don’t have any classes tomorrow. How drunk are you?!”*

*“Very!” I slurred as her roommates continued to giggle in the background. Hadley just shook her hand and kept her arm around my shoulder for the rest of the walk back to our dorms.*

*As we parted ways so that I could walk to the other side of Central campus to reach my dorm, I heard Hadley shout “LOVE YOU BEST FRIEND!”*

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I couldn't get the memory of that night out of my head when just two months later I got a message on Facebook from Hadley through her sister's Facebook account while I was at work. She was in the hospital after trying to kill herself with painkillers. She started the message off by telling me not to panic, and that she had run away when her roommate realized what she was up to and went to get campus police. They caught her on North Campus in the outdoor classroom at the building we had most of our classes in, Meier Hall. We would spend all of our breaks in the outdoor classroom because of the number of climbable trees and relatively isolated location, so it was the first place that popped into her head. The first thing she said when the police came up to her was, "Please don't arrest me. I have a final tomorrow."

I took a breath and asked if I could see her. She told me that she was actually being transferred to a mental wing at a different hospital and that when she got there they would allow two guests at a time in the afternoons on weekends, so I could come by the next day. At this point, I could barely think straight because the thought of my best friend trying to end her life seemed impossible to comprehend, but I was at work so I needed to keep my composure. Hadley asked that I fill in her teachers and our small group of friends and also asked that the third member of our trio, Rick, come with me when I visited. The conversation ended as if we were discussing some casual weekend plans. I felt myself unraveling at the seams, and I began sobbing at the counter. I was the only one working in this store for the day, so after my alarmed customers fled at the sight of my meltdown, I shut the door and called the manager sobbing and begging.

"Jane, I really need somebody to cover the store I... I can't do this right now."

"Jess, I need you to calm down and tell me what happened. I can barely hear you."

“My best friend tried to kill herself and she’s in the hospital and I can’t do shit to help her! I need to get the fuck out of here! Please help me get coverage. I can’t do this. I don’t know what to do. I need something to do!” I was screaming. I can only imagine how hard it must have been to understand me.

“Listen, go next door to the other shop and tell Mary you need an hour to collect yourself. We don’t have extra coverage for both stores today, and I want to come help, but I am out of state, so you may need to finish the day if you can’t get ahold of somebody else to close. I do think it might be good for you to keep busy, though.”

“Yeah... Yeah sure. You are probably right I need to keep myself busy. I am no good to anyone if I break down, right?” I was still having trouble breathing, but I was making a serious effort to sound calm. I didn’t want Jane to feel like she had to drop everything and take care of me on her day off. I needed to handle myself.

“Okay, hon. Please call me if you need anything. I am in Connecticut for the day but check with Charlie and see if he knows who would be able to cover. Bye girlie!”

“I can’t bother Charlie; it is his only day off! Don’t worry about it...you are probably right, I need to stay busy, I need to relax. I can’t even see her yet anyway. Thanks, Jane. I will keep you updated.” I hang up before she can argue and take a deep, phlegmy breath.

I barely registered walking next door to the other gift shop that my boss owned and asking my coworker to lock up her store in order to cover mine. As I walked back over to my store to wait for her, I recalled the first time I discussed suicide with Hadley. She was an interesting friend because she only met me after the fire and had no prior knowledge of what I was like before that point. All she knew was that I was in a rough patch trying to deal with anxiety and depression

that came after the fire and the temporary basement dwelling I was in afterwards. I wasn't seeing much else to live for, but she somehow made it worthwhile.

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*I am shaking as I walk up to Hadley and Rick as they are waiting for the shuttle to take them back to the dorms after class.*

*How do I approach this topic with anyone?*

*I decided to just ask what I needed to ask in order to get it over with but it ended up as word vomit.*

*"CANYOUTHINKOFANYTHINGTOADDTOMYLISTOFREASONSTOLIVE?"*

*"I'm sorry what?" She glanced at the notebook in my shaking hands. "Oh, are you writing a suicide note? I can proofread it if you want!" she said laughing. Rick joined her laughter and added, "I've been there! Let me give you some tips!"*

*I was at a loss of what to say. I felt like admitting that they weren't far off would terrify her, and I would end up losing a friend, but I felt like it was a slap in the face to joke about it like that.*

