

Chapter 1: The First Near Dying on Medical Record

The end is really the beginning. 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 25 years old when they wheel me into a room with white walls and not an emergency room curtained cubicle.

“What did she take?” the doctor asks.

He speaks in an urgent focused manner. I come to, groggy and bleary eyed.

“Empty bottles of Clonidine, Klonopin, and Feurocet were found by the bed.” one of the ambulance technicians perhaps responds standing among the easily seven or more scrub-clad people surrounding me.

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 an IV.

“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.

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

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 to one of the nurses.

She quickly gathers the equipment for a catheter. I am surprised it doesn't hurt more as they shove the tube up my urethra, so I don't piss myself. At that point I feel perfectly capable of getting up and taking a piss but I am just a body on the table and no one asks me.

The life savers are flushing me back into hell. I am walled in with no easy exit except the one I am currently pursuing. I am in the place people end up who cannot find the way out.

Earlier in the evening I swallowed a few bottles of pills, too many to count. Hundreds of pills probably. Last thing I remembered was laying down on my bed on the 3rd floor of a 6 bedroom Victorian in Allston, a funky cheap neighborhood near Boston University. It was the best and biggest bedroom in the house. I graduated to it after living in a small 2nd floor room, then moving to the other 3rd floor room, and finally into this room as housemates moved out. Although the room felt like an aerie on the inside I was in something more akin to airless dark sub-basement of sub-basements. No rooms were high enough to fix this.

Downstairs in a second floor room, my best friend was fucking my housemate-boyfriend. The two of them had been holed up in his room for hours; it was not a good day. Given that I was always teetering on the edge of committing suicide their betrayal had put me over. It was like a dream when I decided to do it. Everything became surreal and the despair drilling into me like a sharpened nail bed softened and floated

away. For once I didn't question my decision but leaned into it, a solid quiet spot in the storm, taking comfort in the slow darkening of the sloping ceiling as I gulped down handfuls. I could swallow a whole bottle of pills in just a few of swallows, 10-20 pills at a time. I took pride in that.

I was a pill-head so it made sense that I was using them. I loved pills the way people adored their dog or cat and was terrified of being parted from them. Pills and their liquid cohorts were my friends, we took care of each other. I bought and ingested them and they in turn shared their chemical gifts to ease my many discomforts. One time torn between going inpatient to prevent myself from killing myself and my pills, I decided to bring them along. I smuggled a mix of anti anxiety, over the counter nasal decongestants and ibuprofen, and I don't remember what else into a psychiatric unit, just in case I needed something and they wouldn't give it to me. Three or four days into my stay a staff member discovered them buried in my suitcase, squirreled away in sock rolls and pant pockets. Furious at my audacity to defy their rules I was punished by being strapped down to a gurney and sped by ambulance to one of the worst inpatient units in the city.

Pills didn't take things away, judge you or send you to scary places. They waited patiently in their bottles or packages to be of service, to take care of me when I was hurting, sad, nervous, had a stomach ache, migraine headache, felt kind of odd, just not right, agitated, angry, hungry, could feel better, couldn't breathe, my nose was stuffed up, had a fever, wanted to feel different, wanted to escape myself, and was thinking too much. I was not thinking of how the affair began, it was not love at first sight but what death march is?

“Swallow it!” my mother said her voice like a two-by-four whacked on my head.

I was in 3rd grade when my mother decided I had to learn to swallow a pill called Dimetab, a huge disc with an aqua blue candy coating. I was terrified to swallow it, worried it would get stuck in my throat and I would suffocate or something. The two of us were wedged into the 2nd floor bathroom of our Newton house, a five bedroom white colonial with green shutters that we moved into a few years prior. I was sitting on the toilet lid and she was towering over me a foot or two away. Our pill-swallowing-dance was all elbows and knees and seemed to go on for an eternity while my face grew red and swollen from crying and hers harder and angrier. Although I wanted to please her and swallow it at the same time I was hoping she would give up and never ask me again because I would do anything to avoid having to swallow the horse pill.

I took another pill, put it half way back on my tongue and swallowed water out of a tiny paper Dixie cup with delicate little flower designs on it. After a few uses the cups caved in as this one attested. The pill was again swishing around in my mouth. I spit it out and added it to the stack of white pill carcasses on the sink.

