

May 29, 2019

Age 39

Boca Raton and Pompano Beach, Florida

I had been drunk for the better part of two days when I awoke, my eyes burning and my lips almost too dry to part. There wasn't even a glass of water by my bed. It was early afternoon, twelve hours since I had last drunk, but the fog had not yet lifted. I grabbed my phone and saw that I had missed a morning call from my daughter, Liana, still back in Pennsylvania, finishing out her fourth-grade year.

I had flown back to Florida the day before, where I was supposed to be setting up our new apartment, our new lives, while Greg and the kids tied up all the loose ends of our previous existence in Pennsylvania. We had just spent the holiday weekend together at my parents' house in Connecticut, but I already missed them desperately.

I hit Call on my phone, knowing that Liana would be in school but wanting to check in with Greg, make sure he knew I was awake, alive, unharmed.

"Hello?"

"Hey, what's up?" I calmly asked, pretending that I wasn't so hungover that I hadn't even been able to lift my head up off the pillow yet, my tangled purple hair tickling the dry skin of my face.

"Working," he replied. He was always working these days. Always responsible, trustworthy, considerate. "How are you? You going to hear Juan play tonight?" He sounded distracted, slightly disengaged. I'd left him with a lot of responsibility in Pennsylvania, while I did... what, exactly?

"I think so. Should be a nice night," I said.

A sober musician friend who I had met almost two weeks prior, who had safely escorted me home when I was too drunk to walk straight, was playing a solo gig at a local golf club's patio that night. I had told Greg about it at some point yesterday, mentioned that I was planning to go.

"That's good," he said, the keyboard of his computer clicking in the background as he continued to work.

We talked for a few more minutes, catching up on what was going on with the house sale, his mom's visit to assist him with the kids, and

the final big move scheduled for the second week of June.

"I'll call you later." I yawned, stretching my back and attempting to sit up against the pillows pressed flat behind me. "I love you."

"I love you too."

Motivated by the warmth of his voice, I managed to get myself out of bed after we hung up the phone. I walked down to the kitchen and opened the fridge.

The half-empty vodka bottle stared at me from the middle shelf. I grabbed an avocado and a plum out of the produce drawers. Beer bottles clinked as I shut the stainless-steel door.

I didn't want to drink again. I didn't want to keep waking up like this. Physically ill, mentally exhausted, emotionally broken, often unsure of what trauma I had inflicted upon myself the night before.

I methodically cut up the plum, then shoved the halves into my mouth. I scooped out the avocado next and ate that without tasting it, willing it to coat my stomach and protect it from the churning acid inside. Hoping I wouldn't throw up.

Juan, the sober musician, was expecting me to come and listen to his gig in a few hours. He'd even agreed to drive me home afterward since I had told him yesterday that I planned to take an Uber there. I did not trust myself to make it through the evening sober, so there was no way I would be driving.

As the meager meal attempted to cleanse my blood, I mustered up enough energy to briefly walk outside, towards the ocean, hoping the sun and the salt air would cure me. One mile there, two miles in the sand, and then back again, where I headed straight to the shower to wash off the fermented stink seeping through my pores from the night before. I got myself dressed and checked in again with Greg, all while fighting the urge to abate my lingering headache with more alcohol.

The half of a handle of vodka in my fridge had been on my mind since I woke up, beckoning me all afternoon. I wanted nothing more than to drown myself in its blue plastic abyss. For hours, I had been delaying the inevitable. My inward fight was like a fencing match in a foggy swamp, my stance sinking, my direction wavering, my target fading from sight. I was defeated before I even stood up.

Like a salivating dog, I knew the bottle was there. I could taste the anticipatory burn in my throat. I could feel how it would stretch its fingers into my blood, warming and relaxing me, blurring the edges, softening the angles, clouding out everything but the moment I was in. One shot, two shots, half a glass more.