*I walked away to avoid the awkward response but I heard her behind me. "JESSICA! HEY JESS, GET BACK HERE!"*

*I turned slowly and avoided meeting her eyes as she caught up to me. I looked back and saw Rick staring wide eyed at me. I had forgotten that he struggled with depression, too, and felt bad for freaking him out.*

*"Hey wait, I am sorry! I saw you shaking, and I was trying to joke in order to break the tension... I went way too far but let me see." She took the notebook from my hands and glanced at the very small list I had written labeled, "reasons to live."*

*“Seriously?” she said. “You were this nervous about asking me to help with this? Girl, I love you! I will come up with a million reasons for you to live if it means not losing you. Come on, coffee is on me. We’ll figure this out.”*

*She put her arm around my shoulders and we walked back over to Rick. He looked us over before shaking his head and saying, “You should already know that if you needed help you could have asked, Jess! We don’t bite.”*

*I gave in and cracked a small smile as they laughed. Hadley wrapped her other arm around Rick and we strolled back into the building to grab coffee and talk.*

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I couldn’t help but find it ironic that most of our friendship was connected to her helping me cope with my issues, and now I was faced with the idea that I hadn’t done the same for her. What did I miss? I was there for her when she had attacks after her father died, I was there through all of her worst moments, but I missed this. Two days before this we were getting drunk in the cafeteria with our friends, and none of us had a clue what she was dealing with. She made so many jokes about serious things that I never took her seriously. When she lost her father so suddenly in a construction accident a year ago, she came back to school the next day to keep busy. She kept an incredible front of strength and lightheartedness, and yet I knew from experience that it wouldn’t last. I was the one who took the call after she had her first public panic attack at school.

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*I was lying down for a nap after trying and failing to focus on homework when my phone started vibrating. A glance at the ID told me it was Hadley. I answered pretty grumpily, having been interrupted.*

*“I was napping. Can I help you?”*

*“I am so sorry, I am so so sorry, go back to sleep don’t worry about it,”*

*“Wait, wait, I was teasing, Hadley, what’s up? What happened?”*

*“Some kids in my psych class were doing a presentation on death and mourning and I lost it in the classroom and had to leave. I am hiding in a bathroom and all of my stuff is in class, and I am freaking the fuck out and I don’t know what to do, and I needed to call someone. I am so sorry.”*

*“Hey. Don’t apologize for this. I am putting my shoes on, and I will get there as soon as possible. Do you want me to stay on the phone?”*

*“No, no, it is okay. Thank you so much. I am so sorry.”*

*“I will see you soon.”*

*I rushed to Meier Hall and ran up the stairs to the second floor where I know Hadley’s class is. I check a couple bathrooms in the halls before I find the one she is hiding in. When she sees me, she starts crying again.*

*“I am so sorry for calling you I didn’t wanna bother you I just can’t do this. I can’t be alone. They were talking about brain injuries in class and I freaked out... God I have to go back in there I left my stuff there.”*

*“Shh it is okay you can ALWAYS call me. I know what you are going through. Attacks are hard to handle alone. I will go and get your things from class. I know the professor she won’t argue with me. Do you want to stay here or come wait in the hall?”*

*“St-stay here please. She will try to come convince me to stay in class if I am in the hall.”*

*“Good point. I will be back soon. I love you, we will get you through this, okay? I promise.”*

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I came out of the memory as if I was in some sort of trance. I checked my phone and noticed that it was 7:30pm and that I needed to get ready to close the store. I went through the motions of closing out the register, taking the other store's key and locking up as I always did, but there was a robotic feeling to my actions. I had gone from being an emotional wreck to feeling entirely numb, and it was in this state that I arrived home and explained what happened to my family. They tried to share some comforting words, but I just told them that I needed to sleep before locking the door to my room and jumping onto the bed.

I messaged Hadley's sister to see what time I would be able visit the next day. She told me that the hours started at 5pm and mentioned that Hadley still wanted to make sure that our friends from school were made aware. I told her that I would make sure that I updated everyone before saying goodbye and tossing the phone in frustration. How do I explain to our friends that we failed her? I am sure Hadley would argue and say that this wasn't the case because as far as we knew she was joking, but I couldn't get the thought out of my head. We were with her almost constantly, and it felt like we had all dropped the ball and hurt our friend. I decided to talk to Rick before trying to sleep and to contact the rest of our group the next day when I had had some rest. As I picked up my phone I got another flash of memory.

