

I was seventeen. I'm nineteen now. I know you can't fix anyone and I knew it then.

R was a girl in my circle of friends and something was wrong.

She was a sweet girl. Funny, boisterous, but troubled. She had bulimia and a whole host of depression and anxiety issues.

I made a conscious decision to help. I didn't really know how bad it would get. But I saw the struggle on the part of my friends. It wasn't just about her.

After a brief period of difficulty I'd ended on my best year yet, academically and socially. I wanted to share that positivity.

But that summer there was some sort of cognitive shift. School hadn't started yet but something didn't feel right at all. You can't really verbalise it while it's happening. The only way I can describe it is as a visceral feeling of dread.

I was really afraid of burning out. Year eleven was going to be intense. I felt forced into activities by the pressure I put on myself, the pressure from other people and the influence of well meaning teachers who really had no clue.

I got a recall audition for the musical, but when I got the letter my throat grew tight and i felt like screwing it up and throwing it away.

I didn't know why, but I was afraid. Afraid of not having enough time and being seen by everybody as someone incapable of decisions. I wanted to be able to cope with stress in an intelligent way, but I simply didn't have the tools to go about it. It screwed my head over and my thoughts were repetitive loops of indecision.

Maybe I decided my course of fate when I said yes to everything. Maybe it was my own fault but I felt trapped. I wanted to rise to the occasion and learn something new; do all of these things I had never done before.

In the third week of orchestra pit rehearsal, I told the conductor that I wanted to quit. He tried to talk me out of it. Playing in a semi-professional pit made me nervous because my ability was far from that level. He probably thought I just needed encouragement. But I wish he thought me capable of making my own decisions because that was one decision I wish I had felt strong enough to make.

So you see - my subconscious mind knew what was going to happen and my conscious mind was clutching at straws.

My solace was literature. I connected with Hamlet, pained with indecision in a course of action that was mandated, by pressures both external and internal. He too was tortured by his own mind. Nothing is good and bad - only thinking makes it so. I knew too well. And in Literature I did excel, maybe to the cost of everything else. It was escapism. I became obsessed. Maybe it was a reminder of my own existence.

I'm not sure how much of this had to do with R . In the beginning there were still some happy times, there was still the sunshine resting on my cheeks. But light casts shadows.

A few problems: there was no psychologist at the school. Mrs S . had left about nine months ago and there was still a vacancy. The counsellor was there only three days a week. Moreover, we could all see that R was getting worse - and we were helpless. The school was not equipped to deal with her either and as a result I'd found myself acting in the collective role of R's parent; in a complex web of hearsay and miscommunication.

At this stage she was undiagnosed and on the wrong medication. She had a knee injury and was on crutches but went to first aid all the time for inappropriate reasons. Her relationships with teaching staff were volatile and intense. She considered them close confidants or arch enemies and there was no middle ground. She had formed a close bond with the first aid team, who took sympathy upon her. She was always asking us to come to first aid with her, for reasons that were superficial but often more disturbing. Once we had to go there because the cuts she had made on her leg were bleeding through her dress. Sometimes though, she wanted to come in there for no reason at all other than to be with the staff.

As such we felt a part of an intrigue. We didn't know how teachers were handling it, what their protocols were, and what we should be doing. In any case I felt they were handling it badly because of the lack of communication. I didn't know how much worse this would get. I didn't want to think about it.

She started to overdose.

I was sitting in maths next to R and asked her how her weekend was. She didn't look at me. Something was wrong. I persisted.

"You really don't want to know," she said.

But of course I wanted to know.

A pause. Sinking feeling.

She'd taken a whole bunch of painkillers, she told me. And her brother's antibiotics which weren't fatal thank God. And whatever the hell she could find in the medicine cupboard. Paracetamol. Antidepressants.

I felt like I'd been punched in the guts.

I asked how she was still at school. Why she wasn't in hospital, getting her stomach pumped.

She said she was fine.

I didn't know that this would be the first of many incidents. She was traveling downhill, and fast, and it seemed like nobody was stopping her - not even the adults we were supposed to trust. I just wished that I could have talked to someone at that time. Whenever I booked a time to see the counsellor she was never in. So I eventually gave up trying to talk.

My Mum, well I think she was worrying about me a little but I don't think she realised how much I was holding in. Whenever I talked about how busy I felt, I got shut down. Stop complaining. You made your decisions, now stick with them.

I believe in integrity, I believe in consistency. So that's what I did.

I know I can get irritating. Hell, I can't even put up with myself half of the time. And I acknowledge that on the outside there's probably not much distinction between appearing anxious and appearing like an ungrateful brat. Eventually I stopped speaking and everything became internalised. I used to tell my parents everything but now there is a depth I still can't communicate.

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A few weeks later.

G .

Screaming at me on skype in capital letters.

G: R JUST OVERDOSED AGAIN

L: Oh shit

L: Have you talked to her?

L: Do you know what she took?

L: Are her parents home?

L: Should we call an ambulance?

G: She's not replying

I ran to the phone and found R's number.