By the time I called for a ride, I was solidly intoxicated, ready for whatever the evening threw my way. The air was heavy and thick, typical for this time of year in South Florida. I drank it in, wishing I had brought a little something more for the fifteen-minute ride. I had taken an Uber to and from the airport a few times, but this was my first time Ubering somewhere just for fun. The street was busy, with valets moving cars around the outdoor lots and older couples dressed up for overpriced dinners ambling about. I double-checked the license plate and the car model with the information on my app and got into the idling sedan on the corner.

“Louise?” he asked. He had a heavy accent and a kind face, his extremely white teeth showing as he turned around and smiled.

“Yes,” I replied. I adjusted my top as I sat down and buckled up, checked that I had my keys, my phone, my credit card, and my license, and sank into the gray cloth cushions behind the passenger seat. I was nervous. The alcohol helped, but everything here was so new. The tropical climate, the palm trees, the lizards scurrying everywhere, like I was on the set of Jurassic Park. But the biggest difference was the people. For eleven years, I had lived in an area of rural Pennsylvania with very little diversity, where having purple hair was about as radical as it could get. I was intrigued by everything and everyone down here.

“Are you from here?” I asked, assuming that he probably wasn’t, but wanting to know his story. I was intoxicated enough to not feel inhibited as I asked him personal questions, when he probably had been hoping for a quiet, easy drive down Federal Highway.

“I’m originally from Haiti, but I have lived here for twelve years,” he kindly replied.

“Nice,” I said, not really having a follow-up. “Do you like it here? I just moved here from Pennsylvania.”

I continued to talk his ear off, telling him my life story, joking about having drunk already that night, asking him questions, and probably being completely obnoxious. But he was nice about it, generous with his responses, and overly friendly when he did not have to be. I tipped him well.

I was not the best version of myself that night, full of false confidence, precariously balancing my self-worth on an unstable plank studded with the broken shards of all of the empty bottles I had discarded in years past. Drinking had become the easy way out. Being alive, aware, and awake seemed like too steep a hill to climb, too ragged a journey, with no guarantees at the end. But currently, I was going

towards the edge of a cliff, and I needed to decide soon what choice I was going to make. I could try to stop drinking and follow an uncertain path paved with hardship, pain, experience, sanity, work, hope, and possible joy, or I could choose the easy one, the one of disengagement, dissociation, and obliteration, where the price could easily be my life.

I did not anticipate anything but more of the same when I stepped out of the rideshare car that night. But that night was my new beginning.

That night changed everything.

That night I was helped.

I was guided.

I was seen.

I was respected as a human.

And for once, I felt deserving of the attention.

I listened to live music. I ate delicious food. I sat at the beach and listened to music from a portable speaker, the sound muted by ocean waves. I cried in bursts, like passing summer showers. I felt the sand between my toes and dug in deeper. I saw the stars, guiding my way.

I felt the warm air on my body. I let the ocean engulf my legs. The night hugged me like a weighted blanket.

I sipped water from a flimsy plastic bottle, and by the time midnight came, I was sober. I was sober, and I no longer felt alone.

Maybe I could harness what I'd felt that night and face my future without blinders on. Maybe I could learn to trust and love myself again, like I did when I was a child.

When I was too innocent to know any better.

Untitled Poem

(Written March 1999, age 18)

Joy in life can be hard to find,
A touch, an embrace, a call,
One word.
The world opens up, darkness fades
As I stare into space.
A face, so strong, so true,
All I know is here with me.
My body and soul together, alive.
A fire burns bright within me.
A fire that was lit by you.

July 22, 1994

Age 14

Spin Doctors Concert

Riverside Park

Agawam, Massachusetts

The crowd pulsed like a human tsunami, arms and legs moving simultaneously, the upbeat pop/rock music energizing the mostly teenage and young adult mass of sweat and hormones. It was a humid night, the lights of the amusement park erasing most of the stars above. It smelled like skunk, like the pot my brother and his friends smoked when they thought no one was watching.

It was the summer before my freshman year of high school. Two weeks before my family embarked on an epic three-week road trip out west. I was high on life, happy, testing out my freedom as a responsible fourteen-year-old. Still innocent, but curious. Craving risk, excitement, and unexpected adventures. It was a summer of firsts. First older (slightly serious) boyfriend. First time someone touched my breasts. First time learning to avoid swimming while having my period. First time alone with friends at a big concert.

