

Eight Months After a Suicide Attempt

By Andrea Rosenhaft

Nine months ago, in February of 2014, I covered all of the mirrors in my apartment because I couldn't stand the sight of myself. The white sheets had tiny blue sailboats on them and when I brushed my teeth in the morning I saw a fleet of ships setting sail for the ocean's depths. The nautically themed set of sheets were a spare I had stored in my linen closet in case a friend needed to stay overnight on the couch. Which hadn't happened in years.

I hated myself so much I couldn't stand to glance at my reflection. I hated the sight of my eyebrows and how they were imperfectly arched and asymmetrical. I hated my unruly dark hair that had turned dry and frizzy after menopause. Most of all I hated what was on the inside; the person that lurked within that ugly shell, the one who was never able to live up to her father's expectations, who had never been able to fall in love and who at that moment believed she had totally screwed up her life.

On March 1st I awoke at two in the morning and a voice was pounding in my head, much like the chronic migraines I often experienced. "You should be dead. You deserve to die. You're a burden to all those around you. Kill yourself. Kill yourself." The voice, which was an exaggeration of my own thoughts didn't come out of nowhere; I had been experiencing suicidal ideation for several weeks, but it hadn't been this insistent. I tried to fight the sound of a raspy version of my voice that seemed to be bouncing off the sides of my brain until daylight, but I grew tired of the incessant drilling. As the sun rose, I gave up and padded into the kitchen where I swallowed a bottle of pills. I shuffled back into my bedroom, laid down and waited to die.

Only I didn't die. I just got sick. Dizzy and nauseous over the course of the next several hours. Finally, crying, alone and afraid I took a cab to the emergency room. A two-day stay in

the medical hospital and a nine-day stay in a psychiatric hospital followed and I was discharged to the care of my outpatient psychiatrist.

The best predictor of a completed suicide or a suicide attempt is a prior one and I had attempted suicide three times over a four-year span twenty-five years ago. After so long I believed I was safe from another suicidal depression, but as I found out, there are no guarantees. After my mother died in March of 2002 a close friend of hers confided in me that she had lived in constant fear that I would try again — and succeed. When my mother received her diagnosis of pancreatic cancer in December of 2001 and went about making her own arrangements including purchasing a burial plot, she bought one for me right next to hers. "Did she know something that I didn't?" I wondered.

I was re-hospitalized a month after being discharged the first time. I started having thoughts of jumping off the eleventh-floor sundeck of my apartment building. As before, I wasn't able to get the thoughts out of my mind; they were pervasive and insistent so at the end of a long and exhausting day (my psychiatrist was on vacation), I took myself to the local emergency room and they sent me by ambulance to the same psychiatric hospital where I stayed for another week.

I began to wonder if I would ever be able to function as I did previously without this sense of hopelessness invading every pore. I made a friend in the hospital who is a successful executive and he told me I was smart and that I was able to understand what he was going through. That helped a great deal. While I was feeling worthless his words reassured me that perhaps I had something to offer. We have stayed in touch. He is kind and he makes me laugh.

After the second hospitalization I returned to work on a part-time basis assuming only a fraction of my former responsibilities. My stamina, both physical and mental, was limited and I became tired at around noon. Most of the time I felt useless and like my efforts in every aspect of my life were as futile as if I was thrashing around in a riptide.

I was still unable to write — I hadn't written anything since the previous December — and that inability was nagging at me. Writing had been my passion, an activity that had allowed me to escape the “patient identity,” and develop an identity as an individual who was not ill. Now I was ill again and proving it by sitting in front of my computer, fingers poised, but still staring endlessly at a blank screen.

I started crying at random times for seemingly no reason. Now I realize I was seized with terrifying expectations that I was going to return to that darkest place again, that place where I was unable to resist the almost command-like thoughts that had convinced me to try to take my life. The five years before the depression began had been the fullest I have ever experienced; I was advancing at work, I had a small circle of close friends, I was writing and getting published. That now distant life was better than I'm able to ever remember life being. I longed to recapture those feelings and roll around in them like when I was a child and jumped into a freshly raked pile of fallen leaves.

Therapy was difficult. When I entered into therapy with my psychiatrist almost nine years prior I had agreed to a contract. One of the tenets was that if I ever tried to kill myself, she would do everything she could to save me, then terminate the therapy. As I lay in the hospital attached to a heart monitor, remembering that long-ago promise, I told the psychiatrist on-call, that he shouldn't bother to contact her. “It's over,” I cried as I told him about the contract I had agreed to years earlier.

I was not privy to the back-and-forth conversations that ensued between the psychiatrist from the hospital unit and my outpatient psychiatrist but she agreed to see me following my discharge. She made it clear that the purpose of these trial sessions was to enter into a discussion about whether it would be prudent to continue the therapy. She and I are still working together; we recently reduced the frequency of my sessions from twice a week to once

a week, which is a good sign. There have been some question marks along the last eight months as to whether we should continue. “I don’t know if I can still help you. We might have too much history together,” she has remarked. And there have been phrases such as “I hate you” and “I must suck you dry,” that I tossed her way. But for now the therapy is working.

In mid-July I posted the first entry to my blog that I had neglected for eight months. I received several kind comments welcoming me back. It felt good to write again, to put words down one by one, to form sentences, to structure paragraphs, to craft and to create.

On August 4th — which would have been my mother’s 79th birthday — I went back to work full-time. I thought of my return as a gift to her, as a sign to her that I was healing, that I was working hard to reclaim a life that might be worth living.

September and October have crawled by without significant milestones. Each day I have gotten an inch closer, a molecule stronger. Some days I remember and think back, some days I don’t. For now I need to remember, to keep that sliver of pain alive, like a splinter that eludes the tweezers. Just a twinge to remember it’s there and to keep working to remove it. So the splinter doesn’t get pushed all the way in and cause an infection. So I don’t ever have to go back there.

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