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*I feel a terrible yet familiar pain in my chest. It is throbbing, and it feels almost as though something is trying to claw its way out of my body. I am hyperventilating and sobbing, and Hadley is keeping a hand on my shoulder in an attempt to ground me.*

*"Jess, I know it is hard but focus on me. Focus on being here. We are in my dorm we are sitting on my bed and we are both okay. We will both survive. I promise you."*

*“I can’t make it stop. I am trying so fucking hard, Hadley, I can’t do it. I am fucking broken and I always will be. The fire was three years ago, and I can’t get through a day without an attack. I need to be over it. I need to stop. Why can’t I fucking stop?” I was screaming, but Hadley’s response was calm, and while it didn’t stop my attack it helped and it was something I have never forgotten.*

*“Jess, If I meet up with you 60 years from now and something triggers an attack, then I will support you just like I am doing now. There is no concrete time of moving on. You can’t give yourself a deadline for something that you cannot control. You are so strong. I can’t believe how strong you are for dealing with this. You know that Rick has struggled for years, and you always tell him that it is okay and that we will support him. Why do you think you don’t deserve the same? I promise you that no matter how long it takes you will have support and I think you can heal.”*

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She gave me so much support. If I was so strong then why couldn’t I help her in return? I thought she was strong, too, so why did she try to take the easy way out? Why would she tell me there was no timeline for recovery and then try to cut her own time short? How could she be so selfish? My thoughts on suicide had always been complicated because my family felt that the person was only hurting the people who loved them. Even though I dealt with suicidal thoughts myself, I couldn’t help but feel that she was being selfish. I shook my head and mentally scolded myself for thinking of her so negatively. She needed me to be strong, if not for her then for our friends and family.

I called Rick and told him that she was in the psych ward and that she asked that we visit the next day. I fielded all of his questions and even managed to keep myself from crying until he

asked “How did we not know?” I couldn’t find an answer to that and just told him I would see him tomorrow. I lay in bed and cried myself to sleep as I pondered how to tell our friends and what to say to Hadley when I saw her. As I slept, I somehow dreamt of a happy memory...

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*Hadley and I run out of the building and burst with laughter. She is holding a black flip top water bottle and I have my phone open on the camera.*

*“He is going to be so annoyed when he gets out of class...” I say through the laughter.*

*“Nah, he told us to watch his stuff and we are! Just because we named his water bottle Voldemort and are taking it on adventures doesn’t mean we aren’t still watching it!”*

*I just shake my head and giggle as we set off to the park that is across the street from campus. When we arrive we carefully set Voldemort the water bottle on the slide, and I snap a picture that makes it look as though it just slid down.*

*“Do you think we should tell him about Voldy’s adventure or just tag him in the Facebook post?”*

*“Just tag him later so we can see his response.” Hadley responds.*

*I shrug and pose Voldemort in between us as we make silly faces for a selfie. We dissolve into laughter as we run to the swings for more photos.*

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I woke up feeling more pain than I had felt when recalling the bad memories. This happy glimpse into our friendship felt like a knife to the chest. I hadn’t hurt this badly in years and suddenly all of my own anxiety was rushing back. I didn’t think I would feel so terrible again, but here I was. I messaged our friend Cam and began the process of letting everyone else know

what was happening. I had to stay strong in this. I needed to get the information to the people who cared about Hadley. The pain I was feeling could wait until after I got to see her, right?

## Doctor Disaster 2.0

My mom's friend from high school died of cancer a few years ago. Apparently, this particular cancer had symptoms like mood swings, depressed or suicidal thoughts, chronic pain, and insomnia. When she shared these symptoms along with several others, doctors didn't even run tests to find out what was wrong. They decided it was depression and wrote her off. By the time they finally took her seriously and ran the tests, she was too far gone.

My mom doesn't know that I overheard her discussing this aspect of the death with her friend's sister. Hearing this did nothing to regain my respect for doctors. After enduring the doctor who spent the majority of my appointment stabbing me, I decided to try a different doctor. It turned out there was a doctor's office right down the street from our new house that took my insurance, so I made the appointment. They proceeded to reschedule me three different times, which did little to alleviate my concerns.