First sexual assault.

Not the unexpected adventure I had been seeking.

I could just gloss over this incident and say that I was touched inappropriately. So many fourteen-year-olds endure much worse. But this is my story, and the shame and agony that I felt that day was life-changing for me, so much so that I blocked it from my memory from the moment it happened until decades later when I was at another concert, as an adult, and remembered in a sickening flashback everything that I had felt.

Like I was back in that moment, an innocent fourteen-year-old.

Fourteen years and eighty-one days old.

I was crowd-surfing, that ridiculous thing young people do at concerts like this when your friends hoist you up to be carried and passed along on your back until you are either let down nicely or you literally fall if people don't see you coming and no longer reach their hands out to hold you up. I used to think it was amazing—almost like flying, but bumpy. I was clueless. I was naive. I was fourteen.

I could feel people's hands all over my legs, my arms, the back of

my baggy t-shirt. My red-and-gray plaid converse sneakers were bobbing up and down, barely avoiding people's faces. I tried to keep my head up, my neck straining as I tried to control my lanky body as best I could, to see how far I had traveled from where my friends, my brother, and his friends were. I could feel the music, hear my own voice yelling with excitement, when a hand grabbed my inner thigh with unnecessary force, slowing my momentum. Then another hand reached up into the leg of my cut off jean shorts, stuck a hand through the side of my cotton underwear, and fingered its way up into my vagina. I have no idea how the assailant was able to do that so quickly and efficiently, or what motivated such disrespect. He probably laughed about it afterwards, bragging to his drunk friends that he had pussy grabbed some tall skinny girl. It probably wasn't his first time.

But it was the last time that I ever crowd-surfed.

I never told anyone what happened. I couldn't process it myself. I didn't want to talk or think about it ever again. I was fourteen, and I had never been touched like that before. I had woken up a carefree child, and someone I will never be able to identify stole that from me in a split second.

I will never know if it was a stoned sixteen-year-old, thoughtless and dumb, or a forty-five-year-old experienced sexual predator who saw a vulnerable young girl who "had it coming." What I actually had coming was the hardest year of my life to date. My issues may not have manifested immediately, but the seed was planted at that moment. One brazen act of cruelty and my innocence, my sense of safety in this world was gone. My body disgusted me.

Dirty. Ashamed.

One Moment.

I was fourteen.



August 1994, age 14

Never Yours to Take

(Written July 6, 2020, age 40)

Sticky sweet
An itch you cannot scratch
The water rises
Sun scorched knuckles grasp

The salient spark
Out beyond the wake
Sodden, sunken
It was never yours to take

Honey colored shells
Hide gills gasping for home
Walk past, glance up
Dissolved beneath a feather of foam

Come float with me
Weightless and undone
I will not let you sink
Our tide has yet to come

April 22, 2019
Age 39
Southeast Florida

Tears streamed down my face as I pulled away from the curb at the airport, watching in the rear-view mirror as my family entered the air-conditioned building. My trusting and cautiously optimistic husband, my sullen fourteen-year-old son who still wouldn't accept that we were moving over 1200 miles away, and my sweet ten-year-old daughter who was simply sad that her mom was leaving for almost two months. How could I have explained that I needed to leave and move to tropical Florida alone, in order to save my own life? How could I have explained anything truthfully when I didn't even trust myself to make this work?

I tried to focus on my breathing, adjusting the radio as I merged into the exit lane, following the signs for I95 north.

Everything was new in Florida. I didn't even know what radio stations would play my favorite music. I fiddled with the dial until I found a song that sounded familiar. I had no idea what it was, but it worked. The tears were inevitable, but then came the sobs, and finally my entire body was shaking, convulsing as I gripped the wheel and squinted towards the road ahead. I took a few deep breaths and snapped out of it, quick enough to prevent crashing my SUV the first time that I drove alone in my new home state.

