

The First (Near) Dying on Medical Record

The end is really the beginning. I am a bird. I crawl along in a half walk half crawl, using my broken wings like oars to propel me on. Soon I can walk no more and my wings are bloodied and breaking. Giving up hope for my flock to come across the ridge or a healing body of water, I lay down to die. As I stop this ceaseless searching I realize I am already in my place of dreams. And I learn of grander things than my small bird dreams, things that could lift me up higher than even my healthy wings could go.

I am lying unconscious in the emergency room at Mass General Hospital in downtown Boston. I want to die but instead I am about to wake up.

“What did she take?”

They are bringing me back to the place where the magic in my eyes dies out.

The doctor speaks in an urgent focused manner. I come to, groggy and bleary eyed. There are easily seven men and women in green scrubs surrounding me, intent on making me whole, or failing that just forcing my pulse back to life.

“We aren’t sure,” one of the EMTs responds, they are following along the horde of scrub-clad people gathered to save a soul. “Empty bottles of Clonidine, Klonopin, Codeine and Feurocet were found by the bed.”

I am walled in with no easy exit except the one I am currently pursuing. I am in the place where people end up who cannot find the way out.

I am 26 years old when they wheel me into a room with real white walls not a curtained cubby.

There is a lot of commotion, my blood pressure is taken, electrodes are placed on my chest, a needle is put in my arm for IV fluids and medication.

“Respiratory set her up with nasal O2 at 5 liters,” the doctor directs. The respiratory guy puts two small oxygen prongs in my nose and fiddles with dials on an oxygen tank.

“What do you want to hang?” someone asks.

The life savers are sucking me back into hell, they are on a mission for which I am superfluous. I am watching at first, like a waking baby trying to make sense of the activity that surrounds her.

“Lisa put in a Foley,” the doctor directs. One of the nurses immediately starts gathering up all the equipment for a catheter.

I am awake as I feel them shove something up my urethra, so I don’t piss myself. I feel perfectly capable of getting up and taking a piss if I need to but I am just a body on the table and no one asks me. I am surprised it doesn’t hurt more and at the same time I feel helpless to stop their mechanisms.

Earlier in the evening I swallowed a few bottles of pills, too many to count. Hundreds of pills probably. Last thing I remember I was in my spacious room on the third floor of a large white Victorian in Allston, a funky cheap neighborhood of Boston near Boston University. My best friend is downstairs fucking my boyfriend, they have been holed up in his room for hours. It is not a good day. I am always considering suicide anyway, teetering on the edge their betrayal has put me over. It is like a dream when I decide to do it. Everything becomes surreal and the screaming despair inside drilling into me like a sharpened nail bed softens and floats away; it is such a relief I don't question my decision but lean into it, a solid quiet spot in an ocean of storm. In the early evening the sloping ceiling is darkening, I look at it as I begin to swallow. I can swallow a whole bottle of pills in just a few of swallows, 10-20 pills at a time. I take pride in that.

I love pills, they are like very good friends who look out for me when I am hurting, sad, nervous, have a stomach ache, headache, feel kind of odd, just not right, agitated, angry, hungry, could feel better, can't breathe, my nose is stuffed up, have a fever, want to feel different, want to escape myself, am thinking too much. I am not thinking of how the love affair began.

"Swallow it!" she is yelling.

My mother and I are wedged into the 2nd floor bathroom – me sitting on the toilet lid, her a foot away towering over me. The bathroom is on the second floor of our 5 bedroom Colonial house in Newton, MA and overlooks the balcony if the door is open. I am in 3rd grade and she is forcing me to swallow a pill called Dimetab. I am terrified to

swallow what to me are huge discs with a sky blue candy coating, thinking it will get stuck in my throat and I would suffocate. Or something.

I am sitting on the toilet seat my face red from crying, my tiny body falling in on itself. In my mouth is a mixture of the sweet candy coating and the bitter chemical taste of the white chalky pill underneath it. It seems like we have been locked in our violent dance for an eternity. And it is not the first time she has brought me there for this test of wills. Although I want to please her and swallow it at the same time I am hoping she will give up and never again ask me to swallow it. I would rather suffer untold agonies than have to swallow this horse pill.

I take another pill, put it half way back on my tongue and swallow water out of a tiny paper Dixie cup with delicate little flower designs on it. The cups are not made to last and this one is now quite flimsy. The pill is again swishing around in my mouth. I pull it out blubbering "I can't", the water creating an ugly bubble in my mouth. We have a stack of drippy white pill carcasses piling up in a glob on the sink.

