

The ICU  
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When surrounded by fluorescent lights and large crucifixes and lines of Scripture after chasing several fistfuls of pills with mediocre bourbon, my first thought was whether I'd been wrong all this time to be a born-again atheist. My family is Catholic on one side and Jewish on the other (though emphasis on the "ish"), so I've got guilt on both sides but heathenism resonated most with me. Indeed, the one church service I attended was merely in an effort to see the inside of Westminster Abbey on a Sunday morning, and my taking of communion despite never being baptized convinced my mother that I'd surely be sent to a hell in which neither of us genuinely believed. You see, I'd always scoffed at religion, often in front of and to the discomfort of my religious friends and relatives. (Wasn't that at least half of the point?)

I always figured that if I were going to hell because of my atheism, casual sex, drinking, and smoking weed, well, the company there would probably be better there than heaven anyway.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps I'd be living it up with (okay, maybe not *living* it up with...) my fellow heathens from the comedy and concert worlds as Mick and Keith played "Sympathy for the Devil." I could make that sacrifice.

It wasn't that I never tried the religion thing. It was more that the one time I prayed was the night before the 2004 election, and since America voted the wrong way that year, I stopped trying to pray altogether, just to err on the safe side. Personally, up until my mid-twenties, I'd never given death or dying much thought. I suppose I subscribed to the Woody Allen philosophy: "I'm not afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens."

When you're surrounded by those bright lights and crucifixes, it's all questions and no answers.

"Am I alive?"

"Am I dead?"

"Is this my fateful transition from miserable to horrible à la *Annie Hall*?"

"How did I get here and how the fuck do I get out?"

"Did I lock the front door?"

"Are the cats fed?"

"Is the stove on?"

Why I wondered about the status of my stove when I hadn't cooked in a solid seven months is beyond me. The most action my crock pot had seen in a year was one of my cats taking a nap in it from time to time. My mother would chalk my questions up to the excessive amount of Sagittarius in my astrological chart, which she considered to be a reliable recipe for neurosis. She also insisted that my acting out was not a consequence of my diagnoses under the DSM, but rather on account of my Saturn return. She isn't doing much to change Berkeley's reputation.

The first clue that you're alive is that you are breathing through an oxygen tube. And then the IV tubes that are taped to both forearms and pulling slightly at the hairs but thankfully covering up a few of my five year-old scars that I acquired over the course of my early to mid twenties thanks to the comfort I sought in a box cutter and the beads of blood that would slide down skin. I

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<sup>1</sup> I say this with the caveat that I often fantasized about Karl Rove and Mitch McConnell burning in hell and if we ran into each other there for eternity, well, you can be sure I'd often be thinking of Sartre's observation that hell is other people, and Bill Hicks's contemplation of a People Who Hate People Club.

remembered my mother's response when I came home one day with sleeves that didn't quite cover the gashes I'd caused. I supposed it was asking a lot of her to expect that she'd "radically accept" this new habit, though I hadn't quite expected a tutorial in the art of using concealer. Apparently blending the makeup is important.

I then listened meditatively to the *beep, beep, beep* of heart rate monitors in my room and down the hall. Then came the inevitable realization that I wasn't in hell, but rather somewhere much worse: the ICU of a conservative Catholic hospital. *I fucked up my suicide attempt. How pathetic. Kill me now.*

I guess that's not the kind of request that will be acted upon by the ICU nurses, or at least not intentionally. I had graduated with honors from UC Berkeley and had a Ph.D. from Columbia University, but I didn't take a class in Suicide and apparently I wouldn't have aced it effortlessly like I did everything else.

As I realized that the tube that I felt between my legs was a catheter, the next thought that consumed me was a mortifying tabulation of the number of strangers who had probably just seen me naked – *really* naked. Surely more than the number of men I'd brought home in the recent months. I hadn't shaved my legs for a few days because it was winter and I was single and having more than a slight dry spell, though at least on my tight budget I was going through razors at a slower rate. I started to regret wearing the old cotton panties that I reserve for days that I'm on my period. And I'd gained a couple of pounds since discovering the nachos grande with the really good chunky salsa at the Irish pub that just opened dangerously proximate to my apartment, and I was self-conscious about it, but clearly not *quite* self-conscious enough to adapt my eating habits having remembered how good some food tastes.

