

DON'T LET
SUICIDE
KILL YOU

9 STORIES OF SURVIVAL AND RECOVERY

STORY CIRCLE PROJECT

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Contents

4	INTRODUCTION
6	SERVICES AND SUPPORT
8	SUICIDE INTERVENTION GUIDE
11	9 STORIES OF SURVIVAL AND RECOVERY
13	POSTCARDS FROM HOME by MAGGIE W
18	RAISE YOUR SPIRITS HIGH OVER CANNON FIRE by FRANCIS ALIZAARD
23	THE CRITIC by GEOFF CROUCH
25	THE BREAKUP by M.E. MOORE
30	THE GREAT DEPRESSION by GEOFF CROUCH
31	MY STORY by MELANIE WILLIAMS
34	TINS CANS AND STRING by GEOFF CROUCH
35	THE PROJECT OF MY LIVING by ANONYMOUS
42	I WOKE UP THIS MORNING by GEOFF CROUCH
43	HOLDING HANDS WITH MY DARK PASSENGER by PREMA RA
49	NO WINGS by GEOFF CROUCH
50	THE GAP by MAXIM HAIM
54	BOWMAN KNIGHTS by MAXIM HAIM
55	WEAVING WITH WORDS by GEOFF CROUCH
56	DARK ANGEL by ROB
60	THE BALL AND THE BATTLE by GEOFF CROUCH
61	HOW I LOOK AFTER MYSELF
66	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
67	BOOK FEEDBACK

Six of these stories are available as podcasts at www.anchor.fm/storycircleproject

This book does not contain graphic descriptions of suicide attempts or traumatic events. However, it does contain themes of child abuse. If reading any of these stories causes you distress and you need support, please call the Blue Knot Helpline on 1300 657 380 (9am-5pm, 7 days).

This book also describes mental illness and suicidal ideation. If you need support with any issues this book raises for you, please call one of the helplines on page 6.

If you, or someone you know, is in crisis and needs immediate help, please call one of the crisis lines listed on page 6 or 000 if life is in danger.

Introduction

Early last year, I sat around a long table in a meeting of the newly-formed Lismore Suicide Prevention Steering Committee (LSPSC). There were about 20 of us, each with some sort of expertise in suicide prevention. We were talking about statistics, about target groups and gaps in services, and while all of those things are important for improving suicide prevention, I felt something missing in the conversation. Every person in the room was a caring professional, passionate about suicide prevention. So why did I still find it so hard to say, 'I've been suicidal myself, actually. That's why *I'm* here. That's the expertise *I* bring'.

This is when I realised how strong the taboo and stigma about suicide still is. If we had come together to talk about improving services for heart patients, I doubt I would have felt apprehensive about admitting to a heart condition. And if I couldn't own up to my own suicidal history in that setting, where on earth could I?

Feeling suicidal does not mean you are weak, or incompetent, or selfish, or attention-seeking, or strange, or diseased, or even living with a mental illness, yet many of us feel judged in these ways - by ourselves or others - and we tuck it away from public view. Feeling suicidal means that you are in extreme distress - unbearable distress - such that ending your life seems like the best or the only option. The causes of this overwhelming distress are varied: common themes are unbearable psychological pain; a sense of isolation; feeling trapped and hopeless; and feeling like a burden to others. For some, this experience lasts just a few moments; for others, it lasts weeks, months or even years.

Isn't that something we should know about each other? Wouldn't we want to ask why there was, or is, so much pain? Wouldn't we want to care for that pain? We have probably all experienced the comfort and relief of sharing a problem with an understanding friend. So why do so many of us feel we can't share with others one of the most distressing experiences we have ever had? Why do we feel this will elicit judgement, rather than care?

In the meeting, I forced myself to own up. I suggested that in addition to services for at-risk groups, there could be a place for building community understanding of why people feel suicidal. I wondered whether people who have recovered from a suicidal crisis might like to write their stories and publish them. However, I knew, from experience, that writing about extremely painful experiences, while potentially therapeutic, can be extremely distressing and lonely. So, I proposed that a group would be the best forum, where the writers could share their experiences and their writing with others who could understand.

I am very grateful that the committee embraced the idea, and that Niall Mulligan from Lifeline generously helped me to develop the idea and gain seed funding. This enabled me to recruit an exceptional team: Peter

Chown, a psychologist with 30 years' experience, and Playback theatre actor; and Sarah Armstrong and Jesse Blackadder, both award-winning authors. Each of these professionals brought their expertise, skill, heart and humanity to the project, and together we developed an eight-week, supported writing program.

It is now almost two years since that first LSPSC meeting, and Story Circle Project has been supported by innumerable people and organisations along the way. We give a fuller account in Acknowledgements.

Here, I would like to thank the nine, wonderful people who trusted us enough to participate in our new, experimental program. Their open sharing, from the very first day, created an intimate group connection. Our afternoons together were filled with gentle care, careful listening, insight, creativity, humour and fun! And we all loved listening to the beautiful stories. Even when the stories were heartbreaking or raw, it felt heart-warming and inspiring to hear them read aloud to an attentive audience. Each week, we left the group with our hearts full.

The stories in this book are stories of hope and recovery. None of them contain graphic descriptions of suicide attempts or traumatic events. Rather, they explore - each in remarkably different ways - the impact of these events on the author, and how they got through the toughest of times.

So, come now, and join our Story Circle. Make yourself a cup of tea, find a comfy seat, and listen to these tales of wisdom, courage, compassion, kindness, insight and humanity.

Then take a moment to think about the people you know. There are more than 3,000 suicides each year in Australia. There are also an estimated 65,000 suicide attempts each year, and 1,250,000 people who have thoughts of suicide every year. That translates to one in twenty people who have felt suicidal. Given that, it is likely you know one of these people, yet because of the stigma, they may not be reaching out. Who might they be? Could you reach out to them?

And if you, right now, are in crisis or feel suicidal, we hope these stories help you to feel not quite so alone, and not quite so hopeless. Each person's story is different, yet there are common threads, common experiences. Please reach out to someone who can help. If no one you know is available, the crisis lines listed on the next page are always available. Real, caring people will answer the phone and help you.

No matter how distressing things feel right now, they will change. Recovery is possible, with support.

Heather Ellemor-Collins BNat, Grad Cert (EvBasedCM)
Naturopath, mother, peer-support worker and chorister

Services and Supports

If you or someone you know is distressed, suicidal, or bereaved by suicide, the following free services are there to help.

Urgent help

000 (voice) 106 (text)

www.triplezero.gov.au

If life is in danger or for urgent medical intervention.

Lifeline 13 11 14

www.lifeline.org.au

24-hour telephone and online chat crisis support and suicide intervention.

1800Respect (1800 7377 328)

24-hour support for sexual assault and domestic violence victims.

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467

www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

24-hour telephone and online counselling for anyone affected by suicide.

Specialists in suicide prevention.

Mental Health Line 1800 011 511 (NSW)

To access local acute care crisis service.

Phone counselling

Mensline Australia 1300 789 978

mensline.org.au

24-hour telephone & online counselling for men.

Kids Helpline 1800 551 800

www.kidshelpline.com.au

Confidential 24-hour telephone and online counselling for 5 to 25 year olds.

Beyondblue 1300 224 636

www.beyondblue.org.au

24-hour telephone support and online chat service with links to local services.

SANE Australia 1800 187 263

www.sane.org

Talk to a mental health professional 10am-10pm.

Blue Knot Helpline 1300 657 380

9am-5pm, 7 days, phone counselling for victims of child abuse and trauma, and their helpers.

QLife 1800 184 527

qlife.org.au

Phone & online chat service for LGBTIQ community.

Open Arms 1800 011 046

www.vvcs.gov.au

Veterans & families counselling (formerly VVCS) 24-hour telephone counselling & crisis support.

Thirrili 1800 805 501

thirrili.com.au

Support for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people affected by suicide.

Mental health apps/ e-mental health courses and resources

Headspace & e-headspace

www.eheadspace.org.au www.headspace.org.au

Online counselling for young people 12 to 25 years.

eCentreClinic

www.ecentreclinic.org

Free online courses for mental health problems via participation in clinical trials, which run throughout the year.

MindSpot

www.mindspot.org.au

Easily accessible courses for people who need some skills to manage symptoms of anxiety, PTSD and depression.

Moodgym

www.moodgym.com

Interactive self-help for anxiety & depression.

Mindhealthconnect

www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

Website aggregates mental health resources and content from the leading health organisations.

MyCompass

www.mycompass.org.au

A personalised self-help tool for mental health.

Snapshot

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/getting-help/self-help-tools-apps/snapshot

Mobile app designed by the Black Dog Institute to self-manage anxiety & depression.

Reach out

www.au.reachout.com

Apps and resources for young people.

Suicide Intervention - Help is Available

Thoughts of suicide can leave us feeling hopeless and isolated. This can also be true if we are caring for or concerned about someone else in this situation. However, there are effective techniques for supporting someone at risk of suicide and helping them to stay safe. There is also more help available than we often realise, much of it free and easily accessible.

The following brief suicide intervention guidelines will give you some tips for supporting someone at risk of suicide, so they can stay safe and get help. The Services and Supports page also provides a basic list of free telephone and online resources. If you are feeling unsure of how to proceed, then contact one of the phone/chat options listed. This will connect you to a trained practitioner. They can provide immediate emotional support for you, as well as guidance on how to keep yourself or someone else safe.

If you are acutely concerned for your own or someone else's immediate safety, then ring 000 straight away. Suicide is a life-threatening situation, and 000 will respond accordingly.



Suicide Intervention Guidelines

The following suicide intervention guidelines are from Sane Australia, at www.sane.org

If you believe someone is thinking about ending their life, it's natural to feel panic or even want to avoid thinking about it. However, there are a number of practical things you can do to help.

Let them know you are concerned.

Tell them that you are concerned, and that you are there to help.

Ask if they are thinking about suicide and if they have made any plans.

Talking about suicide will not make them take action. Asking shows that you care and allows them to talk about their feelings and plans – the first step to getting help.

Take action to get help now.

Tell them that there are other options than suicide.
Don't agree to keep their suicidal thoughts or plans a secret.
Don't assume they will get better without help or that they will seek help on their own.

Encourage them to get professional help.

Make an appointment with a GP and offer for someone to go along with them.
Contact a counsellor or employee assistance program, family member or friend.
Contact a specialist helpline for information and advice – they're listed on the previous page.

If they have made a plan to end their life.

Check if they are able to carry out this plan. Do they have a time, place or method?
Remove access to objects they could use to hurt themselves.
Contact the psychiatric emergency team at your local hospital.
Call 000. Tell them the person is suicidal, has made a plan, and you fear for their safety.

Take care of yourself.

It is emotionally demanding to support someone who is suicidal. Find someone to talk things over with, like your family, friends or a helpline.

An aerial photograph of a wetland or marsh area. The landscape is a mosaic of vibrant green and blue vegetation, interspersed with irregular, brownish-tan patches that represent water bodies or mudflats. The overall texture is highly detailed and organic.

9 STORIES OF SURVIVAL AND RECOVERY

Biography Maggie W

I live a quiet, 'try-to' sustainable life in the Northern Rivers, raising three amazing teenage children. Ours is a multicultural family: I grew up in Texas before meeting my husband and moving to Australia 20+ years ago, and our children are all adopted from the Philippines.

I grew up in a home where both my parents physically and sexually abused me and had me involved in a paedophile ring. I suppressed all of this until much later in life, eventually receiving a diagnosis of PTSD. I remain in therapy, coming to terms with the ramifications of my childhood on many aspects of my life. But it is my faith, friends and creative outlets (like writing!) that help keep me balanced and assured of my value and worth.

Postcards From Home

by Maggie W

I live my life in postcards. A fragmented existence, caught in windows of time.

A postcard can say so much. It captures a finite moment or place. Location and purpose unmistakably defined by the picture or illustration on the cover. The recipient of the postcard is clearly identified. The message, usually short and pithy, engages the reader with disjointed phrases that reference the image on the front. Even the stamp on the postcard says *I have paid for you to know this ... I chose for you to receive this.*

My existence mirrors those postcards. Measured in disjointed non-linear experiences that make no sense, in a reality that is only known to those very few who are intimate with my soul. Experiences that have been distilled down to postcard-type reflections of a childhood hidden from view.

My shattered mind created girls that lived and experienced realities that any normal child could not withstand. Even today, many of them continue to relive the hell that they were thrust into, stuck in cycles, unable to recognise that they are no longer trapped, unable to be free from the horrors they lived through. Some of them have grown to adulthood, existing in my world with varying shades of influence. Some sit like a conscience on my shoulder, others criticising every action I take, mystified at how I choose to live my life each day. Some are simply so angry and untrusting that it colours any ability to have meaningful relationships.

