

**BATTLING THE ECHOES OF DARKNESS:
FROM SUICIDAL THOUGHTS TO GRADUATE ASPIRATIONS**

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“You don’t belong here”. Those are the words that echoed through the mind of nine-year-old me, as I walked back to class. The memory and feelings accompanied with the phrase that plagued my thoughts that moment are so vividly imprinted in my childhood recollections and likely set the course for my future.

It was a beautiful fall afternoon. The sun was shining through the halls giving everything a golden hue - a warmth, similar to a comforting hug. My mindless, quiet stroll from the washroom had become unexpectedly interrupted by the violent assault of my thoughts.

I was suddenly overcome with a profound sense of emptiness and loneliness that shook my very being. The physical sensation accompanying the feelings elicited me to shake my arms out as though ridding my hands of water when there is no more paper towel to dry my hands with. “Weird”, I thought, and went back to class, willing myself to smile and pretend nothing had happened.

Young me was an objectively great child. I was polite, was a high achiever, cared for others, and loved making people smile. Adults adored me. To this day, I still have no logical explanation for the feelings and thoughts that popped into my head that first time. It only happened once – that is, until a few years later, when they came back with a vengeance. In high school, I would be haunted by these whispers urging me to believe their words. It was a battle I fought so valiantly,

but ultimately lost. I would go to bed at night repeating the reasons why I didn't belong – the reasons I was “bad”.

“You didn't get 100% on your test. You're dumb. You're ugly. You're covered in pimples. You're too fat. Your eyes suck. Your friends don't like you. You have no real friends.” I would rehearse these mantras, as tears gently rolled down my cheeks until I fell asleep.

I didn't know how to handle these thoughts and these emotions. They would build up inside me and emit a physical sensation – a pain, a tightness, a pressure. It felt as though my chest was bursting. I needed release so there would be room to breathe.

I was thirteen years old when I started self-harming. I didn't want to die. I just needed to breathe. Like compression syndrome that needs a fasciotomy to release the pressure to heal, I too needed that relief from the excruciating pain. I didn't want to die. I just wanted to not feel how I was feeling.

At fourteen, I was called to the counselor's office. Someone had told on me. I was in trouble. The counselor interrogated me and asked why I harmed. I did not have a proper response. He threatened to have me taken away by Child Protective Services if I didn't talk to my parents and get counseling. I went home that afternoon, mortified, and told my parents. They were not impressed. We went to one counseling session, where I blatantly lied and said I had been injured because I was sad that my grandpa had died. The counselor took my words at face value. We had completed the mandatory counseling session.

The school counselor never saw me again. Had I stopped harming? For a month or so, yes. I was terrified of getting in trouble again. The thoughts kept coming though, and getting louder and stronger as time went on. The physical pain from my emotional turmoil was unbearable. I started harming again. I had to be smart about it this time though; I had to make sure no one would suspect anything. I shut down and stopped telling my friends how I felt and pretended to be “all better” to not raise suspicions.

The thoughts started becoming more insidious. They progressed from self-loathing to questioning my reason for being. “I wish I had never been born. I wouldn’t feel this way if I was dead. No one would miss me. Everyone’s life would be better. I wish I would just die”. I would daydream about unexpected accidents that would take me out swiftly. I never thought about taking my own life. At this point, I was living day after day with these frightening but benign thoughts. This trend continued for several years until I was 21.

At 21, I endured a horrible break-up. I had been with the person since I was 16. We both struggled with our mental health. The relationship was volatile – the ups were amazing, but the downs were terrible. We were in a long-distance relationship at the time. As you can imagine by the lovely poems, I would rehearse to myself – I was insecure. I was jealous. I was fearful of losing him. I thought he was my everything, but he lied – compulsively, and the relationship disintegrated.

My world turned upside down. I was inconsolable. I would go out and party with my friends, only to come home feeling worthless and empty. Through this period, I had one person who would listen to my same problems, over and over and over. She never once judged my repetitive sob stories or told me to get over it, as others had. She had her own traumas and pain to share. We found refuge in each other. We could be our full, authentic selves.

Even so, things turned sour when an acquaintance told me that someone was trying to turn my friends against me. Why? What had I done wrong? What made me so bad that no one wanted to be with me? To protect myself from further hurt and heartbreak, I started isolating. Little did I know, that would exacerbate all the feelings I had been holding inside.

I can't remember the exact details of what triggered my first attempt beyond the breakup and alienation. I just remember that I was done feeling the way I had been feeling for so many years. I was done with hurting. As the grogginess kicked in, I became frightened and texted my mom – who was 45 minutes away. I remember glimpses and flashes of that night – telling the hospital staff what I had done and being hooked to a bunch of loud machines. I was in the intensive care unit for a couple of days, and then transferred to another room for about a week or so. I was released with the condition that I would be followed by a psychiatrist and therapist.

The psychiatrist tried several different medications – antipsychotics, mood stabilizers, antidepressants, and anxiolytics. Nothing worked. The stabilizers stabilized me, but they did so in a way that made me even more depressed and suicidal than when I had entered the hospital. To make matters worse, my psychiatrist was demeaning. She questioned my will to “get better”

when I expressed concern about side effects. Thankfully, my experience with my psychologist was quite the opposite – she emanated concern, kindness, and validation. I may have lost faith in mental health care if not for her.

The semester wrapped up in April. I had finished all my core courses, and the next step was working toward my psychology degree. The idea was to transfer from the Panama to Tallahassee campus since Panama offered only select degrees. My best friend and I started planning what fall semester would look like. Unfortunately, my parents were in disapproval with this and took it one step further, sending me back to Canada. Their reasoning: my hospital stay was too costly, and they could not afford me attempting to take my life again.