“I can’t”, I cried, the water creating an ugly bubble in my mouth.

The taste of the sweet candy coating and the bitterness of the white chalky pill inside mixed unpleasantly in my mouth.

“Again!” she yelled, her lips rigid and thin and her face ringed in salt and pepper colored hair styled in the seventies shag – short on the sides, longer in the back - that did not look good on her.

In old photos from her teens and 20s she had nearly movie star good looks with high cheekbones, big almond shaped brown eyes, a small waist and full hips that made her voluptuous in a way I would never be. But 20 years later there was a harsh look about her, as if her features had hardened into place and lacked plasticity. Aunts and uncles often commented on how alike we looked to which my mother always responded with pride "Oh no Nicki is the prettier one by far." But 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 me so I took it in with hungrily. "I am pretty" I often thought to myself, turning it over in my hand like a sparkling pink stone that I was told has value, feeling more solid knowing I had something of value to offer.

Meanwhile nothing pretty going on in the bathroom despite my heart-shaped perfectly proportioned face and long lustrous dark brown hair. My mother wanted me to swallow the pill, my tears received as if by a wall of steel. I was having violent coughing fits, fits so intense I sometimes cried as they convulsed me like a rag doll. The doctor said the pill might help.

Knowing what I know now the whole scene was sadly absurd. Years later doctors would discover that coughing was often a sign of childhood asthma. So even once she managed to train me to swallow them -- and after several of these sessions she did -- there was no relief. Worse, stress in the home may have been causing the asthma or at the very least the exacerbating it and was probably causing my migraines and stomach aches as well. 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 and 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 another organ and they treat it with their medical model, what they call bio-psychiatry and treat primarily with medication. And so I persisted in these bathrooms without doors or options for decades, where someone stood over me and forced things down my throat I didn't want or need.

Back in Allston I finished one bottle and went to the next, swallowing handfuls of pills at a time, taking comfort in the slowly darkening slanted wall. I kept a grab bag of pill bottles I called my "suicide stash" in a plastic bag. It was comprised of medications I had stopped taking and current ones too. I had plenty of pills. I was like a fucking pill factory. Only pills that put me to sleep were in my stash because I wanted a peaceful death. I couldn't imagine how anyone chose to die from *hanging* or *self inflicted gunshot* to the head. The thought horrified me. I wanted death as reprieve, a soft fading into a welcoming light. After years of ruminating, daydreaming and sometimes obsessing about it I was finally there, a feather escaping the bloody gore of my life floating away to softer shores.

Klonopin, a benzodiazepine, was like Valium and the perfect choice. I took it daily for anxiety and it would definitely put me to sleep and even kill me if I took enough. Clonidine was an equally good candidate, technically it was for blood pressure but it was also prescribed for anxiety. Perhaps I had Codeine on hand as well which was

prescribed for a tooth problem and Feurocet, another narcotic, prescribed for the migraines which still plagued me. Not that any of them were helping. Otherwise I would be making a different decision. When I was done I lied back on my bed. Then I was gone. It was that easy.

I found out later that my friend, who's name I can no longer remember, came up to my room to check on me when my insistent knocking and begging for them to come out stopped. We met the first time on the Massachusetts General Hospital psychiatric unit. She had gauze twined up both forearms and told me that if you cut deep enough and all the way up the artery in the forearm you could die but that slashes on the wrists would never do it. I considered this a very useful piece of advice although I could see this technique was no guarantee given her presence in front of me.

The soft curls of light blond hair that ringed her youthful face belied the fact that she has already birthed five babies, all of whom had been taken away by the authorities. Not that she didn't keep trying. I had it easy next to her, a woman held down and raped repeatedly by family members starting when she was only 4 years old and locked in closets as a matter of course, horrible things you cannot imagine surviving. I never knew how the babies fit in to her efforts to go on living but I remembered the one she had when I knew her, a cute little blond boy nearing six months of age. I met him once when I visited her East Boston apartment. As she tenderly patted him on the back she said without a trace of emotion that he would be taken too, as if she had already given up on making it right, making anything right.