These postcards I share here are glimpses into experiences from my childhood, now locked in my psyche. And they explain how 'we' are affected by these experiences today – both good and bad. From the brief picture or image in my head, to how it is communicated, and especially the emotional price tag associated with that... they are all parts of the fragmented postcard experience of my life.



Postcard #1

CARTE POSTALE

*Dearest Mommy,
I love you so much
Do you love me?*

For one brief moment each year, she watched her mother become awe-inspiring. As a child she was sure that it had something to do with the magic of Christmas.

Christmas was always splendid ... but it couldn't hold a candle to the amazing experience of a Twelfth Night Party, celebrating the end of the Festive Season. And in her parents' home, that meant a grand event.

For weeks before, her mother could be heard humming away and working in the kitchen. Fastidiously making traditional mince pies and sausage rolls, cheese balls, sherry trifles and other amazing concoctions.

She would peek over the counter with childish wonderment, watching the miracle of pastry roll out before her eyes.

'Oh, it's just an excuse to extend the Christmas Season ... such a magical time of year,' her mother would say, smiling and happy, apron covered in patches of flour.

As a girl, she knew that she was not pretty, and yet desperately wanted to be. So it was mesmerising watching her mother transform into Queen of the Realm. Hot rollers in short hair, which became a stunning mass of curls. The make-up, of course, perfect, the dress breath-taking. A new creation each year from her mother's favourite dressmaker. Never overstated and always elegant.

In those moments, she thought she had the most beautiful mother in the universe.

The cornucopia of food was extraordinary. Sweets, savories and so many interesting foods... and always more than was needed. 'Excess is important,' her mother would say as she arranged the food on the tables. 'It makes people feel comfortable and welcome.' Then with an uncustomary gentle touch on the child's back, 'Now scoot. There will be plenty for you later.'

Friends came from near and far, the draw being as much the novelty of a European ritual celebrated in Central Texas as the vast array of food and drink. Her mother was an amazing hostess. A goddess really, floating amongst her devotees, laughing and engaging with everyone, making sure that each one felt like they were the centre of her world.

For those few weeks during the Christmas Season she believed that maybe her mother loved her.

Postcard #2

*If I tell you my
story, will you
believe me?*

Long tangled brown hair
like a dark halo on her pale skin.
She is young. Too young.
Younger than she should be,
standing in a dark hallway, trembling ...
I have been here before.

Her chubby body stands firm. Toes curling into the shag pile carpet under her feet,
heart pounding in her chest like the beat of a drum.
Rigid and resistant is her posture, pulling back ever so slightly
from the hand that takes hers.
With a quiet, sideways glance, she dares to look...
hands that should be gentle and loving are wrinkled and gnarled.
His skin ... the feeling of sandpaper as she pulls back from his touch.
One step back – then another.
She has to fight, even though she knows it will be of no use.
Stumble, and again ...
always again, as he extends his arm and drags her down the hallway.
She focuses on her dress, full of holes, old and worn.
If I count the holes will that help me not be afraid?
Her legs lock, another stumble – she picks herself up.
Always a need to fight, always a hope that it might be different.
Finally she is dragged, the carpet that was soft under her toes
abrasive on her face.
Another stumble, pitch forward. The hallway seems so long.
Get your act together brat. Do what you are told.

So now, compliance.
It's easier that way.
And maybe – just maybe, that will be enough ... this time.
She steps in resignation down the hallway,
wondering for a brief moment if her mommy and daddy
will ever love and rescue her.
She dreams that compliance will bring her happiness.
But in her shattered heart,
she knows it never has and never will.

Postcard #3

CARTE POSTALE

*This is for you,
I know the places you have
been and I understand.*

It can be said that to gain a proper perspective on what you are looking at, you must first look at what it is not. So, to begin with

Anti-hope acknowledges that the dark, bottomless pit is,
in fact, real.

It allows you to touch that place of pain and despair in an intimate way.

It says that there is nothing worth striving for, nothing worth achieving.

Anti-hope is, logically, the absence of hope.

A void that consumes everything in its path.

It makes sense to those of us who understand what anti-hope is.

It embodies a sublime and almost serene beauty.

It is a view into the abyss that in its own way is extra-ordinarily comfortable ...
in an anti-hope sort of way.

So ... own it as your own.

Appreciate the clarity it brings to your life.

The flavour it offers to everything that your senses touch.

Acknowledge its ability to refine and hone your perspective.

Sit with it and feel the companionship of empty resignation,

trusting that it is the one thing that will be true to you in the end.

It is only with this mindset that you can understand what hope truly is.

The irony being of course that you must embrace the oblivion
of anti-hope to know hope.

And above all, remember and recognise that this place will not kill you.

Then, and only then, when the warmth and familiarity of what

your darkness means to you is worn like a warm winter coat,

can you start to understand what hope is.

-- dedicated to my Story Circle writing buddies

Postcard #4

It's time we talked.
There are things that need to be said.

If I am honest ... sometimes you frustrate me.
Your ability to get inside my head,
speaking half-truths that protect you but hang me out to dry,
controlling my moments and life, it drives me crazy.

So to begin with, because starting fresh is never a bad thing,
I am compelled to say *thank you*.
Thank you for quite literally saving my life ...
You took on your fragile child-sized shoulders
experiences and pain meant to be mine.
Day after day, year after year,
your hearts were shattered, wrecked and ruined ... for me.
You hid my soul away in regions unknown, protecting me in the shadows.

I would like to say that I am stronger today than yesterday.
Maybe not by much, these are not things that can be measured in quantifiable ways,
but rather by a condition of the heart.
I want to assure you that this thing called healing can exist.
Not just for me, but for you as well.
I say with absolute confidence that you won't agree.
How could you, when you know that the predictability
of status quo both works and keeps us safe?

But I will dare to say that I know things can be different.
I see that difference in my own children.
Their tenacity and ability to grasp at life with both hands,
head on and at full speed, reflecting to me the things you never had –
a belief in their value and worth.
When I look at my children I am assured that life can be better.
My children, with their own issues, their own stories ...
and yet in spite of all of that,
they still love, laugh and engage this world with eyes of wonder.
That is the life that you should have had.

I suppose at the end of it all and the end of the day,
I am asking, perhaps with your permission, to simply have hope.

To: All of you
It's time to
move on

RAISE YOUR SPIRIT HIGH OVER CANNON FIRE

BY FRANCES ALIZAARD

She first spoke with Death on a tired day when all the colours of the people, the walls and the chairs turned an airless grey. The three-year old knew it was time to go home.

'I want to go back,' she pleaded with the colourful people in the colourful place that no one else could see.

'I will help you,' said the fork, as she poked it into the electric socket.

'No!' said the socket. 'You can't get away... turn back to your trap.'

The round, child body fell lightly onto Big Mama Earth's belly. Gasping through the tight squeeze on her heart, her lips shook and long tears streaked trails down her dusty, puffed cheeks.

The tears of salt from the sea within her fell on crisped yellow stalks sticking out of the parched earth.

More tears fell and the yellow grass stubble grew slightly greener. The tiniest circle of mud appeared. Then the first thirsty ant came in great, gloating delight. The joyful ant stamped the directions into the ground with a tip and a tappet-tee-tap, six feet at a time, a tango of glee, a song of delight that every ant knew in this long drawn-out, fraught-out drought.

Soon there were songs and the tiny step rhythm patterns of ants who'd come from far and wide for a drink and a chant. 'This tiny ant come running, run-run-running to the wet earththth, where tears fallllllll, in a salty rain, sooth sooth soothing awayyyyy... heart pain, heart chain, heart painnn....ooohh aahh ooh ahhhh a ahhh ooohh.'

This sigh song sang, sweet as a temple bell, through the emptied room of the little girl's brain. 'How wonderful, ahhhhh.' She thanked them and rolled over to face the clouds in sky that swirled in tingles of joy to her eye.

Infinity expanding her little self across oceans of time... the space inside her stretching from star to ground through to centre Earth.... gorgeous, wise Mama Earth had the girl in her hug. Mama Earth hummed, 'We are made of love from the black womb into bright light. Back and forth we go, black, white, black, white, with myriad colours in between. Wait till you are 18...then go make your own fabulous free life.'

She was crushed in a vice of fear, of pain, of secret shames. Secrets that if even a wisp were to escape, the world would crash. Fire in every room and valley. Mountains of lava bubbling, boiling red, orange, purple, grey, screams of terror and pain from the beings of flesh.

She wanted help! but couldn't find anyone who could read her blank face or trail of school detentions. WHO COULD SHE ASK? WHO COULD SHE TELL? The world was split. Them who would be hurt and those that would cause more hurt if they knew.

The sharp burn from the bite of her own teeth sealed her lips shut. Trapped inside, the secrets burned like chilli pepper, swelling red her throat and tongue. Her nose bled twice a day.

'You could lose a lot more than you can possibly imagine!' the usually calm inner voice sounded alarmed.

'I know, I know,' the teenage girl's desperate heart responded.

The last frayed thread of resolve – to wait till she turned 18 – tore away, setting into action the arm, hand, mouth... Done. All the tablets except one, just in case she lived and had a migraine.

'Hi there,' said the mother holding her young child close. The teenager smiling at her across the waiting room did not answer. Seconds went by. A minute. Half a minute more. Like the other people who sat in the waiting room that day, the mother's face changed from warmth to fear. The teen still smiled, the same long... still... smile. From 10 that morning, when she had been brought in, the static smile on the paralysed body lasted all day, until a little after 5pm. Then the smile melted, as the watching spirit sank back down from the ceiling, into her body. Unheard by humans, a deafening wave of screaming fear-pain-anguish dumped its full force through her body-mind, as feeling returned. But some number, logic, memory and word pathways remained stilled. Her brain function had changed.

'No, she did not know how much she could lose. She is still alive.'

'Stay focused, we are here to help you,' the kind familiar voice - an ancient presence inside her skull- spoke, causing a warm rush of trust to flow up though her feet. 'You are not alone,' the voice said. 'It is all seen, beloved child.'

'But why?' she moaned.

'You will know. You are love, love carving through thick steely deception. Learn from the flowers, animals, clouds...'

Then it all went blank. It was all forgotten. Only an irritating noise, playing constantly

in the back of her head, remained.

All the eyes in her body switched off that day, except two.

Two eyes were enough, to bungle through.

'Death, can you hear me? Are you there? I WANT TO GO HOME.'

'Yes, I can hear you. I am always beside you. You know I am here. Don't worry, I've got your back.' Death caringly cajoled her again and again. It was always a comfort to hear this friend speak quietly, kindly.

'All is seen and witnessed; there is a long rest ahead. You CAN pass through this airless tomb of doom. This is an initiation, a spirit test, a cracking open of your flower seed. Keep your eye on that smudge of light up ahead and if you lose sight of the light, close your eyes and let your feet lead you. Just take a tiny step and dream huge, dream that you are bigger than the planet,' the wise voice said.

Then came three years of hitching and stitching through beautiful country and dazzling sea. Absorbing the raw honesty of the people found in the so-called dregs of society, where sex is called sex, stealing is stealing, drugs are drugs, a lie is a lie, truth is plain. Where rocks warm the bones and wildlife stirs the wild love of life, each kind interaction loosening the grip of shame.

A woman of the desert saved her sun-dried body and shared the joy of family.

Talking another person out of killing her raised her will to hold onto life.

She felt cleaner and stronger, ready to try out a dream. There was nothing to lose. So she enrolled in art school. A year earlier, waiting for a hitch to take her off into the never-never, Bo had told her she had a wonderful heart, then put in her hands the first drawing book and pencils. Those kind individuals changed how she felt about herself. Art became a good way to digest and express feelings, feelings of yellow suns, red furies, and mother-of-pearl wonder. Her heart grew warmer.

'Just take a tiny step and dream huge,' said the voice. 'But our happiness and success run away from that which we hide from ourselves. The monster inside, that others can sense, knows things that make the righteous turn away with fright. No blame, that's a barbed wire kind of distraction game.'

People frowned with horror as they watched her drown in shame, unable to speak well of herself. Over and over again, the same. Make and destroy. Burn writings and art. Success brought pain. When damaged people sneered and stole, she said nothing, played dumb, kept moving on. Unfathomable fear of people barred her from simplicity, from simply saying "No" to hurt, or "Yes" to her place in the circle where she would be seen.

She suffered the noise in the back of her brain.

'Death, I WANT TO GO HOME.'

'Just soothe yourself with the close love of wise dog friend,' the kind voice hummed.

Thank heaven for that wonderful dog who taught her to laugh and love as did the children who came and stayed, bringing their fresh wisdom and joy. She cleaned other people's houses while cleaning her soul. She painted the coast, and ate capsicum with seedy breads. She had a daily dedication to yoga and meditation, dance and improvisation. Dancing bodies speak a language that is easy to understand. Performing felt like jumping into death by volcano, to be spurted out as something new.