Engaged.

I guess G was trying to call as well.

I waited.

I typed to G: : did you call R ?

She said that she had. I asked her if she had told her parents? G said that she had just asked for R and that she had hung up.

So I called her again and this time I talked to Y and asked her to take R to the hospital.

"Promise me you will take care of her."

She said she would try her best.

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I'm trying to build a chronology in my head of what happened next. Life became a blur. I didn't really know what the difference between depression and stress but I decided I would have to put up with whatever it was. All the needles in my stomach and the pain in my head subsided to numbness. I'm not even sure if it was sadness. It was just...a great big nothing. At the end of term one I was beyond exhausted.

Term two was worse.

School became more intense. She overdosed several more times. More hospital trips. She left a message on her tumblr, farewelling everyone she loved. Incidentally, my name wasn't even in it. The ironies you notice in the aftermath..

She had a dissociative episode. She was sitting in Maths with her head on her desk. I kept nudging her and asking her if she was okay but there was no response. I was worried so I couldn't focus. No wonder I nearly failed maths that year. I knew that sometimes she was like this when she was trying to prevent a panic attack but this was different. She seemed really out of it - kind of absent from reality.

G and I got her out for recess. She was really blank - opening her locker, getting her food like a robot. We got her to sit down. I didn't know what to do. We couldn't get first aid staff for something like this, could we? She wasn't allowed there for superficial reasons anymore. What would they do? Probably exactly the same thing we were doing. We didn't trust the adults around us.

She had a tupperware container in hand. She flicked the lid compulsively. I rubbed her back, tried to keep talking to her. I kept asking her what was wrong and she said that 'something was there', a presence watching and bearing down on her.

Some friends passed by. I begged for help.

The recess bell rang. I told G to go to class. T took over. She'd been through panic attacks before and she knew what to do.

She was still holding the tupperware container. Flick. Flick. Flick. Flick

' R look up. Look up at me.' I heard T say. ' It helps to look up.'

Her eyelids fluttered upward and then down again.

Flick flick. Flick flick. Flick flick -

'Give me that.'

T prised the container from her grip

The spell was broken.

We took her to the ministry centre. We walked back to art class, half and hour late.

Mr D thought he understood. He thought we were consoling a friend. Said something quaint about how wonderful it was for us to provide emotional support.

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I realised how serious this was all getting.

It scared me because I didn't know what she would do next and I didn't know how I would cope.

At least after this happened we were able to communicate with counselor and begin to create a dialogue with staff. Thank God we were clearing it all up.

I think it was around this time that R told me that she had Borderline Personality Disorder. I'd never even heard of it before. But when I looked up the symptoms, it seemed obvious. We were her friends, but we were like her counselors, her parents; her everything - and that wasn't ok. We shouldn't be expected to deal with that.

But oh my God that was so much easier said than done.

It's easy for an adult or a parent or a friend to tell you to disengage from a situation like that. It's harder to do that in practice. She was in two of my classes and in my circle of friends. If she did something, I would be one of the first to find out. It was out of my control. It's easy for people to say, look, you have to make boundaries. To say, ' you're responsible for protecting your own

mental health.' Under that logic the next time a friend is having a dissociative episode and there's no one else to help I should just leave her alone.

Got it.

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*" Mental pain is less dramatic than physical pain, but it is more common and also more hard to bear. The frequent attempt to conceal mental pain increases the burden. It is easier to say " my tooth is aching" than to say " my heart is broken"*

- C. S. Lewis

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School trip to \_\_\_\_\_ Imagine dusty dry wind and a hot winter sun. Imagine landing in a place where there is a pale blue horizon when for months and months you've seen nothing but fog. The sun shines into your eyes and burns your skin, but it can't get into that core part, inside of you, where there is no light.

It's easy enough to smile and laugh and make conversation.

But you feel like you're acting.

And you're so tired.

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In my journal I wrote:

" On the airplane to \_\_\_\_\_ I think i'm excited but it's hard to summon energy. Anticipation is something I've forgone, I think, and I don't really know why - it's not like me. I guess I don't feel I've been truly happy in quite a while - school has set in like an impenetrable fog. I should be coping somewhat better with the work, but I don't know how except to push through and put up with it"

And then I proceeded to talk about what I could see outside the window.

I'd turned into a social alien overnight. I like having company but I felt like I hadn't got a moment's peace. When that happens every socialisation is an effort and I turn into an extremely awkward person. I didn't know what was wrong with me. Everything I said was just wrong or fake or badly timed. And I would forget to do stupid things, like wash up my plates and cutlery, or set up the tent right. I left my drink bottle on the plane. Bloody hell. People would inform me that I was pushing in front of the queue at dinner time. I left my shampoo and soap at the first place we stayed. We played 40/40 in the dark and I didn't know when the game was over. I was a fucking head case. I was losing my mind. I felt like a social idiot.

