A Unique Skill

The men in my family are *bad* at suicide.

I was eleven, fourteen, seventeen, and eighteen each time my brother tried to kill himself. There was the time he drank himself into a pool of whimpering vomit, and there was the time he ran off into the West Virginia wilderness. We didn't know if he was breathing until the cops returned him several hours later, drunk and defeated. Another time, I got the call while I was drunk at my first college party: *your brother might not make it*. That was a bad one. The least effective attempt by far was when my 200+ pound brother tried to hang himself from his shower curtain rod, snapping it immediately. We laugh about that one together to this day.

My brother and I watched our father struggle in the same way; we saw him try to take his own life and dealt with the aftermath as children. We like to joke that we inherited the suicide gene.

The monthly bills from the psychiatrist come to our house in pairs: one for me and one for my brother. While my brother's host of mental illnesses is more complex, we share depression. He understands the aversion to the medications; he's experienced the same hopelessness and anger; he knows what I mean when I say, "I'm not sad, I'm just depressed." There is nothing more intimate and unique in this world than a person's struggle with mental illness. Still, we always understand what the other is feeling, sometimes without words.

We share other things, too, like the curly head of hair and our dysfunctional, divorced parents; any struggle I've faced, my brother can commiserate. This mutual understanding complicates my emotions each time he tries to end his life. I walk the line between empathy and rage, because sometimes understanding someone's apathy towards life isn't enough. *He's selfish,* I thought. *How could he do this?* I was there, feeding him little white pills to put him to sleep when he was seeing monsters. I sat and listened when he talked about his fears, and he did the same for me. He knew I'd always be there to support him; we both knew that wasn't always enough.

The nature of our relationship makes it even more shocking to look back and think that one simple note written by my sibling, my partner-in-crime, led to internal bleeding and a coma.

I was on break from college for the summer. I'd made pancakes and forgotten to clean the griddle. It sat, oily and smelly for several hours before I remembered it needed scrubbing. The yellow office paper laid in the puddles of grease and was littered with luminescent spots of orange.

"This is why he hates you," it read, referring to our stepfather and the tumultuous relationship we had. My brother knew better than anyone how to hurt me. I was sick and hurting, all I needed was a trigger. He just happened to write a snotty message at the wrong time. So it goes.

The trick to suicide my male kin didn't understand is that you have to remain composed and levelheaded. They were always emotional and sloppy. Ironically, feeling

your emotions makes the whole process more difficult. Despite being alive, I consider myself a pro.

"Twenty-seven bucks for Ibuprofen?" I muttered. You never really think about the financial constraints of suicide. I sprung for the bottle of 500, grabbed a Lipton Iced Green Tea from the fridge, and went to check out. *I wonder if this woman knows she's selling me a loaded pistol,* I thought as the clerk ran my card. The paranoia crept in and mounted; everyone around me knew, they knew I was going to kill myself.

If the patrons of CVS did know, they didn't let on. I wanted to die, I was sure of it. Still, I was offended that none of the strangers were more concerned.

The skies were gray and overcast, and there was a light fall of summer rain. I decided I wanted to do it outside, in the woods so I could feel warm and safe, see the sunlight dance through the transparent leaves above me. I scanned the skyline of my DC suburb, looking for a huddle of trees. I felt like an explorer, one from long ago who didn't have a compass or a map, just keen eyes and a mission.

I found a cul-de-sac that sat on the edge of a small forest, but it was raining too hard now, and the woods looked like they'd contain homeless men and needles, so I opted for a cracked window in my car.

There's a common misconception about suicide that one has to be horribly sad and weepy to take her own life, or that she must be facing something insurmountable and upsetting. That's how it is in the movies, after all. This was untrue of me. After finding the note, I'd stormed from the house. The whole experience started as embarrassment and irritation, then mounted into anger, then white hot fury, then nothing. I felt nothing.

In that moment, suicide seemed like the most pragmatic decision I could make. I didn't want to die because my brother had written me a note, I wanted to die because there seemed to be no other option, no other logical decision. That's mental illness for you. I didn't cry once. I had a family at home who loved me, friends waiting for me to arrive at their doorstep to hang out, and a promising life ahead. The only problem was the chemical imbalance in my brain that made me angry, anxious, sad, and restless; it made me crack the safety seal on the pill bottle and down the tablets, handful by handful.

I gagged and gasped as the pills went down. I ran out of tea, so I held the bottle out the car window to collect rainwater. I felt like MacGyver. Once the pills were gone, I laid on my back to see the rain fall upwards, to see it from a new angle. The sun cracked through the clouds and warmed my drowsy face. *This isn't so bad,* I thought. *This is a good way to die.*

Every $175 session, my psychiatrist asks what my coping mechanisms are. She expects answers such as, talking about my feelings, writing in a journal, or listening to music, so I lie. I don't want to tell her that every time I want to end my life, I think of my mother. It's harder to pull the trigger—literally and metaphorically—when the image of your daughterless mom plagues your mind.