She read Rumi, Tagore and 1000 Chinese women poems, and listened to exquisite music: classical, modern, Indian, and other completely new sounds. Yoga sent energy flowing through her body. Visualisation with breathing lead her into the heart-brain centre, and she felt knowing for hours on end.

And then, an awakening began. My brain wanted to wake its silenced part.

Was it because I flew far away, to live in a different language? A language that haunted the abandoned cemetery of my childhood? Or was it because my brain needed all neurons on deck, for survival in an entirely new environment?

The first memories became clear when I was 34. That ended the irritating noise in the back of my head.

'You know you could lose a lot more than you can imagine.' Those words came first.

Did I hear that? Was I crazy? No, it got clearer and clearer as more details came flooding in.

The strangler vine that had been wrapped tightly around organs, nerve and brain was wrenched out of my body-mind by the force of the awakened clarity. The remains of me felt weak, unused to claiming earth minerals and sunshine. Rage filled the emptied space; rage jump-started my tongue to speak.

In that land that knew war, the peace-nik friends knew that peace depends on facing the dirty ugly things hidden inside. They listened to me. My brain healing, as my tongue spoke truth out loud. Joyful memories also returned. My confidence increased, I marked out boundaries. I learnt to say 'No'.

The painting I did for the counsellor hung on a wall at a three-day convention on child trauma. Tears ran down the faces of those looking at the painting. Tears are precious. Tears heal. I felt guiltily grateful for theirs. For three days we watched movies, heard poems and listened to people telling their stories. Stories are precious. The dark

auditorium seemed to heave with the sounds of quiet weeping, like a creaking ship in a dark storm, rescuing the bobbing wrecks of people from the freezing waves of ice-olation.

With new awareness I began to notice when my headspace was out of rhythm with those around me, my words spilling out in a blurry mutter, evoking the 'hospital look', that scoffed: 'She's a loon'.

'Which ways out of the tunnel of trouble and doom?' I asked.

I realise where I am. I slow down my thoughts and movements. Sometimes drawing on my face and walking in the open air makes me calm. Other times I ask out loud, 'How many people are feeling this right now?'

The answer is always, 'At least a million'. One by one, beings from around the world come into view. Someone by the window of a third-floor flat on a smoggy overcast day in Berlin. Another propped against a tree in outback Australia. A dog in a cage. A little person hiding on a ship. Someone watching their father walk stiffly away.

It is somehow comforting that we are riding this wave together.

For me, the purpose of getting older is to get better at relationships. Accepting, encouraging myself and others to grow more relaxed, to open more our hearts... not perfecting.

Then a sigh and a smile emerge with the same old friendly question, 'What would it be like to be really relaxed right now?'

Yawn, stretch, groan, see what the wind is doing. And the bugs; carry a magnifying glass. Look at details, scratch that itch, dance that twitch, chew on a twig, draw in the dirt with a stick.

The s/hero tools found in that airless tunnel of doom are potent. They grind down canons of dangerous shame, defuse volatile confusion and melt rusty chains of asphyxiating pain, back into life's basic threads of multi-coloured light. Those threads weave strong muscles of wonder, into hearts that have shattered. Woven-in-wonder, the heart can relax into the simple freedom of breathing in fully, then blossoming out, connected into the web of all life.

No longer feeling like an irritant in the oyster of the world. Today I am a pearl rolling between the rich Earth and iridescent violet sky. Alive, live pearl.

Biography

Frances grew up north of Adelaide in the country of the Kaurna nation. After volunteering with inspiring teachers, she taught movement and worked in community art. That gave her enriching opportunities to use her traumatic experiences and explore creativity with people in crisis. Now into the rosehip years at 62, with a counselling qualification, she works in crisis support and fun projects. She lives with her partner, in a bi-lingual, off-grid household.



THE CRITIC

BY GEOFF CROUCH

I don't have an inner critic. I have many critics. And when I ask them for advice, they start arguing with one another and I end up watching a rabble, haggling over the price or size of something, like at a market or auction, all bidding and yelling for what they think is right, or so they say. For what they think is best for themselves and for everyone else. What is the best design they ask. Is it personal or is there some universal consensus and agreement of what is best for one and best for all. Like my pen runs out of ink and I wonder if that is a good sign or am I going the wrong way.

I try to arrange these ideas to form something that is comprehensible but instead they slip between my fingers and choose to go in their own direction. Like the splitting of an atom, I can see it happen but I don't know which way they will go. Many words are used to create a story and also many stories have been told to make a single word. I can look at the weather report to see if it is raining but at the same time I can see that it is raining outside my door.

The sound of thunder powers through my ears, deafening the words that pour from your mouth. Is there meaning to those words or is it just silence and I am thinking aloud. The sight of the writing is simply marks upon a page that do not mean anything. Maybe they are some language but they are not one that I understand. Maybe they are an image of something that I cannot see. It is like a wild dance with many dancers all moving to their own tune and being watched by many others creating their very own view.

I am walking along and there is a weight pulling me down, suffocating me, I may sink into the ground. It is the dead child that I carry inside. I am filled with grief and fear, for I know that the rotting flesh will kill me. It is the scars on my childhood body, and the marks upon my soul, and the holes that are in my heart.

I try to hold water in my hands. Time is not something that can be contained and defined, it ebbs and flows, waves come into shore and then recede away. The sea cannot keep rushing in, it also needs to return to where it came from. The small drops of water which combine together form a gigantic ocean and I am just a ripple upon the stormy surface or a grain of sand on the beach or a tiny gem cut from rough stone.



Photo by M E MOORE

THE BREAKUP

BY M.E. MOORE

I have always found it grounding to be up off the ground. I sit on my favourite wooden bench with my legs crossed while I wait for him.

As I look up at the spacious fig tree in front of me, I remember all the times I have clambered up it. Wind rustles its leaves. The cool air nips gently at my skin. I focus on my breathing as I rehearse for the umpteenth time what I want to say.

I notice someone moving towards me from the other side of the park. I can tell that it's Despair by the sluggish movement and slumped posture. His stained grey t-shirt hangs awkwardly on his thin frame.

Before I have a chance to greet him, he grumbles, 'Why did you want to meet here? You know I hate being outdoors.'

My jaw clenches. I take a slow, deep breath before I begin. 'Sit with me. I need to talk to you about something.'

He gives me a suspicious look and obliges.

I continue. 'I think we need a break. I don't think it's good for us to spend so much time together.'

'What? Why?' He sounds genuinely surprised.

Despite all my rehearsing, I still don't know where to start. I'm already exhausted. Existing with Despair has left me constantly drained. I can barely cook or clean, let alone have a conversation like the one I'm about to have.

'For starters, whenever you speak to me it's excruciating. Like a red-hot iron brand on my heart. You tell me that nothing I do is good enough, and you constantly remind me of the times I have been mistreated.'

I'm momentarily distracted by a memory of when I was accused of being dramatic for feeling suicidal, and was called disgusting and attention seeking for self-harming. So many times people have minimised my experiences. The stigma that surrounds my mental illness amplifies my already strong guilt and shame.

I continue. 'I remember the day I literally had to watch a TED talk on courage just to get myself out the door. You have always done everything you can to make me crave the familiarity of your abuse.'

He stammers, with a hurt look on his face. 'I was just trying to protect you. When

you were hurt and scared and just wanted to disappear. I told you there was no point in worrying. Because nothing mattered! I helped you to not care what anyone else thought by encouraging you to give up! If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't be where you are today. You were exhausted from the pain of life. I gave you a place to rest, a place to hide when it all got too much.'

I hate to see his hurt, but this time I respond without hesitation. 'I was trying to get better. You told me I didn't deserve to be happy; that I didn't deserve to be loved. That I'm a bad person and everyone would be better off without me. It's impossible for me to have healthy relationships when I have you making me feel like I'm a burden to those who care about me.' I pause then push on. 'I feel so heavy. I just want to feel lighter.'

There is an ache in my heart as I talk; an emotional fatigue. I notice that the breeze has slowed to almost a stop. The sun is starting to feel uncomfortably hot on my shoulders.

'I was trying to help you. I wanted to protect you from getting hurt again.' He kicks the dirt like a sullen child.

His sincerity softens my approach. 'I know... but you can't protect me from pain without protecting me from happiness. You said that no one could ever love me; or my scars. But you were wrong. I am loved, and I have honoured my scars with art. I don't need to be ashamed of who I am. Who I am is an incredibly strong person. To face you and your darkness so frequently, for so many years and to still be here makes me incredibly brave.'

I pause and look into his dark blue eyes. 'D, I'm thankful for our experiences together. They've helped make me who I am.' I know by his silence that what I'm saying is starting to sink in, so I continue. 'I have so much to offer the world. I want to contribute. I can't keep letting you hold me back. If I stay with you I'm just going to keep sabotaging myself and burning out.'

'What about the letters? Do you remember?' he asks.

I'd forgotten about the letters; all the times I wrote to him in my journal. Before I can reply, he pulls out a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and hands it to me. It's an old one that I had written for him when we were close.

Rock bottom isn't a destination. It's not a place that you go to once and then return home, tired from your travels. No. Rock bottom is a room in your house. It's the room full of junk that you are keeping 'just in case'. It's the room that smells musty because the door is always shut, because you still like to pretend that it isn't there. It's not somewhere that leaves you tired, but somewhere you go when you're too exhausted to be anywhere but there.

Rock bottom is the room you go into again and again; when you've had enough of the cleaning and the guests and the blinding light that saturates the rest of the house. Rock bottom is the place you can be yourself because the darkness provides a sacred privacy.

Rock bottom is also the reason you can't move house because you no longer know how to live without the security it provides. It isn't a place you travel to because it is a place you come home to. It is the anchor at your ankles and the chains around your chest. It is screaming underwater. Yet it is the only place you feel alive.

I'm finding it hard not to cry now. 'Of course I remember. D, I was having a really rough time then. But I am just not in that place anymore. I don't feel that way now.'

Tough conversations have never been my strong suit and I realise that I am still looking down at the letter. I swallow and somehow manage to look back up at him. The change in his expression lets me know I have hit a nerve.

'You need me!' his voice rises. 'You're volatile. You're fragile. You're dangerous. You're a ticking-time-bomb. You need me.'

I flinch instinctively. 'I know you're upset. It hasn't been an easy life for us. We've had to deal with adult responsibilities since before we started school; before we were even old enough to understand it. I know that you were there with me, protecting me as best you could.'

And it was true. He had always let me know when I wasn't happy; when it was time to change things. He reminded me to reach out for help. He taught me about compassion and empathy, and about the importance of looking after my mental health.

Still endeavouring to be clear but kind, I carry on. 'We've been together for over ten years. I have learnt a lot about myself and the world because of you. But it's time for both of us to move on.'

He frowns, 'What if I refuse? You can't force me to leave.'

'That's okay. I don't have to listen to you. You can't hurt me anymore. Besides, Hope will be with me.'

'What do you mean?' His voice is sharp with contempt.

'Hope and I are seeing each other now. She is going to be here soon to pick me up.'

He clenches his fists and starts to say something. I brace myself. But before he can begin he is distracted by something behind me. I turn and sigh with relief when I see her. Her timing is always impeccable. Her colourful, flowing dress dances around her ankles as she walks towards us.

'Hi there, wonderful human,' she says to me as she sits down on the bench, needing no invitation. She looks across at Despair. 'Hey there!'

'Hi,' he says not looking at her.

'I take it Rachel has explained the situation,' Hope says to Despair.

'I didn't know you still spent time together,' he snaps.

I respond before Hope has a chance to, 'Of course we do. I know you get jealous, but it's been important for me to never give up. Hope and I look at the sunset and the fallen leaves, and the smiles of strangers; we climb trees; we watch children playing and laughing. We see the good in people.'

'What if Hope can't protect you?' His tone is serious.

Hope cuts in this time. 'My methods may be different to yours, but I can protect her too. I remind her of all the times that people have been kind, respectful and caring towards her; the times people have withheld judgement and been patient with her. She remembers when people have listened to her and shown her love. D, she remembers these people because they saved her life.'

'I don't know anything but a life with her.' His voice is soft with sadness.

I feel for him. 'D, you are still a part of the family. You can still have a seat at the table. But you have to accept that I am going to be happy; that I am going to feel good about myself. You can no longer have a say in who I see, what I do, or how I feel. I will still listen to what you have to say, and we can still be friends. But you do not get to run the show anymore. I am done with letting myself be frozen by you and Fear.'

He looks down, and I turn to Hope for support.

As always, she comes through. 'We know that you've just been doing your job. But if you really care about Rach, you'll let her go.'

Hope smiles at me, then gets up and wanders just far enough away for us to have some privacy.

I wait for D's gaze to return to me before I continue. 'I want you to know that I'm not mad at you. I am thankful for our time together.'