Don't get me wrong. I appreciated getting to know people I wouldn't normally hang around at school. But I was collapsing inside, slowly and invisibly and couldn't articulate why or even explain my actions. In my journals there is no mention of this feeling. Maybe denial was the only way of getting through nine days. I wrote about the things I had experienced and learned. The words read exactly like a travel journal should. I experienced a lot of good things on that trip. The deep wisdom of M , . Visiting the Lutheran church in and feeling at home. The hospitality of the people at Understanding a cultural conflict on a more fundamental level. But I knew I wasn't being honest. I knew I was on the edge. I desperately wanted to be ok because as far as I saw, there was no reason for me not to be. There was no logical reason why I shouldn't have been having the fucking time of my life.

The trip should have been the highlight of my year eleven. I hate that that was taken away from me.

On the last night, we went bowling. Noise, flashing lights, bad food. I remember going to the bathroom just so that I could keep composure in the quiet. I lost my game terribly. I didn't care.

After we had eaten the pizza and finished our rounds a couple of the guys wanted to play arcade games. So I just sat on a bench with my arms folded staring at the vomit coloured carpet, drawing in and into myself because I wanted to escape from all the people and the lights and tacky 90s music clips; I wanted to get away from the sick feeling in my stomach and the tightness in my throat.

In the troopy on the way back to the dorms I screwed my eyes shut and tried not to talk. I tried to smile and when someone asked if I was ok I just said I was tired. And when we got back and A had left the room I curled up in my sleeping bag and just cried.

I remember that the girls in the next room had found something absurdly funny. They were laughing, crazily, like hyenas. I heard them against my own voice and couldn't help but note the irony. The harder they laughed, the harder I cried. I think they forgot about what or who had started the laughing fit; I didn't even know why I should be upset. In that very moment, I felt like a stranger to the world.

I can't remember if it was A or S who came in first. I think it was A and she went to fetch Mrs M - who I didn't want - and then left the door wide open.

S came in quietly; I didn't want her to see me. I didn't want anyone to see me. Pride is stupid, but I hardly had any dignity left. I didn't want anyone to see me that way.

She asked me what was wrong, and I couldn't answer, so she sat there, stroking my hair for what seemed like a long time.

I'm glad she didn't ask any more questions, and I guess, I didn't mind that she was there after a while. She was the first person to not speak or judge, to just be a silent presence and a comfort.

Then A came in with Mrs M and all the other girls. I can't even describe to you how infantile I felt, under all of those sympathetic eyes. I didn't want pity. I knew what I looked like - this whimpering *kid* whose Mum had packed her bag, who was too slow at setting up a tent, whose conversations were half baked and awkward.

How could I explain to all those eyes why I was such a mess? I mumbled something about being tired and exhausted, because that's what I believed myself.

What more could I explain?

After everyone else had gone and lights were out, I dissolved. I craved solitude, but A was in the same room. She told me to stop crying. She told me that I had a good family and went to a good school and got good grades and I had nothing to complain about. She was giving me tough love, she said. We'd all had to deal with what was happening to R and I worried too much and overthought everything.

I know, I kept saying. I know that. You're right. I'm sorry.

What did I really have to complain about?

A has Multiple Sclerosis. She is often blunt, foul mouthed; stocky, hunch-backed. She's a tough, strangely unrefined sort of person who is trying to live out her life to the fullest before the disease claims her. Of course I could see it from her point of view. She faces an illness and a fate that is very real. I was a snivelling girl conjuring worries from thin air.

In hindsight, I don't have such a skewed perspective. But at that moment in the dark I had made myself feel small enough to disappear. The thought of getting up the next day and putting on a mask of composure was almost too much to bear. I wished that somehow, I could fall asleep and never wake up. I think I wished that many times. The prospect was frighteningly comforting.

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The next day I was brushing my teeth and Mrs M said she heard A last night. She asked me if the problem was A ? I said, no, no of course not. But I couldn't trust myself to say anything else.

I arrived home Sunday. I didn't even get enough time to unpack properly before I had to go to school for the last week of term.

I felt like a zombie. Rehearsal, classes, assemblies and test results. I remember looking dull eyed at a Lit essay I had full marked. It was as if someone had moved the pen for me. Somebody else must have written it.

The only way not to go crazy is to disengage.

Better than thinking in dizzy circles of internal dialogue.

" I am thinking positively, I am overcoming a challenge."

"But you're not dealing with it. Why can't you cope without having a bloody melt down?"

" I am coping. I am enjoying life. Why shouldn't I be?"

"That a lie and you know it. You hate this, you hate life, you hate that you've put yourself in this position you can't get out of and you have absolutely nobody else to blame but yourself. It's your fault for getting into this mess when you saw it coming."

I thought a lot about Hamlet in his to be or not to be soliloquy; about how many actors had spoken those famous words, and how many reluctant students had read them. To me those words were personal. I analysed it, line by line. I committed the whole passage to memory. I still recite it from time to time, imagining the room of mirrors in Kenneth Branagh's film version, reflections upon reflections of self scrutiny as Hamlet asks for a reason to live.