When I was finally able to get an appointment, it ended up being with a nurse practitioner. When I arrived, I filled out a mound of paperwork and was called into the exam room before I could even grab *Highlights!*

Even though I knew that most doctor's offices look the same, I still found it a bit uncanny how the exam rooms here were identical to my old doctor's office. They even had the same painting of a sunset hanging on the ceiling to calm people who were getting blood drawn. The nurse asked me the usual questions and did the weight and blood pressure check, but then she handed me a sheet of paper and asked me to fill it out. It was a depression test.

The questions sounded like those late-night TV commercials that ask “are you feeling lonely? Are you lost? Rejected? Can't find your place in life?” only they were on a scale of 1-10 instead of just yes or no.

As I was answering I found myself wondering why it was so hard to decide where I was on the scale. I knew that I probably should have put 10 for everything, but a voice in the back of my head shouted, “They have your file, they already know you are crazy! Don't tell them *how* crazy.”

I decided to keep myself at a 7 for most of the answers to avoid awkward questions. My friend Rick had once mentioned that he was put in a psych ward after telling the doctor he was suicidal, and our other friend, Hadley, had just come out of a psych ward and was terrified of being sent back there, so I felt safer leaving that out of the conversation.

“Hi there! Jess, right? I'm Cheryl, nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too!”

“So, I see here you have been on citalopram to deal with anxiety. Can we talk about that?”

I filled her in on the nausea and pain that came with the pills and how after taking them for two months, there was no difference. I also slid in the fact that I had recently broken up with my boyfriend, who had hated the pills and convinced me to stop taking them shortly before we broke up.

“Well it definitely seems like it is good that he is out of the picture, but you really shouldn't stop taking this medicine without talking to a doctor. It can mess up your heart and it will make your attacks worse in the long run. I think we should give the citalopram another shot.”

I was upset. They want me to try this stuff *again*? What did I ever do to them?

“Okay.” was my only response.

My inability to stand up to health care professionals continued with every visit. I typically saw Cheryl, but there were times when she wasn't, so I'd get another nurse practitioner. The office's doctor was incredibly elusive, and though my mom and grandma insisted they had appointments with her all the time, I was starting to think she didn't exist.

The appointments are all the same.

I tell them the medicine isn't working and they say to try longer.

I say my leg is numb every night and they say it is probably stress.

The pain in the back of my head that isn't a headache but feels more like scratches on my skin? Anxiety.

The pain in my intestines? Anxiety.

The fact that I can't hear much out of my right ear? Anxiety.

It was like my diagnosis meant these people didn't even need to try and do their jobs. My mom was growing annoyed with the fact that I wouldn't tell them things about my anxiety and wouldn't push them to do tests to find out if something else was wrong. After one particular appointment about my right ear not working she shouted, “They aren't going to do anything if you don't tell them what they need to know!”

I wish I could say that my mom's outburst snapped me out of it and I went back to the doctor and told them how bad my anxiety really was and how I would hurt myself or wish I was

dead, but instead I stopped going for the follow ups and started going just enough to get my birth control refilled and to pretend I was still taking the citalopram.

I would continue to blame my doctors for my own inability to get myself help for many years, and in my mind, I had managed to spin the situation so that I felt that I was right for not going to my appointments. In the end, I was the thing that was standing in the way of healing.

## Self-Harm

I started with elastics.

I found out about using them in a kids' book. Back then I got everything from a book. I told the elementary school shrink once that I wanted to stab myself. I had read the book *Please Stop Laughing at Me*, and the girl in that had stabbed herself with a kitchen knife to end the bullying she dealt with. The shrink called my mom. When I got home from school, my mom told me she had called, and we laughed it off as me being a dramatic kid who needed to ease up on the depressing books.

Fast forward four years, and I am a freshman. I had been reading a book called *TGIF*. One of the girls in the series used an elastic because it was less conspicuous, and people didn't question her snapping it on her skin. They didn't notice the welts.

I have had a serious phobia of blood since I was little and a bully tripped me and my face was ripped up by the blacktop, so normal self-harm wouldn't help.

So, I started here.

*Snap.*

It stung, but it was never enough.

*Snap, Snap, Snap.*

My skin puckered and I winced at the pain, but even as it stung it dulled the normal pain I faced daily.