I notice his body relax. The part of him that loves me overtakes his anger and pain. He knows it's the right thing.

A cheeky grin escapes his tough exterior. 'You can't get rid of me for good, you know. I'm still going to visit,' he says.

'I know. And I'm okay with that.' I smile. The tears I have been holding onto finally start to roll softly down my face.

I lean across and kiss him tenderly on the cheek. 'Goodbye, Despair.'

His tears now mirror mine. He sniffs and turns his head away from me. I know it's so that he doesn't have to watch me leave.

I stand and motion to Hope that it's time to go. She follows me and we walk quietly beside each other until we are out of his earshot.

Hope is the first to speak. 'Did you mention that we are going to have a polyamorous relationship with Faith?'

'Nah... I wanted to go easy on him. I think he has enough to process for now.'

Hope laughs. 'Good call. How are you feeling?'

I pause for a moment. I feel a bit nervous. I can't remember a time when Despair wasn't in my life. But I'm also excited.

'I never thought I would live past eighteen,' I tell her. 'Now I'm twenty three and have found a passion for life that I didn't know was possible. I can finally imagine a future with me in it, and I have found love that I feel I am worthy of. I trust myself. I am okay as I am. I am enough.'

Hope simply smiles and takes my hand in hers as we walk along the path, away from Despair and towards our future.

Dedicated to all those who have shown me kindness on my journey.

Biography

At twenty three, M. E. Moore has experienced more hardships than most would in an entire lifetime. Channelling her experience into writing, Miss Moore shares her struggles with the impact of her own chronic mental and physical health issues.

She is an outspoken advocate for people living with mental health issues, young people, and the LGBTIQ+ community. M. E. Moore has spent time volunteering in animal rescue, saving native wildlife and domestic animals alike.

She specialises in working with cats!

Having never finished school, Miss Moore sometimes struggles with reading and writing, yet continues to overcome obstacles on the road to self-discovery. She challenges herself every day to live life and follow her passions and pursue a career in creative writing.



THE GREAT DEPRESSION

BY GEOFF CROUCH

Desperately I reach across space and time
to find a reason for my existence
I cry out through the dark restless night
escape from this great depression

Fractured lessons lost in my fragile mind
shattered by savage sensations
since birth perverted and guided
through a maze of emotional confusion

My childhood innocence abused and denied
left destitute like a dog deserted
imprisoned in cities of steel and concrete fear
sinister people trade terror for pleasure

Somewhere is there a peaceful society
free from cruel rulers and their delusions
where clear light and true love survive
mankind's mad destruction and pollution

Desperately I reach across space and time
to find a reason for my existence
I cry out through the dark restless night
escape from this great depression

MY STORY

BY MELANIE WILLIAMS

My name is Melanie Williams. I'm 29 years of age. I'm a mother of four. I'm a proud Aboriginal and Kanakan woman. I'm from a little town called Coraki and the community of Box Ridge. I was born and bred in Coraki. I grew up on the community of Box Ridge for many years and then moved into town, and lived in many different homes.

I went to live with my aunty and uncle at a young age. I went to preschool, then Coraki Primary. High school years I attended many different high schools. I lived with the majority of my aunts and uncles. My grandfather was always in my life, as I grew from a child to adulthood. I got older and started living with my grandfather. He was a role model and father figure in my life. I dropped out of high school and started drinking and smoking. I first tasted alcohol at the age of 13. I enjoyed drinking and drank every weekend. Years went on and I was still drinking, stealing, doing things that were against the law. All my offences were drink driving charges. I used to steal my mother's cars.

Time went on and I was still drinking around. I then met a man and had four children to him. My children were all removed by DOCS. My eldest was removed from birth at the Lismore Base Hospital. I then had my second child – she was born at the same time as my grandfather passed away.

Drinking was still a part of my life. I had another two boys, the last child was removed by DOCS. I had the two middle kids with me, up to a time DOCS came and removed them from my mother's care. At the time I had my third child, I lost a close cousin of mine in a tragic car accident. Everything hit me at once, and I turned to the alcohol heavy. I didn't realise how much I was drinking. I knew when a year passed that I was drinking every day. I couldn't eat, sleep, or function at all unless I had something to drink. I loved to drink Mosey, that's all I could drink and stomach. I drank heavy through my pregnancies with my sons. As time went on, I was still drinking anything and everything. I didn't know what else to do.

My body used to ache if I had nothing to drink. Once I had something to drink, my aches/pains would stop. The drinking was so bad, that one day I couldn't walk. I couldn't feel my legs. I had to get help to walk, to go to the toilet and bathe.

Depression, loneliness, every kind of feeling hit me. I just didn't want to be around anymore. I just wanted to die. I thought every day about taking my life and how I would do it.

One day, I was sitting at the back of my sister's by myself and the thoughts came back to me again. I was under a tree, and I wanted to end my life then. Just climb up that tree and never come down. All these thoughts ran through my head every day. But I used to sit there and pray a lot too. Pray for those thoughts to get out of my head.

I thank God I knew about him growing up, because even though these thoughts were there, I was also praying for help, help to overcome these feelings and thoughts. Praying for help with my alcohol addiction and the emptiness I felt. I thank God that I've got a loving and supporting family that never gave up on me.

My aunty and uncle were tracking me down one time, trying to get me into rehab. I had no idea what they were up to, until now. So much time went by, that one morning I was home, this was on the morning that I was supposed to travel to Brisbane to go into rehab. I remember that morning like it was only yesterday. My mother and my aunty were there, trying to move me around to travel to Brisbane. I couldn't move that morning. I felt different. I knew something was wrong but I had no energy or strength to argue with them. I remember travelling to Woodburn to meet some other people to get a lift to Brisbane rehab. I slept most of the way, and I knew something was wrong. We got to Brisbane and I remember getting out of the car at the rehab to have a smoke. I tried to stand up, as I was sitting under a tree, smoking. I remember seeing some workers and other people coming towards me, but then I couldn't see them. I could feel them holding me up, and talking. The moment I stood up, I could feel my insides falling to my ankles. They must have walked me inside and sat me down, awaiting an ambulance. The ambulance came and they took me to the Royal Women's Hospital. I was in there for a week, but it was the fourth day that I realised where I was. I remember the fifth day all these doctors and nurses came into my room around my bed. I wasn't expecting to hear what they were about to say. They told me that I damaged my body and if I were to drink again I would die from it. I was shocked and in disbelief.

After being released from hospital, I went into a rehab in Brisbane called Jesse Budby. I stayed there for a couple of weeks until my mother came to get me and that when I went to church and gave my heart to God.

I returned home, back to my hometown Coraki. It was hard but I was surrounded by family – my family – and I felt safe.

This place is my home. It hasn't changed, but I have. It's not always easy being a non-drinker in Coraki. I went to a meeting one morning recently to meet with a lady in regards to some funding to run some courses at Box Ridge, Coraki. There were limited spaces to meet, so we met at the local pub in Coraki. I sat with her as well as four other ladies. The environment, to me, smelt. I don't like the smell of alcohol, so I couldn't sit there for long. There was music playing. I left the meeting early cos I couldn't stand the smell and the environment.

I went through a lot, all of last year. My body, my health. But I knew I had to keep my mind occupied, so I got into a course at the school. Doing a Cert 3, I eventually got my license after a while of recovery. I got into counselling and started attending Weaving of the Net (a community development program that gives community members information about domestic violence, child sexual abuse and any abuse in Aboriginal communities) which was something I really needed. It really empowered and strengthened me. That is where I got asked to do a Cert 4 which I completed this year in blocks in Tamworth. That was another healing, empowerment course. I'm so glad I did it and finished it. I thought that I couldn't finish or achieve anything.

Going on for a year and ten months without alcohol, I went for a Sec 90 to apply to have my daughter returned to my PR (Parental Responsibility). I turned up to court on a Thursday morning. I felt ready earlier that morning, but sitting there, I was more nervous, anxious, panicking. I walked into the court room after waiting for a while for my name to get called out. I stood up and I could feel my legs going tingly. I started sweating a bit before I walked in. I sat down on a chair and the room was kind of dark. There were two big windows above the judge that I kept looking at. It was the quickest court proceeding that I've had. The judge kept saying, 'I'm granting her PR, I'm granting leave to the mother. She has made big, significant changes.' I began to cry with joy and happiness. It was a proud moment for me that day. My daughter is back in my care as of now. I couldn't be happier and am waiting for my three sons to be restored to my care. I believe that God will restore my family.

I thank God that I am still here and that he restored my health, my daughter and has blessed me with whatever I asked for. Yes, it's been a year and ten months without alcohol and I feel good, healthy and fit. I want to achieve more in life and I'm enrolling in the diploma for next year in Sydney, through ECAV (Education Centre Against Violence) where I completed my Cert 4 in Aboriginal Family Well-being and Violence Prevention Work. I'm thankful I overcame my past addictions, feelings and that I am just feeling happier. I'm going to fight to have my sons restored to me. But the God I serve will fight my battles for me.

Biography

Hi, my name is Melanie Williams, I'm 30 years of age. I'm a proud Bundjalung/Githabul woman from Coraki. I'm a mother of four - Steven, Aliarnah, Jesse and Noah - and a proud Christian woman.

TIN CANS AND STRING

BY GEOFF CROUCH

As kids, we used tin cans that once contained food, baked beans or spaghetti, we'd clean them and then tie them together with string, the old brown string. Then we would stand apart and imagine they were a telephone. I'd hold the can to my ear and stretch the string so that it was tight and I could hear you speak. Then I would place the can to my mouth and you would hear what I had to say at the other end.

Later when I was deeply depressed and stuck in the thick black fog, like sticky heavy mud, that is how it felt when we tried to talk. You were standing next to me but you were far away. The words were slow and I found it hard to understand, and you didn't know if what I said was what I meant. All attempts to speak and listen were broken and distorted by the static of space and circumstance.

If only we could have communicated without the need for language and the technology of tin cans and string. Maybe I could have felt your rhythm, maybe you could have heard what I had tried to sing.



THE PROJECT OF MY LIVING

ANONYMOUS

*What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?
The world would split open*

Muriel Rukeyser

July 1999

I am heavier now, five months post-partum, than I was at 38 weeks pregnant – only now I'm carrying something that the doctors can't cut out of me, like they did my baby girl. They're certainly giving it their best shot. I'm surrendering myself once again to the medical experts, lying flaccid and helpless on my back like a desperate dying seal on the shore. I'm willing to have absolutely anything done to me or put inside of me just to have 'it' stop. Psychiatry is giving me all it has to offer.

The female psychiatrist is the high priestess in this place. She proclaims that I have an 'endogenous' depression and that I will most likely not experience it again with this intensity until I hit menopause. I believe what she says – that my depression comes 'from within' rather than 'from without' – that it springs from biological and genetic causes; or in my case, from unruly hormones and imbalanced chemicals. Under this regime, I have a biological condition that is unrelated to anything in my environment. So, I rely on biological treatments for correction.

I am also being actively discouraged from talking about difficult past experiences. The staff tell me quite plainly that it isn't the right time. I wonder when it will be.

The psychiatrist's prophecy regarding my future 'mental health' is duly noted. I tuck it away for safekeeping, a fortune cookie baked in dread. She's performed a brilliant act of sorcery, some may say. Seer and psychiatrist all in one.

Her words also echo the stories told in my family. Dad, a GP, had forced us with an iron fist to worship his gods, the gods of science and rationalism.

These voices feed the ravenous and ancient tales I hold about myself. That I am an outsider, different, abnormal, just not right. I continue to swallow these gristly morsels whole, absorb them into my tissues as truths undeniable. There is a safety and an absurd comfort in the familiarity of my own self-loathing.

Although thirty-one years of age and a mother of three, I have not as yet knelt at the altar of my own choosing.

What becomes of the child who fails in the project of adapting to the waters of the dominant culture and the family that they swim in?

August 2000

I am spending a few days at mum and dad's with my three girls. Three generations together under one tiled roof.

My mum was in her third trimester with me when they bought this house. It's all I've known through my entire childhood and adolescence. It's a two-storey, yellow double-brick house in the suburbs. It's a house of many rooms. It used to be a house of many people. The people were disconnected like the rooms – not an open-plan family at all. Most of the rooms are now vacant, gathering dust and bric-a-brac.

At the time of this visit, I am doing okay – not great but okay. Suicide and I are still hanging out. She's my little get-out-of-jail-free card, a soothing quiet presence in my back pocket. There's a sickly-sweet pleasure in our courtship, a forbidden and taboo fucking of sorts between us, that keeps me tippy-toed, yet earthed.

On this particular morning, I'm downstairs having breakfast in the dining room of my childhood. The kitchen is in disarray, with evidence of the previous night's dinner on the benches.