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Musical camp. I felt like a dead body walking. I played the notes on autopilot.

I remember standing around at supper with K and J staring into my plastic cup and crushing it slowly in my grip; discussing R as if she was nothing more than a rumour, and suicide attempts are just news you pass round the grape vine.

I felt like maybe I wanted to talk about it but not then and there, so when they asked me questions I told them I didn't want to discuss it. J was sympathetic and gave me a hug and told me if I ever needed to talk I could always talk to her. I appreciated the gesture but I would never talk to her because she would probably spread it around the whole school, so I went and put my plastic cup in the bin and joined in laughing about something inane that I don't remember.

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The next memory I have is sitting in band and trying to be functional except K the flautist asked me if I was ok and I said I was fine and she said are you sure and I said yes and then we came to my solo which is the one with five flats and I could play it properly for some reason and my fingers couldn't find the right keys and I was embarrassed and shaking and K asked me again if I was okay and I wanted to shout at her that i would be fine if you'd stopped asking me five minutes ago and we'd just gone on with things and now look what you've done, I'm a mess I'm not ok. But I'm fine, I'm fine, I'll keep playing, I said; except I was exploding and Mr M who was sitting behind me told me to come with him and sit in his office until I had calmed down. But I couldn't calm down. He got a white mug and filled it with water and asked me if anything was wrong and I said that I was stressed and my friend was depressed and I didn't know what to do and i wasn't good enough for orchestra pit. He asked me if anything was wrong at home and I said no. I think he said something about not being able to help people or fix them and I said that yes, I knew that. I knew he cared but he also didn't know what to do, so he said I didn't have to come back to rehearsal and I could stay there or go for a walk until I was feeling better. Then he left and I started to really scare myself. I felt so alone. D and I think Mrs R slipped through the room but they tiptoed around me. I decided to go for a walk. I walked down to the tennis court and fell to pieces.

My entire body was a scream.

I wish somebody had been there. I wish that somebody could have been there and not said anything and just held me. But nobody was there and nobody could hear me, not even the people in the houses across the fence, and if they could, they didn't care. And I remember saying "I can't, I can't do this. Not anymore."

It's funny how you can want two opposite things at the same time. We want to be heard, to be loved to be cared for, to be understood. But it's so hard to expose our vulnerabilities; we don't want to suffer any more shame or sadness or embarrassment. And so we scream when nobody is around but still wish somebody else knew what that scream felt like.

But maybe that's too much to ask.

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I lost a lot of weight. I didn't really care for food, or for people, or for anything. I couldn't even read Hamlet. I spent my lunch breaks in the blue study room, trying to stay calm. The musical was in two weeks, and then it would be over. Everything would be ok.

R had finally been admitted for hospital stay, so people were taking care of her. I just had to focus on this final task, and then things would get better.

Production week was better. I didn't care anymore about whether I made mistakes. And there was another thing. Every night of production they gave out a Tony award in recognition of a

crew, band or cast member who was seen as especially hardworking and enthusiastic. I think my sister got one; so did C and E. I thought I would be the last person anyone would nominate, because you can imagine by that point I was hardly a bucket of enthusiasm. But on the last night they gave the Tony to me. And everyone clapped really loudly and I didn't know what to say. It's like in "The Perks of Being a Wallflower" when they give a christmas toast to Charlie and he's so overwhelmed and says, "I didn't think anybody noticed me."

Anyway people kept coming up and congratulating me. I remember when C gave me a hug and said "you always work so hard, you deserve that Tony more than anyone.". And my sister even said the same thing. K said well done and I felt like I was going to cry again. She asked again if I was ok and I assured her, this time there were only happy tears.

We played the last number twice for an encore. For the first time in a long time I really felt alive. Like all of the pain was somehow worth it in the end.

Last chord.

Last note.

Last performance.

That was my week of oasis.

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But there was a storm coming.

R tried to hang herself in the hospital clinic. While G told me we were sitting in the library and there was total silence for about forty seconds before I uttered an expletive.

And then I was angry and confused because how could that have possibly happened while she was supposed to be safe?

She had smuggled a shoelace past security; how on earth was that allowed to happen?

No. That wasn't fair.

Things were supposed to get better. It had just been production week. R had been in the hospital and I was determined not to think about her and enjoy the show. She was supposed to be safe. Nothing was supposed to harm her there.

I tried to sit and study but I just couldn't. Last week had been okay. I thought things might be okay from here. How much worse could this possibly get?

In Literature we were reading about a character named Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway*. He's schizophrenic; his world about to 'quiver and burst into flames.' Later in the book he jumps out a window and impales himself on a fence. I felt really sorry for Septimus, and angry that nobody understood what he was going through, not even his wife. He's the victim of a society who tells him to ignore himself, to look outwards not inwards, to become yet another unfeeling cog in the machine.

In the library instead of writing an essay I wrote a double sided page about how nobody understands what it's like to be Septimus and how my friend had just tried to hang herself and I didn't know what to do. I hid the page under the couch in the reading room, in half hope that someone would find it and in complete horror that somebody actually would.