Mom tried so hard, but a person can only take care of two mentally ill children so well. My brother was more sick, so he got more help. I understood the rationale, but it still stung.

If I died, Dad would be able to cope in time, my brother would understand my decision, but I don't think Mom would ever recover, so I usually swallow all the self-hatred

and put the hopelessness out of my mind because no mother should ever have to lose a child. I like to think this makes me a saint—that I deserve a Purple Heart for living with the urge to die.

This time was different though. I wasn't having clear thoughts; I wasn't worried about anything except the rain. I wish now, more than anything, that my mother's image had been able to break through the clouds in my mind, clear my thoughts and bring me to safety.

I remember seeing the flashing red and blue lights, and wondered how they found me. I don't have many clear memories from then on, mostly bursts of life and color, no pain.

My brother and father sat and watched while I drifted in an out of life in the ER. Things were looking good until my heart stopped. They told me they were rushed out of the room as the doctors readied the paddles for my chest.

I don't remember the sterile line going into my neck in the ICU either, just the scar that it left for a year, which resembled a hickey. I hoped it would disappear so I wouldn't have to explain it for the rest of my life: "Don't worry, it's not a hickey! Just a scar from when I tried to kill myself!"

I don't remember slipping into the coma, but I do remember waking up from it. I screamed and kicked, angry that the tube down my throat kept me from talking and even angrier that the straps around my wrists kept me from pulling the tube out.

I wish more than anything I didn't remember screaming obscenities at my parents, who stayed huddled around my bedside for days and made medical decisions no parent should ever have to make. But I do. I wasn't myself, but who was after mind-altering depression and a steady flow of Propofol?

Once I was stable, I was transferred to a regular room. My muscles were injured and atrophied so I could barely move, but I could think. The ibuprofen had thinned my blood, so every slight pressure on my skin led to an impressive, colorful bruise. I had two particularly bad ones, one on each wrist, from where the straps had held me down.

One morning, once I was finally able to hold a phone, I called my mother, weepy and in pain. I told her I wanted her company, I didn't want to be alone.

"I'm just waking up and having my coffee, and I have a busy day." *Click.*

There it was: the same contempt I had for my brother and father when they'd been in their own hospital bed, recovering from their own nightmares. This time, I was the selfish one.

Once it was clear I was going to live, my family didn't visit again, so I spent the remainder of my stay alone, relearning how to walk.

Three weeks later, I stepped back into the real world again.

"How's everyone doing over here?" The poor waitress, she had no idea how loaded her innocent question was.

Mom was weeping into her iced tea and my brother and I sat, uncomfortable, across the booth at the Red Robin. It was my first meal post-hospital. I still had the band on my wrist: Female, 10/21/1995. It was supposed to be a fun family outing, a, "Yay! You didn't die!" meal. We'd listened to music in the car ride from the hospital, even joked about the ugly bruises that stained my skin. But now, here we were, sorrow on mom's face and guilt on mine.

“I’ll….I’ll come back,” said the waitress, tripping over her feet in an attempt to distance herself from us.

“Mom—“ I reached out to grab her hand but she pulled it away, buried it deep in her hair and held her head.

I looked at my brother, who had dark circles under his eyes. He didn’t return my gaze. Instead, he kept his eyes on his lap and his jaw clenched.

Then I looked down at myself. My legs were skinny and weak and my arms were bruised from my wrists to my shoulders. I never wanted to feel like this again. More importantly, I never wanted my family to feel like this again. I was overcome by anger, but a different, softer anger than I’d felt that day. A deeply driven anger that made me hopeful that I’d never feel nothing again.

“I promise,” I said sternly. “I’ll never ever do this again. I learned my lesson. I’m fine now.” Did they believe what I was saying? Did I?

Suicide is sneaky. It hangs back in the shadows while you live your life, just waiting to make an appearance. I had no control over the emotions I experienced that day. So, while I sat there thankful for my family and elated to be breathing, the threat of depression circled my head and infiltrated my thoughts. Who was I to make that promise?

I was just like my brother and father, I realized. I was cold and calculated in my attempt until reality set in. Had I left emotion out of it, I would have stayed the course. Once I realized how much I feared death, however, things became sloppy. I caved, made a mistake in my moment of weakness and dialed 911. It took being at that sticky table with a burger on my plate and my supportive family around me to realize that it was the best mistake of my life, one I’d be thankful for until the day I (actually) die.