My daughters are still asleep upstairs and I can hear the gentle murmur of my parents' conversation and ABC's Radio National playing in the background. Dad descends the staircase to begin his morning ritual of tea and toast making. Easy morning salutations are exchanged, but the calm is short lived. He turns to me and says 'Mick, clean up the kitchen'. It's said in that tone. The tone that the fearful child in me knows well. The one that trips the system, that signals high voltage danger.

Something inside me falls in on itself. There's no time between his words and my reaction. No minutes to consider peaceful compromise in lieu of what seems to be the malfunctioning of my default setting.

Usually, intense feelings short-circuit me. I become the Magician, the incredible disappearing girl. My edges bleed into the scene and from the cradle of my little one's longings, I become smudged and indistinguishable. This survival strategy had served me well all these years.

This time is different.

My anger does a U-turn. Instead of cycling inwards, round and round with a tyrant's gaze, it snakes its way up from the base and spirals spine-wards, emerging on the outside fully fanged and reared for the strike. It's a wild creature released from an unnatural and prolonged confinement. It's the palm held up that says, 'No more'.

The mess of the kitchen and the mess of this family are not mine to clean up.

As I storm around the house drenched in red-hot tears, the tirade tumbles out. It's a thick and steaming river that wants to fill every grief-soaked corner and corridor. I

tell the truth of how I see things, how it was for me in this this seemingly clever and polished family.

'You're an alcoholic. I'm sick to death of your drinking,' I say to Mum.

I ask if either of them have any idea how hard it was for us kids to have to live in a house with a father who was so volatile, so randomly cruel and fork tongued. Do they know how it was to wake up the day following one of his meltdowns and have both parents act as if nothing had happened, like all had been forgiven?

My parents are shocked. Speechless. All my mum can do is beg me not to leave as I bundle up my children and possessions and prepare for a premature departure.

I head home with Sall, my dear friend. She has known of all of my trials and torments. She, like Alby, has been one of the few souls with the stamina to stay the course faithfully through all three depressions, never wavering in their love and commitment to the project of my living.

Here she is again, gently holding my hand, literally supporting me back to where I need to go.

A potent blend of guilt and rapture courses through me as I drive. The guilt at having completely lost control with my parents, for having unceremoniously smashed to smithereens the unwritten code of conduct in our family.

The rapture comes from a sense of lightness and liberation. It's like the glorious relief that comes from vomiting in the wake of writhing and gut-wrenching nausea.

Bewilderment also resides here. I've been set upon by the wild and have absolutely no idea from whence all this came. It's hard to believe that I, their daughter, could be capable of such a momentous demonstration.

I have crossed into lands never before charted in this family, and the enormity of my heresy seeps gradually into my bloodstream, pulsing in time with the throb of the road and the physical distance I need between myself, my parents and that house in the suburbs.

Later that night after the long drive home, the phone rings. It's Mum. After briefly checking in she asks, 'Mick, do you think you need to see someone?'

I know what she means by 'someone'. It's not a gorgeous close friend who can love me right up or a wise elder who can offer an ear. It's not someone who can tell me that I'm okay as I am, that my king tides of grief run clean and clear.

No, that's not what she means. What she means is the whitecoats, the ones with the pills and the pens. The ones who peer over their glasses at me, who say that I'm sick and diseased and in need of repair.

Although I know my mother means me no harm, a hemlock-laced love has made itself known.

That question from her pierces me through. Anger and grief in-siding me out. Warm guts on the outside and skin facing in, my heart and its tubes dangling free in the air.

Plates in the core buckle and move. The landscape shifts and I see. I see my 'unwellness' in the full sticky web, where it fits, what it holds.

*I stand battered and bruised at the fork in the road
my head turns to look back
to remember the lands
from where I have come
the terrain trod
all seasons endured
there's tears and a smile
I can go on
looking ahead
I see there's more than one way
the trails are many
they're each to their own
some clear and unfettered
well-worn and flat-floored
others ask more of the pilgrim
for sure
they're brambled and stony
lost to the green
for a minute
I'm tempted to opt for the known
to stay with the same
the compass set sure
but
the path chooses me
her tendrils so wild
sharp thorns
dark night creatures
and weathers not known
Hecate's love
firm and fierce
she beckons me forth
and I bow to the quest
with my dilly bag full
and a plump pleading heart
one foot leaves the crossroads
onwards I go.*

2018

I still have my days. I'm not fixed and definitely not cured. I wonder whether I was ever broken or diseased in the first place. Probably just a sensitive soul who was planted, long ago, in not so sensitive soils.

As I've grown older, I've gotten pretty good at knowing what I need in my life, not only to survive, but to flourish. I've cut down on constantly making myself wrong, on trying to adapt myself to the harsh conditions of this world.

Nowadays, when suicide gently knocks at my door, I don't indulge her as I used to. I politely invite her in for a cup of tea and slice of cake. We sit down together and chat for a while, then she takes her leave. Although we've had a long and difficult history, she and I, we have an understanding now.

The sticky label put on me all those years ago, now hangs mostly off, with only a small stubborn tattered edge remaining on my brow. I sort of like it there. It's a reminder of the vast distances I've covered, of the roads I haven't taken. But mostly, it helps me remember the jewels in all this, the scarab's prize. How I, unlike my brother, have been able to stay living, to keep my feet firmly planted on this earth and gather all the messy and difficult parts of myself and my life, and extract from them a certain thick and golden nectar.

It's this potent prize that pushes me on, to truly own my gifts, my wounds, my pain – and to fully inhabit my niche in the world this time around.

But most of all, what I've come to realise is that it's me who's needed to not opt out, to fully commit to the project of my living, however that looks.

Last words

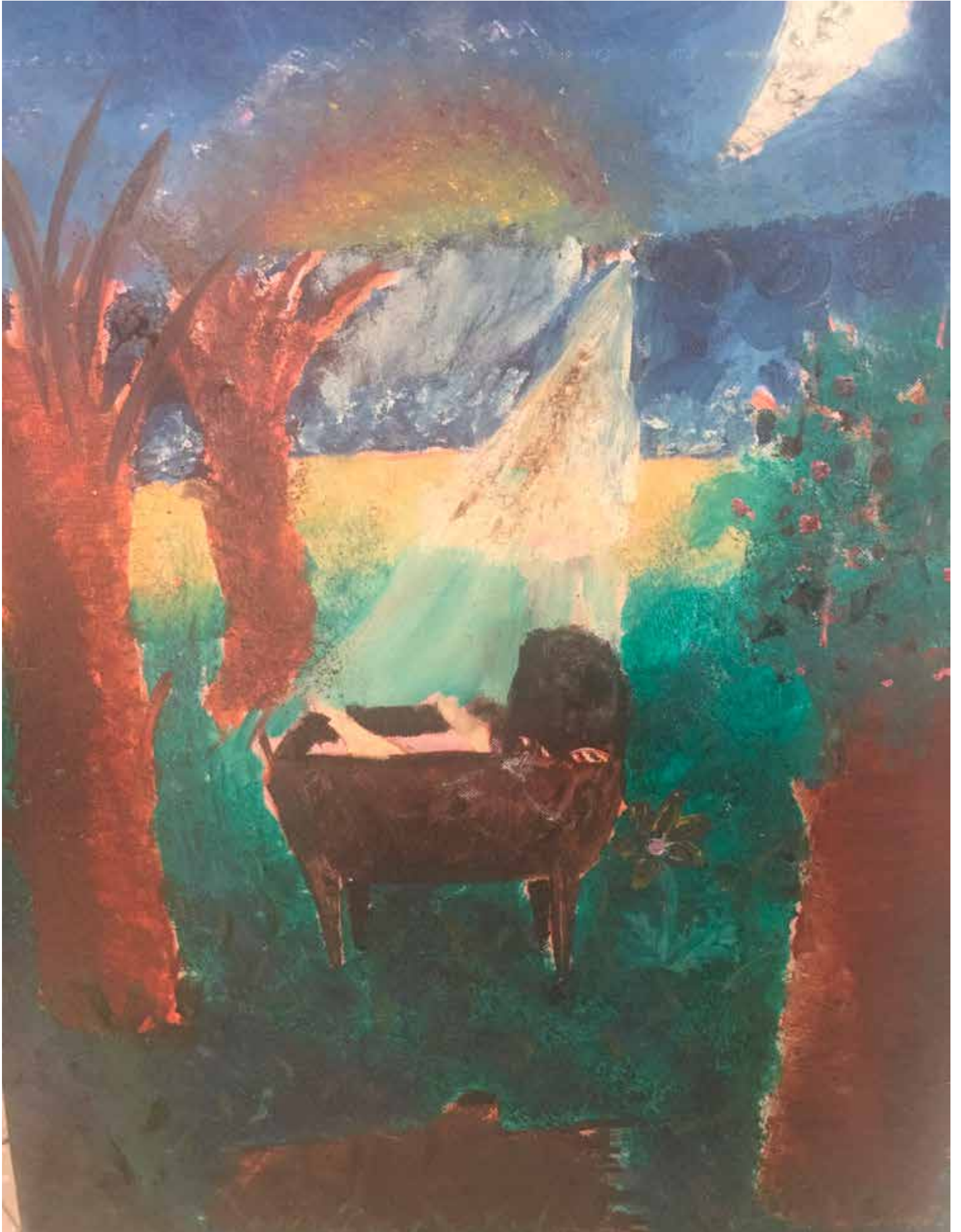
My hope is that my story not only supports you in some small way on your own journey, but that it adds to the growing impulse in our culture to validate rather than pathologise extreme human distress. Along with this, my wish is to be part a bigger conversation that works to de-stigmatise and de-mystify the wish to die. For me, suicidality is an understandable response to profound pain, not a 'symptom' of some mythical disease. It is one perceived way of ending suffering, when no other paths seem clear.

Biography

The author is a forty-nine-year-old woman with three adult daughters. She was brought up in a highly educated middle-class family in Sydney.

She loves spending time in nature, reading non-fiction, practicing yoga and disrupting the status quo. In her spare time, she works as a counselling psychologist in private practice.

She currently lives in a pink house in a rainforest with her partner and a small grey cat called Sita.



"Abandoned" by my second daughter at 12 years of age



"Ocean Woman" by my eldest daughter at 14 years old

Dedications

My support crew:

my partner: my rock, best friend and love of this life

my three beautiful girls: my anchors and greatest teachers

my soul sister: lighthouse and fellow pilgrim

& my dear brother:

*You took a different path
your dying, teaching me the beauty of my living
when death comes for me
I know we'll meet again at the crossroads.*

I WOKE UP THIS MORNING



BY GEOFF CROUCH

I woke up this morning
and realised that it is the end
the beginning of a new day
and the birth of old man death
the future like the past has gone
great sun has passed from east to west
and tomorrow has already come
the judgment of time before the test
old age before life has begun
I woke up this morning
and realised it is the end

I woke up this morning
maybe I'll go back to sleep
forget about the forbidden pathway
and return to the world of dreams
I'll wait until the night of darkness
then make my silent escape
birds are singing the dogs are barking
in the shadow my spirit retreats
into a wild forest like a mad man
I woke up this morning
maybe I'll go back to sleep

HOLDING HANDS WITH MY DARK PASSENGER

BY PREMA RA

Shock jock

Sometimes she likes to shock people with a candid description of the ghastly parts of her life. She has a colourful story. In any group of people, it's easy for her to have the worst story in the room.

She told me once, though, that it's taken her a lifetime to realise that her childhood was not the average horrible life of abuse. Hers was quite the spectacular story.

She was one man's sex slave, from the time she was three months old until she was fifteen.

That sentence alone grabs the headlines. In that single sentence is implied a whole lifetime of suffering, brokenness, self-loathing, the stigma of being 'damaged goods', and – as those who have trod the boards can attest – a vastness of daily heroism.

She said to me yesterday on the phone: 'I got up this morning. That's my act of bravery for the day!' Then she let go one of her infectious laughs. Underneath the humour though, I could feel the jagged edge of truth.

Slavery without bars

I've known her for so long and we've talked about everything under the sun. For she and I, nothing is taboo. I've been gradually able to hear her stories of the horror.

She struggles sometimes to explain. She said to me again last week, 'Even though I was a sex slave from birth, I wasn't imprisoned by bars and locks. I was imprisoned by the era I found myself in. This was a time before financial assistance for women escaping violence. This was before youth refuges, or rape crisis centres.

'This was an era before there was even a vocabulary for the life I was stranded in. I didn't know words like paedophile, or perpetrator, or rapist. I didn't know if what happened to me every night happened in every home, or not. I didn't know if I was the only one.' She dropped her head and swallowed hard, choking back the tears. Her hand slid across the table and squeezed my forearm till the nails dug in. 'No-one spoke of such things. Anywhere. Ever.'

So, silently, secretly, that life, that was all she knew, went on, and on.