( A week later I looked and the paper was still there. I screwed it up and put that moment of insanity in the bin.)

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The school had finally hired a psychologist.

The first question she asked me was " So how is R affecting you?"

I was quick to retort " This isn't all to do with R . "

And that was how our sessions began.

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That night I had soup kitchen..

There's an entry in my diary which I still read sometimes.

*"I learn something every time I come here. Three weeks ago I met a homeless couple who had just recently been kicked out their squatting place. They were sleeping in their car. Somebody at the soup kitchen had given them money to stay at a motel that night. I wonder where they are now. The girl's name was G . She had a heart shaped face with fresh cheeks and blue eyes, a birth mark on the bottom of her left eyelid. One of teeth had been knocked out, but she was still beautiful. She spoke with a lisp. She was articulate. She told me her story."*

*" G had been a ward of the state and grew up as a smart girl on the rough streets. She told me about how she was taken care of in a government house with twelve or so other girls."*

Once when she was fourteen a man on the train told her to come with him to his house, and she, young, naive, and unloved - she followed him. "

"I can't erase the face from my memory as she broke down, telling me about how he tied her to a bed. She was raped repeatedly by a group of men. Then they left her there until the morning when they sent her out, shivering, traumatised and wearing no underwear and nothing but a singlet."

"The rest of her story unraveled. Her life was rife with difficulties that nobody should have to face. Giving birth at seventeen, scared shitless. Always feeling like she had to compromise to men. Having to shoplift tampons because she couldn't afford to buy them. Getting a criminal record and thrown in jail for shoplifting. Her friend in jail who hanged herself. Losing their rented house because of the criminal record. Her world was full of disaster which were hard to comprehend in my urbane, middle class existence. How do you get out of a vicious cycle like that? It's all well and good to say that poverty is the fault of the poor, but when it is staring you in the face, and she is telling you her story, the idea of homelessness suddenly becomes a person, and there is no way you can even begin to think like that. "

"I told her about R . And she said that I had to tell R that i loved her, and she was important and deserved to be on this earth. And that people like me were worth staying alive for."

"I don't know. I don't know if everything she said to me was true. But as i sit here in my comfortable room, the television blaring in the lounge I can't help but still think about her. I was there to listen to her. Maybe I was the first person to listen, really listen to her for days, months, even years."

"And she listened to me."

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Later, Mr P (who knows my family outside of school) drove me home. He asked me about what we had talked about. He said that we can't always believe their stories to be true, but we should treat people like G and her husband with compassion because people like that need it. And it must have been an eye opening experience for me.

There was a lot of quiet during that trip home until suddenly I said,

" R tried to hang herself yesterday."

" R ?

"Yeah, in the clinic."

There was more silence and I immediately regretted what I had said.

" I'm sorry to hear that."

He fidgeted for a while and then said awkwardly "would you like to pray?"

I didn't really know what or how to believe then. But I said yes. I can't remember what he prayed then, but I guess it sounded nice.

I don't know. That night was something.

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On the Saturday of that week I had tutoring. I wasn't quite sure how to explain that I couldn't bear to face D the way I was. I felt unwell. I hadn't written an essay anyway. So I asked to cancel four o' clock. And then he asked if nine o'clock was better but I said I would probably be in bed by that time.

I wasn't. Instead I browsed the internet. I wanted to talk to someone. I don't know. My mind wandered, went blank. I went to the Beyondblue website but most of the people posting there had chronic mental illnesses and unstable home lives. I didn't feel like I qualified for either of those categories. I didn't feel like I could ask for help, They deserved it more than I did, I thought. It sounds ridiculous and generalised in hindsight, doesn't it? But Lifeline is a crisis support and I wasn't in crisis. Not exactly? I didn't really know of any resources that could help me.

I decided to make a thread on an educational website about mental health in the education system. It was a thinly disguised plea for help in the illusion of an intellectual discussion. It went badly. The first comment shocked me, because it was from an admin:

"Pressure in school is a fucking first world problem, so don't expect that you can go around calling other people's problems "first world" and not get called out for it."

"If you can't handle sitting a handful of tests and exams throughout the whole year then you obviously haven't thought about kids half your age who live in war zones, where every day they live in fear of death. You haven't spared a thought for children half your age living in poverty, not just in Africa, but around the world, even in the United States - kids who have to work and scrap to find a living".

"The only pressure in school is the pressure you are putting on yourself, nothing else."

I can hardly believe but my first reaction was apologise to him. Apologise for being so ungrateful. And I was in such a mindset that I expected other users to agree with him and I regretted making the post in the first place.

The other admins stepped in and yelled at him and had a massive argument about how the state of the world has no bearing on my current situation. You can say that it wasn't such a professional affair. And to be honest I was angry. I was sick of this grin and bear it mentality. I was tired of the invalidation. I'd had it with trying to get people to listen.

What surprised was the number of messages I got in my inbox afterward, from people offering their help and support. People who cared, kids like me who had been through similar experiences.