I dearly missed the discipline that I had maintained while in graduate school. Water and iced tea to feel full, 400 calories of food per day, with a potential additional 200 calorie allowance if I had liquor instead of beer and if rather than taking the subway, I walked from my Harlem apartment to my twice-a-week psychiatry appointment in Columbus Circle (and with diuretics, laxatives, and diet pills thrown in to the mix as well, just for safe measure). When my electrolyte abnormalities and malnutrition led my doctors to mandate a normal caloric intake, I found myself ill at ease, though I ultimately did find myself replacing sex with food, and replacing obsessive calorie counting with emotions that, despite years of therapy, I still felt ill-equipped to process. And even as my malnutrition resolved, I felt the sense of shame and failure as I was forced to replace my size 2 jeans and size XS tops with clothes into which I could actually fit when eating 1,500 calories a day. For weeks, I'd felt guilt with every bite that I took, but eventually, the allure of nachos got to me. Damn.

Now I imagined not just my own, but the ICU nurses' dismay at the extra roll of flesh, as though that consideration would trounce their evaluation of the cocktail of medications that I had dutifully prepared and consumed with Velvet Underground music blaring in the background. Seriously, does *anyone* try to off themselves listening to the Beach Boys?<sup>2</sup>

I contemplated – and, let's face it, *reveled in* – their judgments at my many tattoos, though I hadn't gone through with the most comical tattoo idea I had: a tribute to Bruce Springsteen in the form of a lower back tattoo of the line "tramps like us." My ink is all inspired by rock n' roll, which hasn't always coexisted peacefully with the religious community in which I unfortunately found myself at the time living in the Midwest.

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<sup>2</sup> Yes, I know about Brian Wilson's mental illness. But seriously, "Heroin" and "Oh! Sweet Nuthin'" are *much* better depression songs than "Sloop John B."

“Miranda, did you mean to do this to yourself?” they would then ask when realizing that I had begun to regain consciousness, though still foggy and recovering from hypothermia, bradycardia, and severe hypotension. I wanted to laugh, though I sensed that they weren’t in the mood for humor. Surely they knew that I hadn’t merely misread the label on my prescription bottles. *Why no, doc. I took the wrong three bottles of pills with alcohol in one sitting. Silly me.*

“Do you think you have a problem with drinking?”

“No,” I answered without hesitation. “But I sometimes find sobriety suboptimal.”

“How many drinks do you usually have per week?”

Like when asked about my number of sexual partners, I thought that dividing by three was a good answer to report. “About seven.”

“And I see in the notes here that you have a significant history of experiencing domestic violence, sexual assault, chronic medical issues...”

“Yep, well, living the dream.”

“You realize you use humor as a defense mechanism, right?”

“Some days more effectively than others.” He gave me the worse laugh of all, a pity laugh, and sensing that a major breakthrough wasn’t in the cards, he said he’d visit another time in the evening rounds.

My unfortunate status as a bleeding heart liberal, pro-choice patient in a Catholic hospital then ignited my political rabble-rousing sensibilities, which in this case manifested in the form of making such inquiries as, “You guys do abortions, right?” They curtly reminded me that I wasn’t pregnant – an insulting reminder of my dry spell – but informed me that no, they didn’t.

“Can someone discuss with me the various birth control options available to me other than abstinence? *Surely* given your opposition to abortion, you’d want to reduce their necessity by encouraging responsible contraception usage, right? *Right?*” Spoiler alert: they didn’t.

I could tell that I’d need to take my opposition to the next level: hate watching Fox News and providing my own running commentary. With each minute that I watched Sean Hannity from my hospital room, I found myself swearing loudly in a New York accent that I had never actually acquired in the first place, morphing by the minute into a mafia-like caricature as I flipped my non-IV-attached hand under my chin in a gesture I’d seen by angry Italian Americans and more prominently, by Stephen Colbert to Justice Antonin Scalia in the White House Correspondents Dinner.