*Snap, Snap, Snap.*

I suppose I should have figured out back then that there was something wrong with my head. What kid wants to hurt herself when nothing has even gone wrong in her life?

Maybe it was some fucked up sense of foreshadowing? Maybe my body was preparing for the shit it would go through later?

*Snap, Snap, Snap*

The welts are thick and solid pieces of my skin. Touching them feels like there is a rod stuck in my wrist, and it sends a shock of pain that helps short circuit the constant swirl of negative thoughts and ideas in my brain.

I am too much of a coward to do more.

Why should I stop now?

## Selfish

My mom and grandma would always mutter about suicides on the news. If it was a teenager who killed themselves then they said it was a sad waste of a life, but if it was an adult they became angry.

“They left behind four kids! How could anyone be so selfish?”

Suicide was the only manner of death that would cause my family to react in such a negative way. Sure, *normal* death was sad, but to my family it was different to die of disease or in battle than it was to end your own life.

When I was around thirteen, I started saying the same things when suicide was discussed on the news. I knew even then that I didn't care much about myself, and I had started self-harming. I didn't plan on killing myself, so I didn't see an issue with occasionally hurting myself. I was having trouble with the kids at school and couldn't make it through a school day without some cruel prank being played on me. This had been going on since I was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. The worst event happened when a boy transferred into my first-grade class after moving to Massachusetts from Ireland.

For one particular prank, a girl snuck up behind me at recess and pantsed me. The problem was that she managed to pull my underwear down, too, and everyone in the schoolyard saw me before I managed to pull up my pants. I couldn't handle the rush of anger and sadness that came after that event, so I started to scratch my arm during my classes until it was red and raw. My friends noticed the marks, but I told them it was my hives acting up, and they never questioned it after that. I eventually moved on to snapping elastics against my wrists because I didn't need to feign a skin disease to get away with those. I had convinced myself that this kind

of harm was acceptable because I was punishing myself for not being a good person to be around, but I wasn't going to die from the pain. It isn't selfish to cause yourself harm as long as the harm isn't fatal, right?

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As I fell farther and farther into the spell that was caused by self-harm and its ability to block out the pain from my thoughts by making me focus on the physical pain, I began to question my family's thoughts on suicide. If a person truly believes that they are worthless, or a hindrance on the people they love, then wouldn't they be doing everyone a favor by ending their own lives? Wasn't it better that they aimed the harm at themselves rather than others who may have hurt them?

How could my mom know what was going through the heads of every person we heard about on the news?

I pondered this as I snapped my elastic against my skin. I came to the conclusion that if I were to end my own life, my family might be sad for a bit, but once they realized that I had done them a favor, they would be able to move on with their lives. I always seemed to hesitate when the idea of actually ending my life came up, but the thought didn't stop lingering in the back of my mind.

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My first experience with suicide was in my junior year of high school.

My mom worked at Toys R' Us for 10 years before the Medford store closed. Her coworkers from that job had become our family. One of these coworkers, Sal, found a new job at a sporting goods store, but he attended most of the reunion outings that the old workers would plan every few months.

Sal had always seemed like a fun-loving guy. When I was young and got hurt on the go carts at Good Times on an outing with mom and her coworkers, he bought me mozzarella sticks to cheer me up. Another time during Bring Your Child to Work Day he gave me 5 dollars to buy something cool from the store just because I helped him stock something on the shelves.

I came home from school one day and found my mom found my mom crying in the living room. When she noticed me, she only said, “Sal’s dead. That fucking idiot,” before standing up and storming off to her room. I found out the full story by turning on the TV and seeing the breaking news update. He had walked into work, took a jump rope into the back room and used it to hang himself. One of his coworkers found him about 15 minutes later, but he was pronounced dead at the hospital.

Even though I was seventeen at the time, I think my mom still wanted to shield me from Sal’s reasons for ending his life. However, I was an excellent eavesdropper, and our rooms were right next to each other, so I could easily hear all of the conversations between her, her old coworkers, and Sal’s daughter.

It turns out that Sal liked to gamble a little too much. He owed a lot of people a lot of money, and I guess he didn’t see any way out of it.

I heard my mom on the phone with his daughter, Amy, who had also worked with them at Toys R’ Us, about a week after it happened.

“What are you going to do?”

“So, you’ll need to pay it all back? That’s bullshit!”

“Will you guys be okay? I’m so sorry...”