All of a sudden I felt a little less alone.

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The next part is hard to write.

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Monday morning, . I was on the bus. Saw G get on. I could tell something was wrong already.

She looked at me; said nothing. But she didn't have to. It was written all over her face. She was pale and crumpled and her thin body was shaking.

Then she said two words: ' she's gone.'

My mind jumped to horrifying conclusions.

But I had to stop and reason.

What do you mean.

What do you mean G . She's not dead.

Tiny shrug.

What do you mean? Talk to me.

She left. She left last night. She left a message. Did you check facebook, she asked. Her question was not punctuated.

I remembered the notification which I had left unread.

What did it say? I asked.

No response.

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where are we

what the hell

is going on

the dust has only just

begun

to fall



- Imogen Heap; *Hide and Seek*

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Maybe someone close to you has tried to say goodbye for the last time. Maybe someone close to you has tried to say goodbye five times.

Ten.

Fifteen.

And every damn time it's the same.

They love you. They're sorry. They're a burden. You don't deserve this. But they're leaving now, so it's ok. You'll be ok. All that romanticised shit. They'll mention your private jokes. Memories. They'll ask someone to take care of their sister. They'll write beautiful euphemisms to mask their ugliness of their pain; the ugliness of what they are doing.

It could have been like all the other times, but she'd put it on facebook. Our names was tagged. Everybody could see it; when I came to school everybody must have known. But nobody asked me about it. Nobody knew what was happening.

For one morning I didn't know if she was dead or alive.

And it's stupid because once somebody has done that fifteen times over, it almost becomes a routine part of your life.

And so for that one terrible morning i tried to rationalise that this would be like before. Tried to convince myself I was overreacting. Went to band with my hands shaking and could not play a single note. Sat through an entire seminar on alcohol.

Four hours of absolute

nightmare.

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crop circles in the carpet

sinking

feeling

spin me round again and rub my eyes

this can't be happening

- Imogen Heap; *Hide and Seek*

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Finally the head of senior school told us that she was okay. They had called the police. Called the parents. They had found her. She was okay.

But nothing was okay.

Nothing would ever be okay anymore. Everything was broken. I was broken. I wanted the world to hurt as much as I did. I wanted to hurt myself. I wanted to scream. The pain shouldn't be possible. Why did being alive hurt so much? The pain didn't make sense. Nothing made sense anymore. There were no words of comfort. Nothing, nothing nothing. Nothing could make this better. She would never get better. God help me. God help me.

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“When she was alone by herself she clenched her fists together and began beating the back of the chair with them. She was like a wounded animal. She hated death; she was furious, outraged, indignant with death, as if it were a living creature. She refused to relinquish her friends to death.”

- Virginia Woolf; *The Voyage Out*

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I only got to read the damn thing at recess.

Reading it was a bad idea.

I was sitting in the library. Behind the shelves. A friend showed it to me. I was angry. I was defeated.

A year twelve girl came up to me and asked me if I was ok. I said no. Then she didn't know what to say. What answer did you expect?

Then she told me that i shouldn't worry so much about other people. I had to take care of myself. I didn't need to get so involved in other people's problems. All of this was unnecessary. I didn't have to read the suicide note. I could have avoided all of this.

I know.

I know.

But don't you see it's too late to say that.

You don't understand.

Then she told me that God was here for me. That he had a plan and a future for me. He was holding me in his hands.

There has never been another time in my life that I have so badly wanted to punch a religious girl in the face.

No matter how well she meant.

\*\*\*

ransom notes keep falling out  
your mouth

mid-sweet talk

newspaper word cutouts

speak no feeling no i don't

believe you

you don't care a bit

you don't care a bit

- Imogen Heap; *Hide and Seek*

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R stayed in hospital again.

Then she was withdrawn from school.

I became distant from everything. My mind wasn't present. Invisible. Listless. Nothing nothing nothing. Days of nothing. Days of sitting in my room opening internet tabs, closing tabs. Days of blank pages. Days of no words.

Numbness. My mind was barren. Desert. Lightning flashes of anger. No rain. No tears.

My mother was worried. We argued a lot, but none of it was about whether I was okay. It was about, who are you talking to online. What are you doing. What did you do today. Where did you go. I know she was scared. But her fear just made it worse. I felt like a criminal for having feelings I simply could not explain. She begged me to talk to her. But it was too soon. She must have felt hurt - like I was shutting her out. She tried to explain how stressful this was for her as well. I believed her. But she tried to force everything out. I had to make her understand that I didn't want to talk about it yet. That I was talking to the school psych, I guess, though I didn't know how much it was helping. Since then it's always been like that. I have loving and supportive parents but I just can't explain some things. Like when they found out a year later that I self harmed. I can never say the things that should be the most important. I guess I'm trying to say them now.