Looking up at the cloudless blue sky, I tried to feel happy and hopeful. But the emptiness combined with the weight of self-hatred and guilt tore at my soul. It would be two weeks until I saw my favorite person in the world again, when Greg was due to visit, and over a month before I'd get to hug the two precious people I brought into this world. The people who I was fighting to stay alive for.

Unable to process the multitude of possibilities that the next few weeks could offer, I resorted to my usual course of self-destructive medication. The easy path. To numb. To hide. To blur the raw edges caused by too many emotions running wild in my brain. I knew that I was not going to go back to my beautiful new apartment and grab my bathing suit and head to the beach (the reason I have wanted to live somewhere like this for so long), or even buckle down and clean up the last of the mess from the moving in process. No. That would be

responsible. That would be what is expected of a good wife and mother. A good woman.

Instead, I consciously chose to drive directly to a discount liquor store. The first stop on my solo journey of self-discovery, rest, and reflection, was to purchase two handles of vodka (There is a deal if you buy two!)

Pushing every feeling of guilt and loneliness aside, I carried the inconspicuous plastic bag up to my apartment and placed them in the oddly empty fridge. After all, I wouldn't have to feed anyone but myself in the weeks to come, so there was plenty of space for the two large blue plastic bottles of mind-numbing legal poison.

All of which would be consumed before the end of my first week alone.



Zachary, me, and Liana, Boca Raton, FL, April 21, 2019

Untitled Poem

(Written December 1998, age 18)

Crazed blood pounding through my veins,
Heart beating, about to explode.
Spinning and turning, alone in the dark,
The breath of life hot and dense.
Fire inside, burning so strong,
Ranting and raging, my soul in the blaze,
Yearning for a place to feel safe.
I curl up and stay inside.

February 8, 1995

Age 14

Windsor, Connecticut

“I still weigh 120 pounds,” I lied.

The doctor’s office was the same one I had been to since I was a baby. Yearly physicals, vaccinations, chicken pox... the same harsh lighting, orange carpet, antiseptic smell.

“You weigh 108 pounds.” At almost 6 feet tall, the diagnosis I knew was coming, was confirmed.

“You have anorexia,” Dr. Li said, looking at me, while I sat there staring at my feet, rubbing my socked toes together, trying to settle my nerves. I had wanted people to notice that I was emaciated. But now I just wanted to be left alone. I couldn’t bear to look at my mom for more than a second.

Her face was white with horror, shock, and disbelief. Part of her had to have known, had to have considered this possibility. But like most parents, she had wanted to believe her daughter. Her daughter, who just a few months prior, had been a thin, but strong teenager. A healthy 125 pounds.

I remember thinking that the number seemed too high. I was 105 on the scale at home.

Anorexia is the deadliest of all mental illnesses, with a significantly higher mortality rate than any other psychiatric diagnosis. And my case was severe. My family’s perfect world had come crashing down.

And it was my fault.

It was my fault that I was slowly choosing to starve myself to death. I was fourteen.



My brother Matthew and me
Late Fall 1994, age 14



February 1995, age 14

Weighted

(Written June 3, 2021, age 41)

Heaviness held
No whispers seep
Where worries dare not weep
Words written
Below fallen skies
Where eyes look inward
And apologize
Disguise discarded
Deceptions disallowed
As clouded shallows
Swallow the sound
Of secrets still
Too heavy
To be found

Fall 1994
Age 14
Windsor, Connecticut

Turkey sandwich. Bag of grapes. Brown lunch bag... Into the garbage can.

Chew gum. Drink Diet Coke... Feel nothing but hunger pains. So simple to just not eat.

Shrink.

Silence.

Why can't anyone hear me screaming from the inside?

He grabs my hand firmly under the blanket and places it where I don't want to touch. I don't like this. I don't want to do this.

I don't know how to say "NO."

He thinks it's a game. But it's not fun. I'm not ready.

Carpet rubs into my back. I look up at the ceiling of his closet. Why am I here? My body is betraying me. *Dark Side of the Moon* pulses in my ears. My pants are around my ankles, his mouth between my legs. One tear. Half a smile. Numb.

"Uncomfortably numb."

I still cannot listen to Pink Floyd without feeling exposed and scared.