She had what was called dissasociative identify disorder or what used to be called multiple personality disorder, a common development for people who endured

such extreme abuse at so young an age. Because you can't survive it, not really. The personality splits up to cope. During that visit she decided to show me.

"I'm going to have a seizure first, don't worry about it, that's how I switch into some of the alters" she said laying down on the bathroom floor.

The alters were the other personalities inside of her. She proceeded to shake and spasm. When it was completed she sat on the toilet lid and began to talk in the voice of a man with a raspy smokers voice. I could practically smell the fetid smoke on him. I mean everything changed, her body language, voice, how she spoke, what she said. It wasn't her at all. I was shocked and mesmerized feeling like I had stepped into the twilight zone. It occurred to me that only the most gifted actor could pull off such a transformation because I could practically see the loose skin hanging on his skinny body, the dingy clothing and the fatigue of a man old before his time. I don't remember what he said but when it was over she had another seizure and came back to her regular self.

I can picture her climbing the stairs, quietly entering my darkened room and picking up my wrist to check my pulse. She told me later that it was only when my pulse got down to 10 beats a minute that she called an ambulance. I appreciated that she made sure I really needed to go in although it would be the last thing she would do for me. Not that I loved my boyfriend, I was using him like I used everyone. Men served me the same way as pills and drugs; they soothed my angst in one way or another. Boyfriends bought me drugs, drinks, and food or went on runs for these things when I was afraid to leave my apartment. Some of them held me and cooked for me and if they wanted sex I gave them that too. It didn't seem wrong, it was just life. Still their betrayal

of getting together and locking me out was too much. Like they had poured more acid on the acid I was already writhing in.

I must have woken up in the walled ER room after they injected me with Narcan to counteracted the medications, standard procedure when someone was half way to heaven. Realizing what is going on I want to get away. I reach down and pull out the catheter, including the bubble in the tube that keeps it from falling out. Pulling out the needles are 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 surrounding me, intent on keeping me alive. I don't know if it is right or wrong, only that at that point in time I disagree.

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

“Hold her arms!” the doctor shouts firmly to anyone.

Female nurses come to my side each grabbing hold of a wrist. The one on my left is kind or maybe it was my right, her compassion radiates out 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.

“Joe, sit her up” the doctor dictates.

In response a young guy dressed in scrubs, perhaps a medical student or intern physically moves my body into sitting position like I am a rag doll and I let him. Someone else adjusts the gurney to a sitting position. The nurses are moving with me as I move and it is reassuring in an odd way. I watch as the doctor is handed a

package inside of which is a coil of tube an inch or more thick. I heard about stomach pumping and it dawns on me that the doctor plans to rappel 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 nearly as long as my body. I want to get away even more, to run far away from this place but I am pinned and surrounded. Lessons for stomach pumping and the tube that is impales in you are as follows:

1. Swallow
2. Don't fight it
3. Relax and let the tube slide down.

But that is for future stomach pumping, when I know resistance is futile. This time I don't listen to the doctor's advice. Instead I resist which leads to gagging, throwing up into and around the tube. 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 would not allow the soul killing he was doing to me.

But I am failing.

"Hold her hands!" someone yells after I pulled at the tube.

There I was, sliding into a waking abyss, one tube package after another opened and the whole process restarted each time I threw up.

Later in the intensive care unit the living corpse that was left lay 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 arriving at the emergency room. Too tired and hopeless to think of the next chapter I was being forced to live, I prayed to a dark god, the one who left me alive and hadn't the mercy to let me die. I prayed for mercy. At intervals a nurse brought in a 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. Charcoal absorbed some of the medication my body absorbed from the overdose; it was the first of many charcoal drinking I would face in the next few years.

In my small dark room a baby sitter was on hand not more than three feet from my bed, students and older women primarily. They sat 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 gone directly to the closest bottles of pills I could find.

This is as far as modern medicine takes you. Alive but dead. Dead but alive. I didn't know it yet but there was another way; there was a way up that did not involve pills, ERs or even dying. In the meantime the needle scraped across the album. I had another 13 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 laid in this huge metropolitan hospital. The ping ping of the ICU machines glowed all around me. There was an open door but I couldn't

reach it; I didn't care if I ever rose again. A silent mass in the bed, I was as dead as you can get while the heart still beats and the brain still lit up, faint but insistent.