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'I can bear any pain as long as it has meaning' - *Haruki Murakami; 1Q84*

I did a lot searching then. I read Nietzsche; C S Lewis. Contradicting philosophies played in my mind. I read *Hamlet* and *Mrs Dalloway* over and over, trying to decode the secret messages; trying to find some sense or reason. I wrestled. I studied. A lot. I wrote essays. Not a lot made sense, still. I learned the chords to Missy Higgin's *Nightminds* but my fingers were clumsy and nobody had taught me to use a piano pedal.

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The sun came back.

Things were slowly getting better.

But one day in the school holidays I checked my school emails to find out that a boy in the year above me had killed himself.

What.

No.

After all of this it had happened to somebody else.

I blinked, looked at the screen again. The name was only vaguely familiar. I didn't even know the kid. I felt nothing for him personally. Instead I felt anger. Hot, sick; rising from my stomach; undirected fury.

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She would not submit to dark and nothingness. She began to pace up and down, clenching her hands, and making no attempt to stop the quick tears which raced down her cheeks. She sat still at last, but she did not submit. She looked stubborn and strong when she ceased to cry.”

— Virginia Woolf; *The Voyage Out*

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I went to his funeral, in our school chapel.

I saw his parents sitting in the pews. Divorced.

His                      sister..

His father - a thin, balding, middle aged man. In the eulogy he spoke about his son in a way that was distant; distracted; as if he was talking about his favourite pot plant. Holding grief at arm's length.

I learned how     T     was a high functioning autistic. He loved Tolkien, military history, his dogs, and fencing. He had received enormous support from the school. His dog had died a week before his own suicide.

A memory flashed to mind, from just a few weeks before. The boy, round faced, red haired, with acne. Walking through the school parking lot arguing with his mother. Probably about something trivial. Probably about something she regrets now.

No, I didn't know him, but I knew his best friend, C . His World of Warcraft, Dungeons and Dragons friend. His fencing partner; his childhood companion. The pair who hadn't quite fit in but had fit with each other perfectly.

We gave T a soldier's farewell as we filed out from the chapel and silently formed a line.

I remember watching C with the other men and boys, carrying his best friend's coffin.

The weather was chilled and solemn. I was feeling so many things, thinking so many formless thoughts.

Nobody that young should have to bury their best friend.

R didn't kill herself last month.

But T did.

I could just as easily have been at her funeral.

I was angry. Furious that someone's young life had ended. That he had felt the need to leave. That this wasn't prevented somehow.

But I was also angry because this was a twist ending. The kind of ending in a novel that leaves everybody disappointed. Out of the blue a stranger had killed himself and I was at his funeral and I didn't know for whom or what I was grieving.

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I have said enough.

I want to point out a few things in my story.

When I told my mum I wanted to see a GP, she said I wasn't ill enough. She was under the impression that all that a GP could do was prescribe meds or refer to me to a specialist. And I didn't need either, surely.

It was only later that I learned It's true that I didn't want meds, but I could have accessed free or low cost counseling services for six weeks. I wasn't aware of this fact. There was little information that I could access at the time.

Another problem was stigma. I spent the next year trying to promote mental health. I wanted to talk about fostering mental health and wellbeing. My message was positive, but the response was tentative. Admittedly, I know there were few factors involved in this reception - T's '

death being major one. Retrospectively I understand more because think it is very hard for educators know just *how* to handle mental health issues in schools. I'm trying my best just now to figure out how is the best way to talk about it.

There seems to be a fear that if you discuss mental health on an open level, more mental health problems are going to arise in students. This is not necessarily the case. I feel it has more to do with how the information is presented. What I do know is that prevention is always better than a cure. Creating a community which encourages openness and information about support networks will significantly reduce the burden of illness. If, on the other hand, schools take a more conservative approach - not openly advertising support but tackling issues on a small scale as they arise - it's inevitable that individuals are going to fall through the cracks.

I don't want to be a downer. But neither do I want to be coddled. What I do want is to challenge schools to be proactive in a mental health strategy. I want schools to teach the importance of resilience and tangible coping skills. I want principals and teachers to establish strong network and support systems to ensure the wellbeing of both staff and students.

And don't get me wrong, the school's response to our scenario was excellent during that morning of R's very public attempt. They called the parents and police. The psychologist was present and supportive. I want to emphasise this. However, this was not the case for most of the year. The previous psychologist had left, so there was a major gap in services available. We had one teacher who was also our chaplain with some counselor training. She was pregnant and had a two year old child, and so was only in three days a week. She taught classes so I could only see her at lunch times. I could not access her help and I gave up until the school employed a psychologist. I know that finding new staff can often be difficult. But let's speculate that a school is in the process of replacing its one and only toilet block; would it provide no other alternative or replacement during that period of transition? Or let's just say you rent out a house. The heating system busts in the middle of winter. What are you going to tell the residents - you'll fix it in three months, but in the meantime, they'd better huddle up and put on a blanket?