In the basement, on the couch. Fully clothed, which is a relief. But I am out of control. My brain is terrified, ashamed, guilty. Disgusted. But my body can't stop. How can something so physically pleasurable make me feel such terror?

I want to disappear.

I want this defiled body that has betrayed me, confused my sense of self to just disappear. I want to make it suffer.

I was only fourteen.



Late Fall 1994, age 14

April 29, 2019

Age 39

Boca Raton, Florida

“Ladies Eat Free!” I had been alone in Florida for a week now, my thirty-ninth birthday fast approaching. So far, I had gone to the beach, the grocery store, Target, the liquor store (twice), ordered food in and walked a lot. I got nervous going out to eat alone, feeling as if I was taking up space that was meant for people who actually had someone to eat with. But I could drink alone. I was actually really good at drinking alone. Although it was more like chugging and gagging, and then chugging some more until my limbs started to feel tingly, my brain a bit fuzzy, and my insides warm. No matter the day, no matter the time, no matter whether I drank myself senseless eighteen hours before or hadn’t had a drink in two days, that first extra-large shot of vodka always hit a nerve. It was as if an obnoxious ringing in my ears, a loud note out of tune, a scream muffled by layers of denial... were all silenced. My mind was finally quiet. Calm. Peace. Warmth. Oblivion.

Even though I hadn’t gone out to eat anywhere besides a sports bar where I ordered food two days ago and then barely touched it, I had most of the local restaurant menus memorized. I knew the places I wanted to try, the places that were way too expensive, the ones that I couldn’t wait to bring my kids. And the one where I planned to try tonight, where if I sat at the bar, like easy prey for wolves, I would get a free small plate of food. Granted if I had a group of girlfriends, or even one close girlfriend here in Florida to go with, maybe it would have been fun.

But I didn’t. And I was a drunk. I wouldn’t have even wanted to hang out with me in that condition. I hated who I was, and when I was drunk, I was unknowable. Maybe that’s why I kept drinking. So I didn’t remember who I was, what I’d done, what I was continuing to do to myself.

The restaurant was crowded, groups of older women mostly, standing around the small bar area, chatting in their designer clothes. I had missed dressing up when living in Pennsylvania, but this was to another extreme. I actually pitied most of the women, because it looked like it took a considerable part of their daily routine to get their hair and makeup just so. I was confident in my crazy half shaved hairstyle, my

minimal use of eye makeup, and the vintage combat boots I wore everywhere. I didn't have the desire or the time to sit at a salon for hours every week getting my hair and nails done.

I ordered a glass of red wine and the free penne pasta meal advertised to draw women in, to lure men in after. I sat there picking at my food, as innocent as a baby bunny before the hawk swooped down.

In his defense, he was mostly a gentleman. A flirty, as old as my dad, slightly inebriated gentleman. A former Assistant District Attorney for the state of Maryland. Or maybe it was Delaware. Either way, he flattered me, complimented me, distracted me enough that I barely ate my free plate of delicious pasta and probably downed another 5 or 6 drinks in the course of one or two hours, all paid for by him.

I had arrived at the bar intoxicated, so by the time I left, with him still hovering, I had to force myself to remain coherent, guarded, and direct. I didn't need an escort back to my building across the parking lot, but he insisted, kindly continuing to compliment me the whole way back.

"Your husband is a lucky man!" He said as we parted ways at the apartment building door.

He gave me his card, but I tossed it in the garbage before entering the elevator. Another night spent wasted, wasting time on people who will likely never give me a second thought, and could have easily done me harm.



Red Reef Park, Boca Raton, FL, April 29, 2019

April 11, 1994

Age 13

Windsor, Connecticut

The letters K-U-R-T written in black eyeliner across my forehead.

For once, I didn't care what anyone else thought of me. The previous Friday, April 8th (now my wedding anniversary), my favorite musician, Kurt Cobain, had been found dead. A week later, I walked a mile into the center of town after school and held a little ceremony for him down by the railroad tracks, complete with music, incense, and tears. I was consumed by my own thoughts, legitimately mourning someone I had never met. The creator of the music that would go on to become the soundtrack of my teenage life was dead. I stood out already, being 5'10" and not quite fourteen years old. I was a giant. I hated being tall. I felt uncomfortable in my own skin. But today? Today I didn't actually care.