I was devastated; I would have to leave my one unwavering friendship behind. Coming out of the hospital, I leaned on my best friend emotionally, for the last 5 or 6 months. For both of us, this type of friendship was unprecedented. We could be real with each other, despite how scary it could get. I had someone who understood me, and whom I understood. She had held and consoled me as I sobbed in her arms after my ex re-appeared and baited me with the idea of getting back together, only to change his mind and vanish.

My last night in Panama was spent with her. We stayed up all night talking, dancing, and making plans for her visit to Canada. I hugged her tight and told her I loved her as tears were shed. As I arrived to the airport for my flight, I received a message from her to look at my laptop. She had left me a letter on my computer. Part of it read, “This is just something unique and extraordinary.

I have never had a friendship like this before. There is no doubt we are gonna stay close, even if we are separated by hundreds of miles”.

My arrival in Canada did not cure everything as my parents had hoped. I still struggled with the thoughts that plagued my mind. I remember being hospitalized at least twice from May to July for suicidal ideation and behaviours.

On July 22, 2013, my mother and I got into an argument. She had been in Canada for the summer, preparing to sell our house. I can't recall what we fought about, but I was angry and frustrated. I left for a walk. Soon after, my mom drove up and confronted me. Things escalated, police were called, and we were both sent home with an understanding that I would go stay with my aunt for some time.

As my mom drove us back home, I received a phone call from a number I did not recognize. I picked up: “Hi, Emily. It's Aggie, Katie's sister.”. Weird, I thought to myself, why would she be calling me? As I responded cordially, she continued, “It's Katie...”. My mind immediately thought, “Oh no – did she get injured?”. I asked, “Is she okay?”. She replied, “No. She's dead. She died”. Had I heard properly? I asked her to repeat, “What?”. She obliged. At a loss for words, I could only muster apologies. “Katie's dead”, I said to my mom, avoiding eye contact. She responded with “Do you need to go to the hospital?”. Firmly, I responded – “No.”. In the span of nine months, I had lost the two most important people in my life. No words could accurately portray the emptiness I felt, the loneliness that further entrenched itself into the pits of my soul. This was more than hundreds of miles, Katie.

My memories of that year after Katie died are a blur. They are obscured by a hazy fog, reminiscent of a dream. My mental health was at the worst it had ever been. A month after Katie's death, I met my current spouse. I'm still unsure of what he saw in me that didn't have him running in the opposite direction, but undoubtedly, he is the reason I am alive today. He endured multiple suicide attempts and dissociative breaks. His support was unwavering. How could a person undergo all the trauma I inflicted, and not flee to save themselves? In that year, I lost count of the number of hospital admissions I had, or how many times I couldn't bear to live anymore. The last one I remember, before a new start, was sometime in winter. It was the most lethal thing I had done to date. There was no way I would survive this. I didn't tell anyone. I just went to sleep.

Against all odds, I awoke the next day. It took weeks to get back to my "normal" at that time. I couldn't string words together properly. I was slow. I was tired. I was alive. After this occurrence, my partner and I started discussing moving away to reset. What did I have to lose? I didn't have friends. I didn't have a job. My family was upset with me. So we did it – we moved across the country.

For the most part, things got better. I had a job. I made friends. I still struggled with my mental health, but my hospital admissions reduced substantially. In my time there, I had one attempt that elicited a hospitalization and a week-long inpatient stay. Over time, the ideation lessened. The daily fight for survival slowly attenuated. As I improved, I would reflect on the times I believed escaping my thoughts was implausible. It ignited the perseverance for my return to school at 26.

In 2020, I graduated with honours and distinction, with the objective of pursuing graduate school to help others heal from their anguish and desperation.

It has been nearly 10 years since my last attempt. While the thoughts may occasionally surface, they have never been so unbearable that I would consider ending my life. I still experience physical aches in my body, stemming from I believe, loneliness as a result of my profound loss, however, I know the feeling is only temporary.

My experiences with suicidality have shaped me into the person I am today: an empathetic, compassionate, and caring individual that wants empower others to keep fighting. There was a point in my life when I could not conceive an alternative to dying by suicide to get relief from the hurt and pain I had endured for so long. The darkness had only become darker, and the light no longer shone. I was exhausted from swimming against the current, yet somehow, what felt like treading water, slowly took form of me swimming towards shore.

I don't have the answers to how I healed. I just know it's possible. I aspire to instill that hope for peace by speaking of my journey to others who may currently be fighting the battle.

Unequivocally, this remains the greatest motivation for my desire to pursue a graduate education.

Barriers still exist however – and this is why I am writing this paper. In clinical psychology – a field that aims to heal those with mental health concerns – you are advised against disclosing lived experiences of mental illness. It is considered a “red flag” and comes with many stigmatizing preconceptions about your ability to deal with stressors. You are asked about your

rationale for pursuing a graduate degree, yet you must hide a piece of yourself that has shaped and helped you grow beyond imagination. You must diminish the experiences that enable you to comprehend and validate aspects of your client's circumstances beyond what a textbook offers. You must hide. You must pretend you have never been unwell.

In a field that endeavors to increase help-seeking behaviours and reduce the burden of mental health on society, some programs endorse the stigmatizing ideas that create the very barriers to seeking help. I truly believe that for the field to advance, it needs to be inclusive of individuals with lived experience as it can allow for different perspectives to enter the field and effect change from the inside out.

We, who have struggled with suicidality are not "broken" or "weak". We are fighters. I am a fighter. By your side, I will fight for you.