

## Do No Harm

I heard about my brother today. His girlfriend called. It was during the day so I didn't panic when the phone rang. When I heard his ring tone I should have regardless of the time. I expect the midnight phone calls. I'm sure he'll be dead when the phone goes off at one in the morning. I'm a-stay-at-home mom during the day; a student in the evening. No one calls me at one in the morning. The person on the line is usually someone I don't know; maybe a new girlfriend. She'll be distraught, scared, and most likely unsure of what to say or do. Sometimes she'll cry. "Your number was in his cell listed as 'sister call if 911.'" I always expect any number of scenarios I've made up in my mind. He killed himself. He got into a drunken driving accident and he died along with a family of four. He got shot during a bar fight. I've played them out in my head over and over. I've habituated myself to the words that I will inevitably hear.

Today the daylight phone call was like one of the midnight calls I wait for. He's in the hospital. His latest girlfriend is sweet and very charming and far too young to deal with this type of thing. The time I saw her after my brother had taken a razor to himself she had a blank look in eyes. There is nothing there. I watched her disappear right in front of me. Perhaps she's protecting herself; making a folder inside her mind in which to file away "the horror" of what she's seen. She's much younger than he is and I feel bad for her sometimes. I used to feel bad for myself but not really anymore. This is the second suicide attempt she's witnessed. I've witnessed or known of seven, maybe eight? I've lost count over the years. He's thirty three now. His first attempt was when he was sixteen. The car he drove into a telephone pole looked bad but he was drunk and managed to escape relatively unharmed. It was the last time anyone gave him a car.

My brother's recent attempts have been a little harder to deal with because we've grown closer over the last couple of years. We're burned into each other's souls. He's usually drunk when he does it. He's a carpenter by trade so he has a toolbox of lethal weapons. Awls. Saws. Blades. Razors. These aren't cries for help. He really tries. Each time he does just a little more permanent damage to himself. This time he cut into his arm so deeply he severed some muscle and nicked a tendon.

His arms are like the red highlighted Interstate routes on a map. All the slices are in various stages of healing. Some are red and raw. Looking at them makes my skin hurt. I get a tingle inside my body like it's trying to reject the pain I should be feeling when I look at them. Some have faded to the natural skin color with just a raised scar. He sends me pictures from his cell phone after he gets stitched up. Once he sent me a picture right after he did it. I don't know why he does that. I hate to see it. Maybe he just wants me to become desensitized. Maybe he needs to know that the one person who can truly understand him has seen what he's done. It hurts to see them but in the end, I file them away in my own mental folder.

After his attempts he usually finds a way to get to my house. It's calm here. Quiet. No one tries to psychoanalyze him. I just let him be. I don't turn him away because he's my brother and I love him and I'm mentally ill too so we have a silent understanding. He has more of an alcohol problem but that, mixed with whatever the doctors, in about five minutes of discussion decide which diagnosis to give him the next time he goes in just makes matters worse. I have Bi-Polar Disorder. Major depression and dangerous mania. I'm on meds. I'm lucky. I have a doctor and health insurance. I've done most of the hard work and behavioral modification on my own. I fail

sometimes. A marriage in the toilet because my ex-husband couldn't handle the illness. I no had real support until I made it into an intensive outpatient program.

My brother's not jealous of me even though I feel bad that I'm much better off than he is. I had a schizophrenic father who put a bullet through his head. He has a father, who has any number of serious personality disorders (undiagnosed and unmedicated) and was abusive to both of us; me on a lesser degree. I was able to escape knowing this man wasn't my real father. My brother is stuck with him. Alcoholism runs through our mother's side of the family. One day we were talking and he said, "You know what? From the day we were born we didn't have a fucking chance." He's right. We didn't.

When he comes for a visit we don't talk about what he did around my kids. My oldest daughter knows. She's smart. She's seen the look and she's also seen me at the bottom of the pit. The youngest is just thrilled to see her uncle. He wears long sleeves and tries his best to seem happy and normal but he's so weak and she can tell. He doesn't pick her up and throw her around. Just hugs. It takes a lot out of him to physically heal.

He's gaunt looking; almost wraith-like. He's here but he's not here. He's trapped between the living world and the dying world and as hard as he pounds his fists on the walls, he can't break through either side. It's a far cry from the way he looked when he was running and winning marathons. His face is sunken in and his shoulders are droopy. Helpless. Hopeless. I think he tried really hard this time to find a way to stop the pain. He was left with physical and mental pain. Now he has to deal with both.

Right now he has no significant fine motor skills in the arm where he hit the tendon and the muscle. He can touch his thumbs to his fingertips. That's about it. The doctors say with some physical therapy he should get 90-98% of his original strength and

range of motion back. I wonder, as I'm sure he does, whether or not he can slam a hammer effectively into a nail or ever do fine detail woodwork again.

I stopped wondering where all this mental health "care and concern" was in regard to my brother. He was put on a 72 hour psych hold three times. A psychiatrist always comes down to see him. The problem is he's usually drunk when he gets there. Drunk and covered with blood. This last time the nurse told me he was combative. But you see, when you're drunk, some don't consider it a true suicide attempt. You were just out of it. You pulled a Mel Gibson. I didn't mean it. I was drunk. I'm sobered up now. Could you put in a few stitches for me? Can I go home?

His dad never did him any good. He snatched away the only chance he had to start out in a program the right way. When he was a teenager and could be forced into programs my dad would pull him out. His son had no problems. His son would not be labeled as a drunk or a nut. No one should know about this. Keep your fat mouth shut. He can't be president or a leader of men if he's a drunk or is mentally ill. His dad needs to read a bit more history I think.