I knew on this day that life is more complicated than I had thought. Everyone is suffering. Life is messy. You can have what seems like everything, and still feel unworthy, worthless, and unloved.

Sometimes the demons prove to be too strong in the end.



Daily journal I kept at the time of Kurt Cobain's death

Legacy

(Written August 20, 2020, age 40)

Cast your net out wide
And leave room for chance
Find your footing in the sand
Arms out, hold your stance

Hard won battles can still succumb
When wounds scar too deep
Batten down what's next to come
Don't let daydreams sleep

If all you have is one more day
What edges will you shape?
What words will stay upon the page
When daylight fails to break?

January 1995
Age 14
Windsor, Connecticut

Alarm goes off at 4:45 a.m. 250 sit-ups before I even leave my room: My toes tucked up under the dresser attached to my desk, my spine digging into the hardwood floor beneath the old, braided rug. Slip downstairs to pour cereal and dump it down the drain. Leave the bowl in the sink as evidence that I ate. Feed the cat, because at least one of us should have a real meal.

I could control what I ate. I could simplify that down to such a point that it would take the focus off of everything else. I could make that perfect. One cup of cereal. Three slices of bread. Two apples. That I could do. I still have a diary from my freshman year of high school, and besides the one or two sentences about what I did that day, all I wrote down was what I ate. Most fourteen-year-old girls would be writing about their friends, their boyfriends, their hopes, dreams, fears... I couldn't face any of that. So I wrote down lists of food and calories. It was simple. It was what I could handle.

Air-popped popcorn. Apples instead of a meal. Diet Coke, black coffee, gum. Filling myself with emptiness. I was a skeleton with a lot of air in my stomach. And the more I focused on my tiny, bloated belly, the less I wanted to eat.

Numb. I wanted to feel nothing. Silence. Invisibility. Do I matter? Have I ever said anything that means anything? A mile a minute, and then... nothing.

It was like there was another voice inside my head telling me what to do, drowning out everything else I might have been thinking and doing. Future therapists would refer to the eating disorder (ED) voice as "Ed," which actually helped: to think of it as something separate from me. Something I could fight and defeat. But at this point in my life, that voice was winning and killing me slowly in the process. I was disappearing in front of the people who loved me. I remember looking at books in the high school library about eating disorders, self-diagnosing myself before a doctor ever did. Of course, I never felt like I qualified. I wasn't that bad, was I?

The rush of secrecy had already found its home. The addict's brain was wired and ready for the next thrill. I had duped my parents for

months. I had been in control of something. My mind was calm while counting calories. I didn't have time to think about the friends who hadn't called me back or had better friends on the softball team or could eat food without thinking about the size of their arms. If I kept things simple: carrot sticks, All-Bran cereal (measured in a 1/3 cup), unsalted pretzels, apples... if I made myself smaller, everything would be OK.

I had missed my period. I was dizzy all the time. I even passed out after standing up too fast and hit my head on the back of my parents' bed, resulting in stitches and a small scar where hair no longer grows.

My body was shutting down. I was seriously ill... but I was lucky. My parents and my doctor intervened, held fast for years, and gave me a future. They gave me the choice to live.



February 1995, age 14

Reflections

(Written June 20, 2019, age 39)

Sit-ups in the dark,
Alone before dawn,
No muscles left to see.
Paying a college friend to buy booze,
Peach schnapps, Cloying.
Expensive scotch, shots poured into a paper bathroom cup.
Food flushed away, out of sight.
Chew and spit, calories unswallowed.
Toss it in the garbage,
My body disgusts me.
Age 14. Age 22. Age 39.
Vodka hidden in a cupboard. In a sock. In a sleeping bag.
The thrill. The chase. The secrets,
Being eaten from within with regret.
Going to the liquor store and hoping no one sees you.
The things you cannot change.