"Again!" she yells.

My mother is standing in front of me, her whole being bearing down me. Her hair is salt and pepper and in that seventies shag style – short on the sides, longer in the back - that when I look back on old pictures does not look good on her. In photos from her teens and 20s she is very pretty – her face soft and full with big brown eyes, her small waist and full hips making her voluptuous in a way I will never be - but 20 years later there is a harsh look about her, like her features are hardened into place and lack plasticity. Over the years extended family perpetually comment on how alike we look and she would always respond with "Oh no Nicki is the prettier one by far," with a proud

pleased look on her face. I could never tell if she really thought that or if she said it because it reflected well on her to compliment her daughter in front of other people, or alternately she was pleased I was being called pretty because it reflected well on her to have a pretty daughter. Still, it was one of the few times she would say something positive about my basic nature so I took it in with hungrily. “I am pretty” I often thought to myself; I turned it over in my hand like a sparkling pink stone that I am told has value. It made me feel more solid, more whole, like I had something of value to offer.

But in the bathroom there is nothing pretty going on. My mother wants me to swallow the pill and no amount of drama on my part will stop her. Dimatab has been prescribed because of my violent coughing fits; fits so intense that I am nearly vomiting and often crying while the coughing goes on and on. The doctors said the pills might help. So what was she to do? She is trying to be a good mother!

Knowing what I know now the whole scene is sadly absurd. Years later doctors will discover that coughing in children can be a sign of childhood asthma. So even once she managed to “train” me to swallow them – and she did - there was no relief. I was finally diagnosed with asthma 5 years later when I started to wheeze. Moreover, it is highly likely I was having asthma from the stress in the home or at the very least the stress was exacerbating it. I was also having migraines and stomach aches that were undoubtedly stress related. The doctors spent a lot of time tracking my diet (to no avail) but no one examined the emotional state of the home. So my mother, in creating scenes like this was creating more duress and likely more coughing fits, not to mention migraines or stomach aches.

40 years later modern American medicine still does not ask these questions. They treat *physical* ailments, even the psychiatric establishment has convinced itself that the brain is just an organ to be treated using their medical model, bio-psychiatry, and medication. And so I persisted in these bathrooms without doors or options for decades, where someone stands over you and forces things down your throat you never needed or wanted.

Back in Allston I finish one bottle then I go on to the next, swallowing handfuls of pills at a time. I am looking at the slanted wall, noticing the darkening while the sun goes down. I feel peaceful in a way I have never felt before.

I keep a suicide stash so I have plenty of pills; it is all the extra pills I have on hand for daily use as well as bottles of pills I no longer take. I am like a fucking pill factory. I only take the ones that I know will put me to sleep, I want a peaceful death, I can't imagine how anyone would want to die from say, *hanging*, or self inflicted *gunshot to the head*, the thought is horrifying to me. I want death as reprieve, a soft fading into a welcoming light. After years of ruminating, daydreaming and sometimes obsessing about it I am finally there, a feather escaping the bloody gore of my life floating away to softer shores.

Klonopin, a benzodiazepine, is like Valium and is the perfect choice; I take it daily for anxiety. Clonidine is another good candidate because it makes you tired if you take too much; it is for blood pressure but because it affects the nervous system it is used for anxiety as well. I have tried every medication there is for anxiety so I always have any number of good suicide choices on hand in my stash. Obviously none of them are

helping or else I would be making a different decision. Codeine I have on hand from a tooth problem Feurocet, another narcotic, is for the migraines which continue to plague me. When I am done swallowing I lie there quietly. Then I am gone. It is that easy.

I found out later that my best friend came up to my room to check on me when my insistent knocking and begging for them to come out stopped. When she saw I was unconscious she checked my pulse periodically. We had met in the psychiatric unit at Massachusetts General back when it was in the historic Bullfinch building and the doors weren't locked. She is no stranger to suicide attempts, I am pretty sane next to her: a woman held down and raped repeatedly by family members starting when she is only 4 or 5 years old and locked in closets as a matter of course, horrible things you cannot imagine surviving. She figured she'd wait until my pulse got low enough, thinking maybe it was a baby attempt and I would wake up in a while? She told me later that it was only when my pulse got down to 10 beats a minute that she called an ambulance. I thought it was considerate of her to make sure I really needed to go in.

