I stood under the glow of fluorescent lights with a lump in my throat created from tears and fear. The itching ill-fitting blue scrubs were uncomfortable and had no stretch. The admittance bracelet pulled at the hair on my arm and the smell of hospital disinfectant hung in the hallway where I stood next to some “Monet-esque” painting, framed in plastic and visibly bolted to the wall. It was late at night but you could still occasionally hear the bustle and announcements over the hospital speakers from where I stood. I was just a long-haired nineteen-year-old kid and in front of me was a scared girl assuring me she would visit me tomorrow and that she loved me. Just past her were two heavy beige doors that could only be opened by a key card. As she was ushered away from me and out of the psychiatric ward she turned back to once again remind me that she loves me. I tell her, “I love you today, I’m not sure I’ll love you tomorrow…” As those heavy hospital doors shut behind her, I felt scared, alone and hopeless.

As a teenager I just floated through life. I was smart enough I didn’t really need to study much, and school came easy for me. I was voted most friendly and was even chosen by my peers to be a commencement speaker at graduation. I was one of those odd kids that enjoyed my high school years. Overall, life was easy on me. But I wanted a change. I felt like I was just treading water. After spending a year at Boise State, I decided it was time to get out of my small town. The girl I was dating was planning to move to Logan and attend Utah State University. I also had a few friends who went there and went for a visit. I fell in love with the area and found a one-bedroom basement apartment close to campus.

After just a few weeks of living in Logan I realized I was starting to feel a little down and sought out a therapist. He recommended a psychiatrist who started me on an antidepressant, but in a few short weeks my mental health spiraled out of control. Not only did I lose interest in almost everything, but I thought about suicide a lot. Life was suddenly really hard and outside of my girlfriend I didn’t have a lot of local support. Then the hallucinations began. Most commonly I would feel as if I was being watched during the night. I would look around and see an unnaturally skinny man with dis-proportionally long fingers and a face hidden in the shadow of a wide brimmed hat and watching me. I didn’t know what he wanted but his presence filled me with terror.

The hallucinations were scary, but what broke me was that I could no longer trust my own brain. Logically I knew that this couldn’t be a real person. I knew that my apartment was locked up. However, to my eyes, he was as real as the door frame he was standing in. At that point you realize you can’t trust your own brain. You can’t trust your own thoughts. When you can’t trust yourself, who can you trust?

After they had her leave, the hospital workers and nurse showed me to a small, simple private room with a dark wooden closet and a bathroom. Everything in the psychiatric ward was meant to keep those like me from hurting themselves. That means that the toilet in the bathroom only had the bowl exposed, the tank and workings were built into the wall so creative patients couldn’t find ways to hurt themselves. I was physically exhausted after spending hours being admitted through the emergency room. I had been emotionally drained for weeks. As I climbed into the stiff hospital bed, I learned that not only was this bed so narrow that I could hardly turnover but that It would loudly squeak every time I moved. There I laid on my back, in itchy scrubs, on this torture machine of a bed and I cried.

I cried because I didn’t know how I went from a happy fun filled life to being so depressed and scared that I was planning to kill myself. I cried because I was plagued by intrusive thoughts. I cried because in a matter of months I went from being a normal teenager to someone experiencing hallucinations. I cried because I felt like a burden and disappointment to my loved ones. I cried because instead of floating through life, I was drowning.

In the morning there was breakfast brought out to a table in one of the common areas, I don’t recall exactly what was served but I do remember it perpetuated the stereotype of tasteless food served in hospital settings. It was here that I met the other patients and spent the day in several group counseling, private counseling, and other therapeutic experiences. The psychiatrist changed medications. I started reading a childhood favorite, Treasure Island, and did a lot of thinking and writing. I sat on the squeaky bed with a yellow legal pad of paper, and a red pencil. Not an ordinary pencil because that was too dangerous. Instead, I filled page after page using a rubber pencil flexible enough to be bent into a circle.

That night after dinner, I was led to a small room with two chairs and a green couch. There, my parents and girlfriend were waiting for me. I hadn’t seen my parents for weeks and I realized my girlfriend encouraging me to be admitted to the hospital was probably for the best. Their love and concern was so great it was almost physical.

I spent four days in the psychiatric wing of the hospital in Logan, and I’d like to tell you that I was better when I left, but I wasn’t. In many ways it was the hardest year of my life. The psychiatrist kept changing meds to treat major depression and then prescribing more meds to deal with side effects until I felt like a zombie going through the motions but not really living. I was almost unrecognizable to the two friends I remained in contact with and looking back they mentioned how my eyes had lost any spark of life. My parents finally talked me into moving back home in May. I wasn’t the same person that left at the end of the previous summer. I was so easily overwhelmed and scared I couldn’t go anywhere crowded. I found a good psychiatrist who believed I was misdiagnosed and had bipolar affective disorder type two and talked me into another hospital stay in the high risk and elopement wing of a psychiatric hospital because I was still suicidal, and he wanted to completely change my medicine. The reason you hear at the end of certain prescription commercials that it “may cause suicidal ideations in teens and young adults,” is because bipolar disorder tends to set in during that age range and can exacerbate bipolar disorder.

I learned a lot from that hospital stay. I learned that it’s ok to not be ok, and compassion for those fighting silent battles. When you feel like you’re drowning, ask for help. In life I’m stronger because of it. Life got better, not right away, and not quickly, but it got better. Life is worth living.