She gave in.
She gave up.
She caved in.
She could no longer get up.

The depression infiltrated her every breath. It was like a pair of dark tatty wings wrapped around her. A strange, familiar comfort lay within those filthy feathers. Depression was willing to be her friend when all else had deserted her.

Saved by Grace

I remember in the early years of our friendship we spent a year apart, when I got a fancy job in Melbourne. We wrote to each other. That's what people did back then, before computers. We wrote long intricate letters, full of stories, jam-packed with a literal honesty that I found both alarming and intriguing. Once, she wrote about a woman called Grace. She always said that Grace saved her life. There was a day, a moment really, when her whole life shifted.

This is how she wrote about that day:

I felt a gentle feather-light touch against my arm. Turning toward this whisper of a sensation, I saw a face beaming a big, uncomplicated smile right at me. 'Come with me,' she said, gently placing her hand under my elbow, as if to simultaneously cradle my arm, and lift me to standing. Naturally, I followed her out of the crowded room.

She led me across the courtyard, and along the sandstone walkway to the back garden, behind the chapel. She took me further into the garden than I'd ever been before. The dappled sunlight played tricks with my eyes, as garden beds of flowers gave way to tall trees and wild undergrowth.

My heart was pounding now. I felt my eyeballs pulsating with every heartbeat. My palms were wet. My tongue was dry, sticking to the roof of my mouth.

I didn't know where we were going. I didn't know what was going to happen. Did she have a plan? Why was she taking me here? A thousand questions ricocheted about my mind. What petrified me the most was the thought that rang out loudly, over and over, gradually drowning out all the rest.

*I had a secret.
I had a filthy, dirty, foul secret.
I was buried alive, under tons of sordid secrets.*

We turned sharply to the left, into the dim light in the depths of the back garden. We entered a small cave, laced with moss. In the back corner, a sweet, spring-fed pool trickled.

'This is the grotto,' she said, softly, as if the words themselves were sacred. 'I come here when I need to be safe and alone. You are safe here. I've noticed you've been sad and sitting alone a lot lately.' She let the sentence hang in the air. I couldn't bear to lift my head. I stared rigidly at the water dancing and trickling into the pond.

Her breathing was measured, audible, comforting. Her voice reappeared out of the quietness, as if she was sliding slowly back into speaking, tentatively reaching across the void to my frightened ears.

'Is everything alright at home?'

Her words buzzed in my ears. I could barely breathe. I had craved for someone to ask me that question. I'd waited my whole life for someone to ask me that question. I'd given up hope years before that anyone would ever ask me that question.

And right there, as the question rang in my ears at last, all I wanted to do was run and run and run, gasping in desperation to get as far away from that question as I could.

'Is everything alright at home?' she gently repeated.

Here I was, in the sacred grotto, with nowhere to hide, and nowhere to go. This was the moment. How could I dread so completely the very thing I'd craved all my life? The breath caught in my throat as I managed to force out a single word, almost inaudibly. 'No'.

There it was.

In a single syllable, the wall of secrecy began to crumble. 'No,' I repeated. Inside, the wall teetered and tottered. 'No,' I said again, vocalising again a sound so unfamiliar. The wall of silence shuddered and tumbled, completely.

'No, it's not okay,' I wailed. I shuddered and tumbled. The words shuddered and tumbled. In that moment, my whole world shuddered and tumbled.

Once you tell a secret, it's not a secret anymore.

In breaking the silence, she broke its sinister spell.

In breaking the silence, she began building resilience. Never again would she be silenced into submission.

The dark passenger

You'd think that once the abuse stopped happening on a nightly basis that she'd be relieved and elated. But she has told me often enough that it didn't unfold like that at all. The rhythm of the abuse was a constant in her life and without that predictable impingement she felt lost. There was a murky void, instead of relief. There was a world of self-loathing instead of elation. She slid quickly into a kind of brokenness that nothing could prepare her for.

Do you need to know she was sent away to Sydney, and abandoned there, after she

disclosed the abuse? Do you need to know about the years spent in promiscuity as she dived in and out of life experiences, practicing choice and boundaries, exploring limits, and challenging fears?

Do you need to know about the encephalitis, an infection in her brain, that demolished her life and her ability to walk and talk, for a decade? Do you need to know about the alcoholic husband she nursed to his death? Or the heroin addict boyfriend who wreaked havoc through another decade of her life? Or the multiple sclerosis?

What you need to know is that the curve balls kept coming, and kept her suicidal, more or less constantly. Her depression was like a dark passenger who travelled with her everywhere she went.

Feel the feelings

She said she'd felt suicidal as far back as she could remember, and now she is a very old lady indeed. How is it that someone who has craved death with such a passion is still alive?

We were sitting beside the river just a few weeks ago, our toes dangling in the water, talking about writing this piece you are reading. She surprised me, as she often does. She looked me straight in the eye and said with a forceful clarity, 'My life has been perfect'.

I didn't ever expect her to say that. She saw my confusion and went on. 'I've been given what I've truly needed, when I've needed it. I've always known I needed help,' she said, tossing her head back in an unbridled laugh. 'And, God knows, I needed a lot of help'. Her laughter skittered across the water once again.

'Did you know that I lived in a Buddhist monastery for seven years? That was where I learned how to stay alive even in the depths of suicidal craving.

'They have a practice I call "Naming the Demon" which has changed my whole perspective on my various patterns of distress. I simply name what I'm feeling. I simply name what's happening. This helps me witness my thoughts and feelings and events. It makes it heaps easier not to get caught up in them. It gives me the time, the pause, to remember that I'm not my suicidal thoughts. The thoughts are happening but they're not who I am. They're thoughts, not facts, and they need not become acts. I do not need to do anything my thoughts suggest. I have space. I have time. I have choice. I love that I have choice today.'

She was on a roll now. It had been many months since I'd seen her this animated. She sparkled as she spoke. Her hands danced in the air, almost mesmerising, as she revealed more about those momentous years in the monastery. The words kept bubbling out of her.

'And, in the pause, self-compassion can flood in ... *Oh sweetheart, you're so distressed today. You're safe, precious one. How can I help you now*, I say kindly to myself.

'And, in the pause, I make room to feel the feelings. I have learnt, slowly and sometimes

with ridiculous resistance, to sit with whatever rises, to sit with the feelings, to sit with the thoughts’.

As we walked around the river bank, the sensation of uneven ground beneath my feet pulsed up my legs and reminded me how precious life is, even in such simple sensations. I felt my strong legs grounded to the earth with every step, as we walked and talked some more.

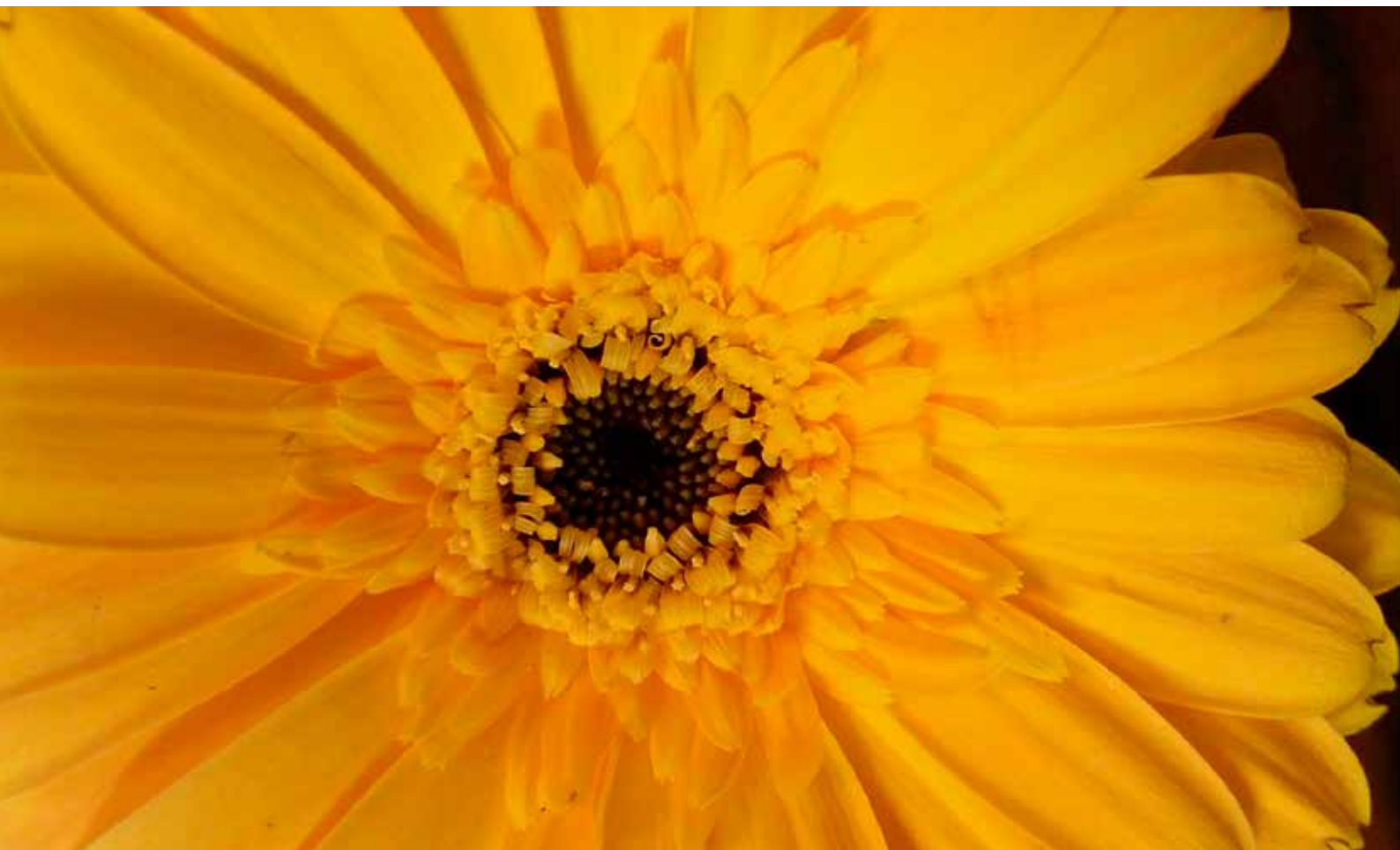
I sensed her ‘wisdom waffle’, as she called these talks, was coming towards a deeper insight. ‘Ultimately,’ she said, ‘I’ve come to accept my dark passenger as part of my inner world; a member of my “inner village”. The dark passenger is no longer the rejected outcast on the edge of the village. Nor is it the ruler of the village. My depression is part of me. It is not all of me, just a part. I have learned to make friends with the pain, to hear the song my suicidal self sings, and to listen to the messages spoken by my pain and my longing.

‘Really, I’ve just learned, at last, to be kind – to myself, and to others – and to keep speaking up, and speaking out. Silence and secrecy will kill me. Openness and truth are my go-to methods when I’m distressed.’

She said she’d felt suicidal as far back as she could remember, and now she was a very old lady indeed. How was it that someone who has craved death with such a passion was still alive?

The simple answer is: she’s worked at it! Every day she makes room for the part of herself that loves life, knowing always that the part of her that craves death is also a member of her inner world. No part of herself is rejected.

Photo Prema Ra



And, as it turns out, she's also rather partial to a hearty gratitude list, and really good chocolate.

'And tell them to remember to breathe' she yelled to me from the front verandah. Then she wafted down the stairs and was out the gate in seconds.

So, remember to breathe, softly, sweetly, sometimes deeply, sometimes with whistle-lips, sometimes slowly, and always with love. Soft belly breathing soothes the soul.

And the truth is...

It's time to come clean with you now. I've never tried to shock anyone with the ghastly parts of my story. I've never even told my story before. I found it hard to write, so I pretended the pain was another person's.

The truth is, I was the sex slave from birth. I was the terrified teen trying to speak up against the wall of silence. I was the woman lost in depression, and with a hunger for death. I was the person who sat with the feelings, made friends with the pain, and found a way to include my depression in my inner village.

I am an old lady now. I have survived. My suicidal thoughts and feelings and 'slippery dip' are part of the landscape of my world. They are ornaments in my garden, adding depth, texture, and shape to the sculpture of my compassion.

I regret none of it because it all contributed to making me the amazing old lady I am today. I can, and do, love myself. And, at last, I can say I am glad to be alive.

'I got up this morning. I am my own hero!'



Photo Prema Ra

Biography

Prema Ra is a physiotherapist who exclusively treats people with long term or complicated pain. She treats the people that everyone else has given up on, and helps them get well. Her life of extreme pain and hardship has helped her serve her clients even more deeply. Her pain is rich with meaning and purpose. She hopes to work until she's 94 years old! She also loves gardening, and chin-wagging with friends over good coffee and good food.