The next thing I know I wake up in the walled ER room. They have probably injected me with Narcan to counteract the pills I have ingested which wakes up. Once I fully realize where I am everything turns black inside and I want to run but I am surrounded. By this time there are wires and needles attached at various locations to my body. But it couldn't be helped; I reach down and pull out the catheter, including the bubble that is supposed to keep it from falling out. Pulling out the needles is next on my list. I am just trying to communicate with them! Trying to let them know it is ok to let me go, to *please* let me go.

I am not thinking of my friend and boyfriend anymore. I am simply ready to go. But there are too many of them, every one of them intent on keeping me alive. I don't know if it is right or wrong, only that at that point in time I disagreed.

“Jesus she pulled out the catheter!” someone interjects.

“Hold her arms!” the doctor shouts firmly to anyone who will respond. Female nurses come onto each side of me, each holding a wrist. The one on my left is kind, her compassion exuding off of her like a warm yellow haze and I am glad she is there even if at the same time I wish she was not. It can always be worse.

They re-insert another catheter. My arms are pinned down now.

“Joe, sit her up” the doctor dictates. In response a young guy dressed in scrubs, a medical student or intern physically moves my body into sitting position like I am a rag doll and I let him; another adjusts the gurney to a sitting position. The nurses are moving with me as I move and it is reassuring. While this is going on I watch as the doctor is handed a package from one of the other nurses, inside is a long coil of tube.

It dawns on me that they intend to *put that thing down my throat*. I can't imagine why they need such a long tube! I am only 5'4" and the tube looks to be nearly as long as my body. I want to get away even worse than before but there is not much I can do pinned and surrounded as I am. Lessons for stomach pumping are as follows: swallow, don't fight it, relax and let the tube slide down. But that is for future stomach pumping, when I know resistance is futile. But this time I do none of these things. It is a horror show, I am throwing up into it and around it, gagging, and turning all red in the face; pulling one of my hands free I try to pull it out.

People say stupid things like “I don’t have the courage to kill myself.” Those people have no idea. I want to tell them they are blessed with other kinds of possibilities; that they have the good fortune to not experience the degree of inner torture that makes self murder a mercy killing. We are all in hard places from time to time. For me the hard places were so heavy something vital inside me went into hibernation. The deadness was like a cloak of lead dragging me down into a watery depth; it was a jail from which I could not escape; a demon sucking me dry as he drilled into me with a poker fresh from the fire. It was unendurable. I said “fuck you” to that demon, I will not allow the soul killing you are doing to me.

But I am failing. They are bringing me back.

“Hold her hands!” someone yells again after I manage to break free and pull at the tube.

The stomach pumping went on and on. They had to take the tube out several times because I was throwing up, then open new packages and sink the tube into me again and again. I was not going to come back easily.

Later in the intensive care unit the living corpse that was left laid there unmoving and silent, in a place so dark it was easy to mistake it for something else. I was numb and a little high from all the pills my body absorbed before they pumped my stomach. Too tired and hopeless to think of the next chapter I have been forced to live, I prayed to a dark god, the one who left me alive and had not the mercy to let me die. I prayed for mercy. At intervals a nurse brought in a nice cup of black charcoal which I dutifully drank (lest I have to face the tube again) and got up to shit the black sludge the

charcoal left in its wake. I have wires all over me and a couple different IVs attached to bags so they have to wheel in a portable toilet. Charcoal would absorb at least some of the medication that my body absorbed from the overdose, it is standard practice and the first of many charcoal drinkings I would face in the next few years.

There in my tiny dark room a baby sitter is on hand not more than three feet from my bed, different people at different intervals, students and older women primarily. They sat there silently, some read, some sewed. I was on 24 hour watch because without it I would have pulled out all the needles, catheters and heart monitors and left, going to directly to the closest bottles of pills I could find.

This is as far as modern medicine will take you. Alive but dead. Dead but alive. I didn't know it yet but there was another way; there was a *way out* that did not involve pills or ERs or even dying. In the meantime the needle is scraping across the album and I have another 12 years of this shit to live through. The rest of your life starts today! Forgive me if I did not get up and celebrate as I lay in the darkness in this huge metropolitan hospital. The ping ping of the ICU machines glowed all around me. There is an open door but I cannot reach it; I don't care if I ever rise again. I am a silent mass in the bed. I am as dead as you can get while the heart still beats and the brain still lights up, faintly but insistent.