Sal had left his family to deal with his debts. I was disgusted! No wonder my mom and grandma found people who committed suicide to be selfish. He left behind a family and

friends to deal with both losing him and handling the mistakes he made during his life. Suicide negates life insurance which meant the family had no means to pay back his debts and would accrue even more debt from having a funeral. How could somebody do that?

Memories with Sal would always have a dark stain on them. It was the most selfish thing somebody could have done, and I would never question my family's thoughts on the matter again.

## Death Wish

It came as a bit of a shock when my own suicidal thoughts started coming out. I had pretty much always felt that I wasn't a worthwhile person while I was growing up because I had always dealt with bullying. People would throw ice at me in the winter, mock me for my short hair and nails, and spread rumors that I was a lesbian because of those traits. They would throw me against lockers and tell me I was too annoying to hang out with. Going through that on an almost daily basis for several years tends to mess with your head a bit, but it wasn't until after the fire that happened in my sophomore year of college that everything negative that I had ever felt came flooding back and joined up with some new feelings of guilt and worthlessness.

The thoughts came out of nowhere during the summer before my sophomore year of college and once they started they wouldn't stop. It was like there was somebody inside my head whose only job was to remind me that I shouldn't be alive. The thoughts were more general at first.

I would do something simple like forget to clean the dishes, or spill my coffee and the thoughts would flood my head in an instant:

*Just fucking die already.*

*You can't do anything right!*

*Your family would be better off without you.*

*You don't deserve to be happy.*

I didn't know how to comprehend these thoughts. I understood them and part of me agreed with them. The worst part about these thoughts is that they only made me make even more mistakes and bad decisions. I started skipping classes more often, forgetting to do my homework, and cancelling plans with my friends. Every time I did one of these things the thoughts would ring through my head and remind me that I was useless and would never be able to do anything right. After a couple months of these thoughts attacking my mind, I decided that they must be true or they would have stopped by now. I was an average student and terrible at making new friends. I also felt that it was my fault that the fire even happened in the first place because I was supposed to clean out the junk in the room that had sparked the flames, so it made perfect sense to me that the voice was speaking the truth.

This feeling didn't mix well with the ideals my family had instilled in me. Suicide was *selfish*. No matter how much better off everyone would be without me, it was still selfish. So, I tried to push the thoughts aside. When I first started having panic attacks, my mom told me that it might help if I pictured a door in my head and shoved all of the stressful or negative thoughts in there and locked them up. These thoughts were behind a giant metal wall with no doors or windows, but the dark room seemed to be a perfect place for the thoughts to grow.

Soon they had blown a hole out of the room with no door and started battering me with a vengeance. I would try to start conversations with friends, or feel proud of some schoolwork that I had finished when they would sneak up on me again:

*Why are you still messaging her? Don't you know she hates you?*

*This paper is shit. Why bother?*

*You should just kill yourself.*

*You're useless so stop trying.*

There was a problem with everything I did. I started picking apart my daily activities without taking any time to consider what I may have been doing right. If I had a heart-to-heart with one of my close friends and helped them find a solution to a problem in their personal life, then I managed to convince myself that I had given them bad advice and that they would hate me for it later. If I got a B on a paper I would focus on all of the mistakes I had made that prevented me from getting an A. If I got an A, I usually assumed it was a fluke or that the professor had made a mistake.

These thoughts became as constant as the chest pain from my anxiety, and I quickly fell back into my self-harming habit. I went through at least 100 elastics as they wore out from my almost constant snapping. My wrist was always red at this point, so I kept the elastics hidden with colorful bracelets. The bracelets rubbed against the welts on my wrist and made them sting to the point that they drew tears to my eyes. This was helpful for when I was in class and the sound of my elastic could possibly annoy the other students. I could silently shift my wrist and catch a sting of pain that could get me through the period.

I spent most of my nights contemplating how to kill myself without making my family think it was a selfish action. I also needed to make sure none of my friends knew what I was planning because they would probably tell someone, and then I wouldn't be able to go through with it. I had myself convinced that while my loved ones may be hurt if I were to die, they would be able to get past my death soon enough and move on and live happier lives without me.