NO WINGS

BY GEOFF CROUCH

I am hungry
but cannot eat
I want to talk
but cannot speak
I need to touch
but cannot feel

I am sad
but cannot cry
I want to laugh
but cannot smile
I need to sleep
but cannot dream

I am happy
but cannot sing
I want to shout
and move my mouth
I need to fly
but have no wings



THE GAP

BY MAXIM HAIM

*Dedicated to Lana
She always loved me through it.*

I have spent my life living with physical and mental health issues, hiding away, never anticipating that there might come a time when I would be strong enough to tell the deeper story. So in writing this short piece I have tentatively begun this journey to look further into the difficult spaces that, up until now, have remained hidden away.

There are moments in life when someone's whole fate and future is decided by a singular and powerful event. For me, this happened eight years ago when I was dragged thirty metres down a hill, underneath a car. Those few agonising seconds left one-third of my body and half my face burned to the third degree, along with head trauma, and the dark and menacing specter of a near-death encounter.

Until that moment, my life as an adult had been a cautionary tale, stepping along my merry way but as if walking across rice paper, hazily aware that anything could wrench me apart at any time. Out of sight, I wrestled with the trauma that had been writ large throughout my childhood and teens. My life had been saturated with sustained, cowardly emotional and physical barrages, both in and out of school, and I always loathed referring or admitting to any of it.

I lived my days with unceasing hurt and internal anger, dissociating from myself and from the pain and people. I could not master the skills to place and make sense of all the events or my feelings, but I desperately made sure no one would find out. I absolutely hated looking needy or stupid, so in the most part, I learned to consider my thoughts, my choices, my ideas, and opinions as not welcome or valid. I was better at expressing myself through music, stories, and by letting my thoughts transport me to other worlds.

As years passed, I internalised nearly everything, becoming more and more unwell, yet not able to see or feel seen. I would sit out on the sidelines; my way of living life was to not show up, to never show who I was.

Then, eighteen months after the car accident, it all caught up with me. I became unable to cope with events and people at all. Something was creeping up on me faster and faster. My initial attempts to articulate this to my family and friends, and to suddenly shift how I was reacting to this new reality, were painful, difficult and acutely emotional.

One September morning, the sound of my second-born daughter crying echoed through our home. The noise seemed to be coming from everywhere and the sound shattered through every atom of my being. I began clawing at the sides of my head and ears, an intense state of confusion and chaos entering my mind, and in that haze, I recoiled and withdrew, resorting to the one thing I do when I am anxious - walking.

I headed towards the beach, magpies swooping my head and leaving me even more hopeless.

I was falling into some kind of gap. My thoughts settled on fears again and again. I felt such a long way from home, from everything and everyone. It was like a depth charge had gone off inside my body, blasting out a shock wave, shearing through my body just like that goddamn car accident, and in this moment I was undone, ripped apart.

Out to sea, an eagle hung low, moving slowly and watching patiently for its prey. On the sand, I was struggling in a squall of disarray, gasping for air, grasping at nothing, looking through a liquid haze towards the sun. I wanted to look at the sun. It blinded me. Weighted, I sank onto the sand. I could no longer see anything plainly. Any appearance of self-control was being blotted out. I felt I was being wiped out with no real grasp on what was happening.

I sat looking out over the ocean and felt once again the sense of relief in knowing I could end all that invisible torment. Maybe it was the only real power I possessed.

My first attempt at suicide was at around the age of 20. I was talked down by a childhood friend, a girl, Briony. (In my early years she would feature in my life like some kind of wounded angel and seemed to appear at my most critical junctures.)

And, sitting there on the beach, I sensed again a kind of awareness keeping watch over me. I sat vibrating inside, unsteady, looking at myself yet somehow looking back at myself, outside of myself.

Up until this sudden glare on my life, I had thought I'd managed to hide my pain well, a kind of majestic achievement that no one and nothing could ever get to me. Now my soul was agitated, desperately looking around for the missing pieces of me, long ago shattered apart, flung about throughout my life.

There were the hard facts for me to face, that I could not truly express or reveal even to myself. The pain of that constant, unending neglect, along with the complexities of the abuse, had been moving silently through my life. Now here it was, attending to me, making sure I knew of its presence.

I watched the eagle and began planning what I would do. I noticed that I wanted to tidy up my life. I thought about my children and the mess my life was. If I could get everything in order, I could disappear and no one would miss me because what use was I? I now know that in that planning the steps to take my life, I gave myself time.

It is simply not possible for me to continue my old way of life. When I was younger, it

looked like I had no choice, but now I am venturing to make a radical shift and open up, to take a risk and let go. I'm learning to speak up and write my truth to anyone who might listen, in the hope that my story can help those who suffered as I did.

When my father was drafted into the Korean war, he fell in love with Asian culture and its people. And so, I become a Buddhist monk from 21 until 28. Without a doubt, this saved my life. I am aware that when speaking, it is best done mindfully, with authenticity and compassion, always speaking from the heart. I was taught that a more truthful way of living and speaking was by connecting to my heart, to speak from that area of the body rather than from my head. To breathe it from there. But I would never truly understand why, let alone follow through. I was always stuck in fear, performing, a shape-shifter. Until now.

After recently telling a few people of my fight with dyslexia, hyperactivity, anxiety, depression and later CPTSD - which seemingly came out of the blue to most people - I'm finally making the choice to start showing myself more vulnerably. And I'm scared.

I have lived a life feeling extremely fearful. But something I continue to learn is that there can be no room for fear when speaking the truth. Whether speaking in public, to a group, to my friends or someone I love, if I am fully present, giving and breathing deeply, my fears melt away.

One way I can make sure I'm only saying what I need to say is by remaining quiet. This is something I'm naturally good at. If I'm still feeling nervous, anxious or afraid, it means I'm still letting my head do the talking, and more often than not, that voice is saying, 'I wonder what everyone is thinking of me right now? I wonder if they think I'm stupid, inhibited or...?' Holding onto the fear of judgement means I'm not fully participating and giving 100% of my authentic self, listening rather than speaking my absolute truth.

The easy option for me would be to keep going on with avoidance, addiction, drama, gossip, scandal, moaning and negativity. I can no longer do that. I'm now cutting through the noise to express myself in a more authentic, direct and mindful way, to begin to re-secure my physical and mental wellbeing. I want to rewire my connections to my world, my family, and my relationships, on my terms, in a new and more meaningful way.

Biography

Max is 55 and lives with his family in northern NSW. He worked on early developments in computer, lighting design, and art, arriving in Australia at the inception of the world wide web. He worked on many internet projects, maintaining his flair for creative solutions around the use of technologies.

Max has deep and intimate experience with hyperactivity, panic attacks, anxiety and depression and later, Complex PTSD/Dissociative Disorder. He sustains life energy through the pursuit of philosophical and metaphysical experience and maintaining creativity. From time to time, Max needs to withdraw from society to remain well enough. He has an abiding love for Zen and intuitive archery, and continues to dream of doing archery, off horseback.



Art by Maxim Haim

BOWMAN KNIGHTS

BY MAXIM HAIM

The sun sits high across the plain.

The horse's cadence slows.

Her head behind the bit, pulling forward.

Left-hand reins tight to the loop

The bow lays along the barrel, held by the other hand.

Fixed to the distance, bow lifts firm, hand letting go of reins.

Up over, the arrow lands on the shelf.

Move to canter, then gallop, thundering air, arrow lets fly steadfast out to emptiness.

Nay to target, the splitting of sunlight with its shadow.



WEAVING WITH WORDS

BY GEOFF CROUCH

I woke up one morning and you were fully formed, although I could not yet hold you, I could feel your presence. I need to enter and embrace you, and be held within the body of your words, the womb where I grow and from where I am born. I am the marks I make on paper, not the scribbles I imagine to be meaningful images but the flow of lines that I have learnt to weave into words. I want to hold you but I must let you go. I want to listen to the words that I have written rather than wait for the words that I will write. Looking out through the confusion of broken memories I try to write a sentence but the words are disconnected and I forget the questions that I wanted to ask.

DARK ANGEL

BY ROB

Warning: Although its message is hopeful, Dark Angel describes strong imagery of a pit of despair. We recommend not reading Dark Angel if imagery of pits and falling causes distress.

I am on my knees outside my house, in the dust and the bare, sandy earth and rock. All around me lie the ruins of my Great Garden, the lost garden which was to be my life's work. My garden – sterile and ravaged by drought – has been slowly abandoned, lost to exhaustion, depression and finally, to despair.

I scoop up a handful of dry earth and pour it into my mouth. I close my eyes and chew on dust and sand; taste it, swallow it. I feel grit on my teeth, and dry choking dust on my tongue and in my throat. And the taste – ashes, dust, sterility, failure, defeat and despair. My mouth, my throat, my body, my mind, my soul are filled with it, the taste of defeat and despair. There is nothing else, nothing left. There is nothing.

I feel a gentle movement beside me and open my eyes. An angel has flown silently down to land beside me. She is black, with brown leather wings. Her ragged clothes are black. Her face is the colour of deepest midnight, chiselled out of obsidian, all sharp angles, translucent, hard and cold - but somehow, at the same time, so soft and warm and inviting. She smells old - ancient and musty. Not an unpleasant smell, more like the smell of stale spice that's been left in the drawer too long, slightly mildewed. And dry – she smells dusty, like the dirt in my mouth. Her wings rustle dryly as she settles, like dusty blinds in a desert breeze.

But she is beautiful. She is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. And in that moment I know that I love her; she is the one I have always loved. She is my long dead mother; the one I never knew, but the one I've always longed for. She is the aching emptiness, the part of me that's always been missing, the void that can never be filled. In the bright shiny disc of my soul, there is a torn and fractured corner, a piece that decayed and fell away long ago. Or maybe it was never there. She is that broken corner, that missing piece.

And she is crying; she is crying tears of blood. Scarlet drops seep from the corners of her eyes, trickle down beside the bridge of her nose and trace a spidery pattern across her cheeks. She has been crying for a long time, she has been crying forever. Her tears have worn deep furrows in her beautiful face, scarred her rock-hard cheeks. She is silent, wordless; but I sense that she loves me deeply, just as I love her. And I know that she has come to me in this the moment of my greatest need.

She takes me in her arms and holds me tightly. She beckons and I look. A pit has opened up before us, narrow and deep. My knees are on the edge of the pit. I lean out slightly and look down. The sides of the pit are straight and smooth; they go straight down forever. There is no bottom. In fact there is nothing in this pit, there

never has been anything in this pit, and there never will be. I understand without being told that this is the pit of infinite despair. If I go down into that pit there will be no way back up, not ever.

My angel, my beautiful angel, enfolds me with her wings, surrounds me with her love, her warmth, her smell. I feel complete, unbroken, for the first time in my life. She lets me know without words that I have always desired this pit, always. And she is right, she knows me so well. I long to be in that pit. I long to give in to my despair, to fall forever into oblivion. And now both she and the pit are here; the pit is her gift to me. I know that in this moment I need only surrender to this ancient desire, to give into this longing for oblivion, to erase this broken life and let her carry me down into the pit, where I can be with her, wrapped in her wings forever. She is gentle but persistent: Give up, give in to this desire, come with me now and I will always be with you. You will never be broken again.

But in that moment, on the very edge of that pit, leaning out, I resist, I push back ...

... my angel gently insists. But I resist. She assures me that this is for the best, this fall into the pit. She tells me again that this, like her, is all that I have ever desired. That this is fulfilment, completion. She tells me that she loves me, that she has always been with me. She is part of me, she knows what I need, what I truly want, what I most desire. And she tells me that she is here with me now, that I don't have to go alone; that I don't ever have to be alone and broken again.

But I resist, I push back slowly, away from the pit, away from my desire. She doesn't try to stop me. She moves back slowly with me, holding me in her arms, keeping me wrapped within the warmth and smell of her beautiful wings, within her loving embrace.

And then comes the hardest part. I slowly, carefully extricate myself from her arms and those beautiful wings, that warmth, that loving embrace, the only place I have ever felt whole and complete. I let her know that she should leave, that I will choose another way. She looks down at me from that beautiful, ancient, damaged face; those black and bottomless eyes. She looks hurt, saddened, confused.

She tries to insist; I resist. Again she insists, gently in the way that she is gentle; but I resist, stronger this time.

Finally she accepts my decision. She gives me one last sad look, her face so filled with love and hurt and disappointment. Then she spreads her beautiful leather wings, releases me, and flies away. I watch until she disappears into the glare of the cloudless sky. All that remains of her is the scent of musty spice and dust.

I collapse forward then, but the pit has gone. There is only the dirt and rock, dry and desiccated as ever. I pull myself slowly up onto my hands and knees. I cannot walk, so I crawl back towards the house. And then that other angel in my life, my wife, comes out to me. She doesn't say a word, just helps me to the bathroom. I strip and shower; I wash the dust and sand out of my mouth. She brings me clean clothes, and I dry and dress. And then she helps me into bed. I let exhaustion take me, surround and enfold me, and carry me down into a long and dreamless sleep.