I don't know how many schools give salaries to in-house psychologists. What I do know is that the psychologist was the only person who made a real difference to our situation, as a professional who had previously dealt with cases of Borderline Personality Disorder. Before she arrived, there was little communication between staff and ourselves and a lot of anxiety and distrust. She was the mediator. She met with us individually and in groups, consolidated and relayed our sentiments to other staff. I would love to see qualified psychologists in each and every school. That's my ideal of course, and I know it's an ideal that would take a lot of time and money to realise. A scheme like this does not exist in a formal sense, as far as I know. But if the Liberal Government is serious enough about young people's mental health to create a national

commission, then I would like to see them follow through with some action. The Government's proposed diverting of funds to chaplains removes students' choice of having a secular counselor, possibly alienating non-religious students from getting any kind of assistance at all. I've got nothing against pastoral care, but the fact is that it is in no way equivalent to training in counseling and the mental health field. Ultimately the best chaplains will still only be able to provide information for local mental health services. Can't we do better than that for our young people?

I also want to point out the reactions of some of my friends and peers. Some offered support. Many of my friends felt alienated from R , which is understandable. But others did not offer any comfort or advice - only criticism. They made us feel like it was our fault, yet I fell into a situation that became unavoidable. I was trying to avoid it, believe me. But I didn't have a say in whether or not I wanted to hear bad news or in whether or not I cared. I want to change this judgemental way of thinking, wherever it exists. I want schools to have a positive, open culture surrounding mental health. A lot could be done with government promotion of mental wellbeing as a public issue. A lot of this has to start from the ground up as well. Individuals and communities and businesses need to speak up and recognise mental wellbeing as a priority.

As well, I want to know how to improve the mental health system itself. You can say what you like about how R knowingly did what she did in hospital because she thought she was in a place where nothing could actually happen to her. But the fact that she even got close to trying is a testament to an understaffed, under resourced system. How did anybody let this happen? I want an answer to this question. At the time of writing, I don't really have a solution.

I'm under no illusion that some of R's actions may have been histrionic and exaggerated; acts to garner sympathy, to show us how much pain she felt. Conversely, I don't deny that R's pain was very real. It's left me baffled to be honest. Many friends and peers have questioned how much of it to take seriously. I look back and I try to tell myself that I was overreacting. At the same time I'm not quite sure that I was.

And to speak more personally once again, I don't know how much of my depression was caused by R . Academic stress was a contributing factor, but those circumstances threw me into deeper darkness. Expectations from teachers who didn't understand my situation made this worse, by making it harder for me to make my own choices.

You could still say that was a still a year full of a lot of success. From a far away view that's probably all that you could have seen. A girl at a private religious school with good grades. Music. Extracurriculars.

Except that's only one side of me. It's the person they minted into the medallion they gave me at the end of year twelve. But there was so much internal cost to that external image.



People tell me that I'm positive person. Quiet. Calm. Intelligent. Empathetic. Good at listening. Yeah, I can say a lot of good things about myself.

But I'm still pretty great at invalidation. I'm great at denying that I've ever been mentally unwell. I'm pretty good at hiding it too. The chronically depressed boy who called me on the phone every week to me before exams, my best friend, *my own father*, they all said to me:

'It shows your strength of character that you never suffered the mental illness while supporting your friends.'

I think it more just goes to show that I don't talk about myself enough. I don't count my strengths enough. Well look at me here, I'm counting them. I hate cliches. I reject the illusions and comforts that make us avoid reality. When  $\tau$  died, the outpouring of love for him was incredible. People who had never spoken to him were now declaring in emoticon adorned facebook statuses that he was now with God and the angels. I guess maybe people really did care. Or maybe human nature likes to explain away tragedy in a way it can understand.

On the other hand, I remembered a lot of silence to do with  $R$ . People must have known, but nobody broached the subject with me. Why does there have to be death for people to notice the burden of mental illness?

Stripped of heavenly images and religious words, mortality remains. I've never been more aware of it. We don't know when we are going to die. Our beliefs cannot change this fact.

I'm no longer inclined to believe anymore in cliches or in illusive comfort. I've learned that truth is not always comfortable. But resilience is something you can cultivate in spite of an oppressive world; if given time. Perhaps quite paradoxically, knowledge of death has made me want to live. I want to take as much life as I can - while I still can. Right now I am strong. I am optimistic about the future. I know that things are just as likely to get better as to get worse. Life has hardened me into a realist. I'm ok with that. I'm motivated. I have goals.

It was nine months before I told my Dad the whole story. Vocalising it made me realise how the experience was still red raw. He said we should go for a walk. We walked for a long time. On a whim we decided to pass through a stormwater tunnel by the creek; a long curved passageway marked with graffiti tags and littered with cans. We walked in the middle where it was pitch black and wet. In the centre I could see nothing; could only smell dampness and must. I've never physically experienced such total darkness. We thought about going back. But I kept one hand attached to the wall, and the other in my father's firm grip and took one careful step after the next. Soon enough there was a light in the distance - first dim but growing steadily. We made it to the other side - a little muddy; a little dusty.

The afternoon sun was bright.

*\* And in our honesty,  
Together we will walk  
Out of our nightminds and into the light  
At the end of the fight.'*

*Missy Higgins - Nightminds*

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