When you’re in the hospital after an attempt, unless you’ve got an incessantly chatty babysitter looking after you, you’ve got nothing but time to think, unless you’re the sort to instead spend that time watching *Seinfeld* reruns, wondering if anyone accidentally slipped you Junior Mints. (I’ve read about such people, you know, in books.) I felt my stomach turn in knots and I watched the *drip, drip, drip* through the IVs – almost meditatively – though it occurred to me that I wasn’t entirely sure what medications they were giving me, and I didn’t entirely care.

I thought about my last in-person conversation before I took the pills. I was with my friend Lola, with whom I had arancini – a.k.a., goodness on a plate – and Manhattans because we thought that made us sound and feel grown-up, though our selection of Manhattans rather than Old Fashioneds also enabled us to still eat maraschino cherries despite adulthood status. That was, indeed, our longtime goal. That, and the dulling of the senses until life felt almost tolerable.

And as Lola asked me the last time that I was genuinely, and not simply fleetingly happy, I shifted the maraschino cherry around in the glass with the swivel stick, buying myself time as I contemplated whether, in recent memory, I had ever been happy for more than a few moments here or there. And the amount of time it took to think of an example made me cry, rimming the

cocktail glass with salty tears even though the salted rim wasn't appropriate for our drinks of choice that night. But then with a cavalier smile and coming my fingers through my hair, I made a sly joke that got a laugh and that I really wish I'd written down because I can't remember it for the life of me. Because hey, make defense mechanisms great again.

I couldn't shake the feeling of, "How did I get here?" as I thought about all of the woeful Shakespeare lines like, "What a falling off was there."<sup>3</sup> No number of academic degrees could – or *ever* would – prepare me to "radically accept" the deaths of two close friends in under a year, especially since they were both by suicide. And having fantasized about suicide as well and watched my friends "succeed" where I "failed," it was going to take some more therapy to work through this triggering of my inferiority complex.

I was so sure that my shrink and I had a breakthrough moment right around the corner and I wouldn't need him anymore. I guess that ship sailed, though truth be told it had been harder and harder to open up to him once I found him on Tinder. There's never a better time to turn things around in an awkward therapy session by saying, "So, 44 and never married, no kids. Why do you think that is?" Deflection can be a wonderful thing.

Our last session, he had sat in his chair quietly, watching me as I fumbled with my scarf and fantasized about its potential as a makeshift noose. I hate it when shrinks play the quiet game, so I said, "Penny for your thoughts?" He smiled, but didn't say anything. "Okay, fine, doc, \$200 for your thoughts."

"I think there are some subconscious reasons why you keep putting yourself in positions where you're stuck between a rock and a hard place."

"I don't think so. I'm pretty self-aware. I don't think there's much going on in my subconscious that I don't know about."

"Well, Miranda, that's the thing about the subconscious..." *Christ, who the fuck pays \$200 an hour to see a psychoanalyst to defiantly deny the existence of a subconscious?*

Ultimately, I think he grew weary of me by the end of the session because it ended in him suggesting that I read self-help books. I wasn't sure if that's how shrinks break up with patients, but I had been under the impression that shrinks were supposed to be better communicators than that. Besides, if I were going to get a "you had this wisdom in you all along" lesson, I'd have liked to get that lesson \$10,000 ago.

I imagined a religious friend of mine saying, "There's a *reason* you survived. There's a *reason* you're still here." The greater purpose and all that bullshit. I was willing to entertain that possibility until, oh, about 11 o'clock at night on November 8, 2016, at which point I was determined that if there is a god, he's a fucking sadist I want nothing to do with.

Because what non-depressed people seem unable to grasp is that the goal is not simply living, but *wanting* to live. And believe me, there's a difference.

I'd just never expect to feel so lost at 30, or so unable to turn the hurting off.

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<sup>3</sup> I refuse to associate that line with its morose quoting in *Love Story*. If you don't get that reference, congratulations on not spending 100 precious minutes of your life watching that movie. Or apologies for missing out on a sappy classic that appeals to a teenager's melancholy. One of the two.