She leaves me there and goes back to caring for our two kids. She is a remarkable woman, and she is pregnant with our third child. She and those kids, and that unborn baby, are the reason I am not down in that pit right now.

Author's note

The journey away from suicide and back to life was not a sudden transformative experience for me. I didn't just wake up one day recovered; I didn't just get over it. Recovery was a long and winding road with many turning points, those moments when the resolve to go on, once found, is strengthened.

But Dark Angel describes what I think for me was the turning point, the moment when I first found the resolve, the will, the desire to go on. And that resolve was closed to me until I had gone to the absolute brink, felt the fullness of my pain and despair, and faced my own annihilation.

It wasn't fear that made me turn back in that moment. I was at peace, ready to die, to cease to exist. Part of me still is. No, it was something else. My family was a big part of it for sure – that sense of duty and responsibility, as well as love and the hope for future joy. But there was something else, something that I still don't completely understand to this day and possibly never will. There was something that compelled me to go on, to create a meaning and a purpose for my life in a world that still seems to me to lack any real meaning and purpose. Perhaps it was the sense that life is just such an amazing adventure. I remake that choice to go on every day. And I think that I will keep making it until something (not suicide) finally takes the breath from my body.

And as for my beautiful angel. Who was she? Did she really exist? I'll try to answer the second question first. I think there is a difference between events and experiences. Experiences are our personal response to events – how we felt, what it meant for us, and how we remember it. So yes, I did experience a dark angel beside a bottomless pit in my garden. I remember her exactly as I've described her. I can show you the exact spot where she landed. I walk over it most days. She was more real to me than many other things I've experienced in my life.

And who was she? She really was my long dead mother, that missing piece of my soul, an indivisible part of me. She was also my chronic, inescapable depression; and my suicidality. But I really did love her despite that. I've never felt so complete, so whole, as when she was with me.

She is still with me. You cannot lose an inseparable part of yourself, even a sick, broken, demonic part; a part that wanted you dead. She isn't a demon that I was able to exorcise once she manifested. Instead over the years I've learnt to embrace her, to incorporate her more fully into my being, to use her loving energy to heal and grow.

The depression, and even the wish to die, is still there. But I've learnt to manage the depression. And the wish to die is a long way in the background now. It is balanced by the will to live; and the resolve to see the journey through until its end, whenever and whatever form that end may take. But as I said, it's unlikely to end in suicide.

I am still with my wife, and my three children are all independent adults now. I'm even a grandfather. I experience times of great joy and fulfilment amongst the troughs of darkness and despair. And my garden has grown and flourished; that same, once-desiccated garden where my beautiful dark angel visited me beside a bottomless pit and made me feel whole and complete.

Biography

Hello, my name is Rob. That's it for now, just Rob. I'm 62 years old and I've been married to the same woman since 1980 – nearly 39 years now. We have three adult kids who are all off our hands now and living independently in the world. And joy of joys, we became grandparents this year!

I have lived a long and interesting life with many adventures, and many different jobs and careers. But I mostly identify as a gardener. I created my first garden when I was six- years old.

I have also lived with major biological depression and anxiety since at least my teens. Some of this, if not caused by, was no doubt exacerbated by my abusive and dysfunctional childhood. I have had two major episodes of suicidality in my life, one when I was 16 and then again in my late 30s, which is why I am in this book. My journey to recovery is a story I want to share with others.

THE BALL AND THE BATTLE

BY GEOFF CROUCH

I am a ball of knotted string. Not one continuous ball but rather made of small pieces of string randomly tied individually to one another. I have decided to unravel this mess and then tie the pieces together to form a continuous integrated sequence of events that returns to the source of who I am. Easier said than done. In any society identities will fight with force against one another to satisfy their own desires and that happens within my mind. Whereas with a tribe each individual has a part to play in the wellbeing of the group. So which do I choose, the society or the tribe. I gain nothing by surrendering, I either win or I lose, live or die. Continue with the battle within, I choose life.



How I look after myself, and things that helped me to recover

BY STORY CIRCLE WRITERS AND FACILITATORS

These are notes from Story Circle writers about things that helped on our roads to recovery. Each of us makes the journey in our own way, but if you are struggling, we hope that our stories will be of use to you.

Find honesty and self-awareness.

I was driving home from work late one night when a program about depression came on the radio. As I listened, I realised they were pretty much describing me, so I resolved to talk to my wife about it and seek professional help as quickly as possible.

Have confidence that good help is available - you may need to try more than once.

My first attempt to seek help was quite negative and deterred me from seeking further help for almost a year. A GP confirmed the diagnosis of depression (helpful) then referred me to a well-meaning psychiatrist. This guy was not the person to help me at the time. I left after one consultation with a sheet of 'coping strategies' and the impression that there was nothing much really wrong with me. By the time I summoned up the courage to seek help again, nearly a year had passed and I was a real mess.

The second time around I lucked in with an excellent GP who turned out to be one of the people who helped me recover. So, don't give up if you have a negative experience with the 'system'. Try again, soon, to find the right person and the right treatment to help you.

Talk openly and respectfully about suicide and your issues.

My excellent GP confirmed the diagnosis of major biological depression and commenced a treatment program for depression and anxiety. This included honestly confronting, accepting and trying to find a way to heal from my abusive childhood. But my GP also put the word 'suicide' on the table, right at the outset. It's a big word with only one meaning. It's also very powerful. I was able to admit to him in that moment that I really was thinking about killing myself. More importantly, I was able to admit it to myself. Being in a suicidal state with major depression was for me like peering through fog with lots of disconnected and often contradictory thoughts swirling around. Once the word 'suicide' entered the picture, the swirling dots in my head started to join up. I could finally start to understand what I was really contemplating, and its consequences. It was a scary moment – but helpful-scary. It also led to a suicide safety plan being added to the treatment mix, including an acute suicide risk plan for the short term.

Make recovery a major life project.

After my breakdown, the only thing I could do was to exist, be treated, and to try to heal myself and recover. My GP arranged for me to go onto benefits, as paid work of any kind was out of the question. Although difficult for me to accept, it gave me the time and space I needed to focus on understanding and learning to cope with my condition. It took me nearly a year to get back to work, part-time at first. Even then, the recovery project continued. It still does to this day. It has been hard work and I have had setbacks, but it has gradually gotten easier over the years. And the rewards have been immeasurable.

Find a GP, psychologist or psychiatrist who can help you to decide whether or not medication could help you, and if so, which one suits you.

I have had both positive and negative experiences with a range of antidepressants, SSRIs and benzos (Valium etc.) over the years, but the overall experience has been helpful. I think this is because I didn't rely on them solely. I used them in conjunction with a growing personal toolkit of effective self-help strategies, and care from different health care professionals.

Not many people know about low dose corticosteroids as a possible treatment option. For me, in just three days, I went from begging my psychiatrist to put me into the locked ward, to having zero suicidal thoughts! By day six, I was not depressed at all.

Find someone or something to love.

Ultimately these are the things that kept me here by giving my life meaning and purpose. I am so lucky to have an extraordinary partner and children to share my life with. But I also have made my garden a life project, as well as carving out a meaningful career offering help and support to others. And I try to view the world like a child peering into a toy shop, constantly rekindling my interest, excitement and joy in even the mundane things in life.

Take your recovery into your own hands.

I have been blessed in my life with many skilful and caring people who helped me along the way to recovery. However, I was the one who had to make the journey. I had a great vision one day where I saw myself paddling the proverbial barbed wire canoe up a dark and winding channel. The four most important people in my life at that time were all there, standing along the bank and shining lanterns to help light the way. I was very grateful they were there for me. But I was the guy in the boat doing all the paddling!

Over the years, I hope I have been able to pay back some of the kindness I received from those who helped me, and to pay it forward to others as well.

Reach out for help.

I think that what has helped the most is learning when it's time to reach out. Knowing this has meant that I have been able to keep myself safe even when I'm really struggling. There is no shame in needing to call a friend, or a helpline, or even going to the emergency department. If I hadn't reached out when I needed to, I wouldn't be where I am today.

Try different ways of looking after yourself.

Here are some of the things we Story Circle writers and facilitators do to take care of ourselves. We don't all do all of them! If you're looking for ideas, start with one that grabs you.

Use professional care

Seek out a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist who suits me.

Take care of others

'Giving helps my Living'

Take care of my body

Eat a healthy, wholefoods diet.

Notice how much alcohol I'm drinking.

Be creative

Doodle, scribble, draw figure 8s.

Do anything creative, even something as small as blowing bubbles in a glass.

Find a piece of music that makes me want to move or hum along.

Write.

Sing, especially in a choir.

Garden.

Be in nature

Climb a tree.

Walk barefoot on the ground.

Walk in nature.

Bathe in sunlight – especially on my eyes in the morning.

Imagine being in nature if I can't be in it.

Pay attention to things outside myself

Look at the sky at the same time every day and see how it changes.

Watch and listen to the dawn and sunset.

Count how many people are wearing something blue.

Notice how people walk...are they lopsided?

Move my body

Exercise every day, any way

Yoga Kung fu

Chi gung Walk

Garden

Reach out and connect at good times and when I'm struggling

Ring someone.

Find a group live or on the internet.

Don't keep feeling suicidal a secret.

Reach out to friends, family or even acquaintances when I'm struggling.

Have good conversations.

Make time with friends who accept me.

Ask for a hug.

Care for my mind and emotions

- Hug someone.
- Record myself speaking of the problem, then listen with compassion.
- Draw a circle with what I want inside and what I don't want outside it.
- Let myself cry, with a movie or song or photograph.
- Remember my good moments.
- 'Feel the feelings' – sit with the feelings.
- Write the feelings down. Sometimes I write and write and then I do a burning ritual to release it all.
- When I'm struggling or dissociating, I use 'Be Here Now.' I say out loud, preferably to someone, 3 things I can see, 2 things I can hear, 1 thing I can smell or touch, then repeat until I return to the present.
- Have alternating hot/cold showers, or warm/cool showers when I'm overwhelmed.
- 'Name the Demon': name the feelings/emotions; name the thoughts; name the things happening; remember, I am not my thoughts, feelings or events, I am just watching them.
- Relaxation, conscious and deliberate.
- Visualisations.
- Affirmations.
- Meditation.
- Gratitude – list of 10 things I am grateful for before I get out of bed.
- Make friends with the pain. Acceptance.
- Pace myself - don't do too much - activity/rest, activity/rest.
- Imperfection is beautiful.
- Whistle-lip breathing – blow out through pursed lips.
- Jungian psychology - work playfully with imagery to construct a personal narrative of my condition and my path to recovery.
- Grounding practices, like checking in with my heart and body.
- Practice doing what is right for me.
- Practise saying 'no' when I need to.
- Mindfulness- including intense focus on a small object without thoughts.
- Silence.
- Coffee.
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).
- Be kind to myself: de-pathologise my 'symptoms' and accept what's coming up.
- Simplicity.
- Zen archery on horseback.
- Time alone.
- Put my hands on my body where it hurts (emotionally), and care for it like a child.



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Heather Ellemor-Collins

Book feedback

We would love to know how this book may have affected you.

In particular, we would welcome your responses to any of the questions below:

- Has this book increased your understanding of the experiences of people in suicidal crises? Or why people become suicidal? How?
- Has this book changed your impressions of suicide or people who become suicidal?
- Have any of these stories given you new ideas about what you could do to help yourself in crisis? Would you share what those ideas are?
- Have any of these stories given you new ideas about how you could help a friend, family member or stranger in crisis? Would you let us know what you've learnt?

Please send all feedback to **storycircleproject@gmail.com**

Thank you very much. We appreciate you taking the time to send us any feedback.

Also, please email if you would like to order a hardcopy of this book for \$30. (This covers the cost of printing).



In this book, nine people who have come back from the brink of suicide share their stories of recovery and survival.

They write of their journeys through despair, and the ways they have learned to live a life with meaning and purpose.

These stories were written during an eight-week writing course, and offer readers stories of hope and courage, compassion and humanity.

'I felt such a long way from home, from everything and everyone. It was like a depth charge had gone off inside my body, blasting out a shock wave, shearing through my body.'

'I am an old lady now. I have survived. My suicidal thoughts and feelings and 'slippery dip' are part of the landscape of my world. They are ornaments in my garden. They add depth, texture, and shape to the sculpture of my compassion.'

'Nowadays, when suicide gently knocks at my door, I don't indulge her as I used to. I politely invite her in for a cup of tea and slice of cake. We sit down together and chat for a while, then she takes her leave. Although we've had a long and difficult history, she and I, we have an understanding now.'