I knew that overdosing was too obvious, and it would also be the easiest method for them to stop before I actually died. I was terribly afraid of blood, so anything relating to stabbing or

slicing was out as well. It was important that my family not think that I was selfish for going through with this, so I wanted to do something that could make them think it was an accident. In the end, I decided to allow things to fall into place on their own. I couldn't *actively* kill myself, but I could stop doing things that are meant to prevent my death.

It was easy to get started.

Step One was to stop looking across the street when I crossed. Most college students do that anyway, so it wasn't suspicious, and my friends were more amused by it than anything. One time, a school shuttle almost crashed into me while I was walking home from class, and when the driver looked over to flip me off, he paused as he saw a small smile on my face.

Step Two was to care less about doing things that could get me sick. I would walk in the rain without an umbrella, shovel without a coat and gloves, stand in the freezing cold, and refuse to take the time or medicine to heal.

Step Three was to stop bothering my friends and family with my problems and to keep them bottled up in my mind instead. This meant I spent nearly every night awake with a panic attack. Lack of sleep is *great* when you are trying to get sick.

Step Four was to make my room into what I felt I deserved to live in. I no longer cleaned, which left me to live in filth. My cat made the entire space under my bed into her litter box, and old pizza boxes and plates were everywhere, so that I only had a small sliver of space on my bed to sleep. Being surrounded by trash and feces was also great for getting sick.

This last step was the hardest to get away with. My family obviously noticed and pestered me to clean. I started to keep my door closed and kept a bottle of Febreze on my dresser so that I could mask the smell.

My plan certainly got me sick a lot. I spent a good two years of my life in a perpetual state of illness, but it was never serious. It was more of a prolonged cold and didn't do much more than make me look gross and snotty.

I self-harmed whenever I could, but people started to ask questions about the large red marks on my wrists and the elastics I always wore, even though I tried to hide the marks with jewelry, so I had to think of ways to avoid the questions.

Cutting was still out because of my phobia of blood, and biting made me look insane. I knew that if people caught on to what I was doing they would try and get me to go to a doctor or check into a psych ward, and at this point I felt like I was simply beyond any help they could give me. As far as I was concerned, I didn't deserve to be alive, and any help would be a waste of time. Luckily, I have sharp nails. It was easy for me to inconspicuously scratch my arm or even dig my nails into my arm without people thinking much of it. Most people assumed I had a skin problem and let it go, so I was free to keep it up.

They were small things, but the harm helped short out the thoughts of suicide and the illness made me feel like I was getting closer to my goal of allowing myself to die "naturally."

The voices were there to remind me that life was too beautiful for me and I had no choice but to listen to them.

## Life

I am looking back on these pieces that I have written through new eyes. I have been back on my medication for two months now, and I have finally opened up to my doctors about the issues I was having. I am not even close to being “healed,” but it has now been one month since I have hurt myself, and I am looking forward to events in my future for the first time in five years.

I am no longer just going through the motions and living because I have no choice. I still have panic attacks, but I have started to be honest with my friends and family about them, and they are always there to help me through them. They tell me frequently how glad they are to have me in their lives, and although I still have trouble believing that, I hope that with time I can believe it as fully as I believed the negative thoughts that ran through my head.

I have started to look both ways when I cross the street and even started cleaning my room for the first time in ages! It sounds like these are small things, but these small things are a sign that I am actually starting to care about myself. For the first time in *years* I actually feel like I deserve to be here.

I feel like many people will think that my story wasn't heading this way.

I wouldn't be surprised if someone was reading this and thinking that I would die by the end, or that I would end my life after it was finished. I would probably have agreed with them.

But this is for the people who are dealing with mental illnesses.

I know that it feels like everything is hopeless.

I know that you feel like you are worthless.

I know how easy it is to think that suicide is the answer.

It. Is. Not.

Hearing it from me probably won't make it seem like it is true, but I promise you that things *do* get better.

I know that sounds like a stupid tagline or an empty promise, but I guarantee that if you end your life now you will miss out on beautiful moments that you deserve to enjoy. People who love you would be devastated by losing you and they would not get over it like you think they will.

If you are contemplating suicide, or just feel like you don't fit anywhere, then I hope that you will be able to see that despite everything that happened in my life, I was able to push my way out.

It isn't easy. It hurts to face your fears and the negative feelings you have about yourself, but if you are able to do that then you will be a stronger person because of it.

Somebody loves you.

You deserve that love.

You deserve Happiness.

Live.