It's funny but I actually think he's listed as a seeker in the hospital he goes to. He's categorized as someone who comes to the hospital with no real problems seeking drugs or attention. One day they'll be wrong and he'll die because they "treat 'em and street 'em." That's their policy. Oh humanity. Oh love thy neighbor. Oh, just stitch him and ditch him. Hippocratic Oath? Hypocritical Oath? Seems to be a much better moniker for that profound promise physicians take to do no harm. My brother has two armfuls of harm.

The harm decreases as the insurance increases. I suspect my brother would be sitting in a clean, warm robe with group therapy twice a day, meds galore, meetings, and doctors to stick their heads in just to check in and see how you're doing. Maybe he's get a hot, wet towel over his face in the morning before they shave him (he shouldn't be using razors but that freshly shaved feeling really lift's your spirits, doesn't it?). Would you like some aftershave sir? It might sting a lit...oh, well, I guess it won't sting anymore than cleaning those wounds with alcohol, will it. You can handle it.

I don't believe in God (or gods if that's your thing). To some degree, neither does my brother; but he tries. Sometimes he sits in churches when he's distraught but I think it's more about the serenity or more likely a desperate cry for counsel that won't cost him money he doesn't have. In all the time he's been there he's never been approached by a member of the cloth. No priest or minister ever came to him and asked if he wanted..*needed* to talk. Isn't it a priest's job to tend to the sick? I guess the guy sitting in the pew with clothing that hangs on him and the look of a Concentration Camp survivor isn't sick enough. I guess I ask too much from priests and ministers. They probably figure he's praying and they should leave him alone. He's praying that they *don't* leave him alone. He's just far too weak in so very many ways. He can't get up out of that pew and ask for help.

There are a lot of people out there that think my brother and I are gifted because we're mentally ill; as though it's a precursor to intelligence and ability. The brilliant ones are usually *touched*. Richard Dreyfuss. Ernest Hemingway. Abbie Hoffman. John Forbes Nash Jr. Edvard Munch. Emil Post. Virginia Woolf. One of the dearest friends I have is an unmedicated bi-polar from Mississippi. Like my brother, he suffers without services.

Some days are good. A lot are bad. He is also the most gifted writers and one of the smartest people I've ever met. I was identified as "gifted" in third grade. My brother is gifted as well. He designs, builds things and has a creative vision that other contractors envy. I think *I'd* like return this *gift* for a refund. I don't want it and I'm pretty sure not one person out there that suffers the way we do wants it. Ask me any day of the week whether I'd trade my mental illness for a dull, uninspired ordinary life and I'd say, "Yes, please."

We just have to take care of *ourselves*. After my last breakdown and my brother's last attempt I've embraced the idea of Humanism. It's just you and me, baby. Let me take some of the load off your shoulders for a bit. Eat something. Lay down on my sofa and rest. Will you let me try to help you? Will you help me if I need it? If God made this world He definitely ditched us. Maybe He liked some other creation better. Humanity is the black sheep in His family.

Instead of being treated, he's right outside the ER's door with a 50¢ paper ice pack wrapped around each arm, stitches that were done too soon, and a script for Ibuprofen. He's a user and instead of taking pain medication they'll just have him pop a couple of over the counter pills that won't do anything for the pain he's in; mentally or physically. He'll have a discharge sheet in his hand telling him to follow up with the family doctor he doesn't have. He'll crumble it up and toss it on the ground. Maybe throw it the garbage if he's feeling magnanimous.

He told me the other day that he was seriously considering taking a trip to California. Definitely with "an aching in his heart" though not the one that Robert Plant probably meant. He says he wants to sit on the sand and watch the waves. Maybe walk

on the beach and feel the crisp, cold water mix with the hot sand under his feet. I think it'll be good for him. I hope it's not the last time I see him. I still want him to build my seven year old a dollhouse. I don't know if that will happen. He'll squeeze that tennis ball in his hands for months. Maybe he'll work with wood again. Maybe not.

I feel like he's dead already and I've already mourned him. Maybe that's why I'm so unemotional sometimes. Hard. It drives my mother crazy. I guess she thinks I should be weeping and wailing and gnashing my teeth when I get those phone calls. I don't. I'm calm. Cool. Collected. The weeping is her job. I answer the phone. Where? When? How? Did they find him a bed? No? Of course not. I can try to get him a bed up here. Oh, you're discharging him tomorrow? Make sure he tells the doctor that he can discuss his case with me. What's the long term plan? Oh, there isn't one. I'll try to figure out something myself if I can. I have the whole encounter memorized. It never changes.

If he does kill himself I can see the funeral very clearly, as though it's already happened a dozen times over. His father, pulling at what hair he has left saying, "Oh, beloved son (who I never really gave a damn about) why did you do this to me?!" My mother, the honest and loving parent of the two weeping and crying, "Oh why did you do this to yourself?! Why couldn't I help you?" And me? What about me. I suppose I'll just say to myself, "I'll miss you younger but bigger brother. I hope you've found some peace." No one wants to see a loved one take their own life, but in the end, sometimes it's better than to sit there and watch them suffer and mutilate themselves until all the blood and life has run out of them; until they are emaciated ghosts of what they used to be with nothing ahead of them but the return to the bottle, the needle, the blow, the razor;

whatever their coping mechanism is. Is it a bad thing to realize that sometimes a life is over before the heart stops beating? Is it a bad thing to mourn someone who isn't dead? Is it a bad thing to not feel sad if my brother takes his own life? If he does I'll miss him. A lot.