

The Suicide Button

To all of those I've ever loved. You know who you are.

(Hint: It's all of you.)

“May the day of my birth perish, and the night that said, ‘A boy is conceived!’

That day—may it turn to darkness...”

Job 3:3-4

Coming Home

If I hadn't been dwelling on suicide, I probably wouldn't have come home for the funeral.

It just so happened that the holidays were coming right afterwards, so I figured I might as well stay for those too. I don't know why. I wasn't in the mood for holidays. I wasn't in the mood for funerals, I don't think. I wasn't in the mood in general.

I understood why a lot of other people didn't come home, but for me I thought it was nice to be a part of something. I don't know why. She meant something or seemed like she should still mean something at least. Death meant something, for sure.

It was a thing.

It was another funeral.

Like a wedding or a high school reunion.

Another thing, with people I knew, or used to know.

I went anyway.

It was not the first funeral for me or anyone else I knew but it felt like a big one to me at least.

It would be.

I guess all funerals felt important at the time. I was still collecting them. It was before I got too old to keep counting.

That didn't take long.

People were always dying.

There would always be funerals.

Counting them felt selfish.

This one belonged to Lila McKye who drove her Toyota across a median and into a pillar at 110 miles-per-hour along I-95 south of Baltimore, headed to DC. It was the middle of the night and the road was empty. She sped up as she approached the pillar, tearing across the grass and leaving skidmarks on the pavement. She left a note on social media before she did it. The note was incoherent, I'd heard. I didn't see it before it was taken down. The strange detail, for me at least, was that she had been wearing her seatbelt when she crashed.

Why would anyone wear a safety belt to commit suicide?

We were long out of touch and Lila had become just another face on social media to me at this point, no longer a part of my daily life. I will get into that later, when I am ready. I still miss her.

I said I was coming home to pay my respects, which I was, but a part of what tugged me back to Baltimore had nothing to do with respect.

It was that seatbelt.

I felt like that one detail was wrapped around my neck, pulling me in the direction of home.

First-World Problems

I was aware that my problems were all what people call “first world problems” and for that I felt weak and ashamed for having them or seeing any of them as problems in the first place. I was not being hunted by warlords. I went to bed hungry sometimes but never starved to death. My problems were the only problems I had access to. As far as I could tell, I had human problems. I probably would’ve had them no matter what world I lived in because all of my problems came down to one major problem at the root: Me.

Attempted

My suicide attempts were all trash. One time, for instance, I got wasted on rye and pills and tried to cut my own head off with a pen knife. I passed out and woke up pasted to the couch with dried blood and now my neck is covered in tiny scars like it was attacked by a tribe of stray cats. There were lots of other stupid ones. Once I put a .22 caliber bullet between my teeth and tried to hit it

with a hammer. I ended up with a lot of dental fees. Even as a child, I used to swim to the bottom of the pool and hold my breath.

It never worked.

Nothing worked.

All the overdoses had only turned into bad hangovers that made me want to disappear even more than I had in the first place.

That is the thing. Right there. I never wanted to die. I wanted to disappear. I didn't want to be a dead body. I wanted to stop existing altogether.

Kick a mushroom and it may turn to dust, but the spores will spread and grow.

Pick a plum and the tree will make another. Throw the plum on the ground and there is a chance the pit will grow into a tree full of plums.

Even hard skeletons became soil. Who wanted to be a skeleton?

I wanted to be vapor, mist, then nothing at all.

But there I was, putting on a black suit and navy blue tie with little shamrocks on it, using my mother's bathroom mirror to ready myself for the funeral of a person I had not seen in years.

Instead of disappearing, it felt like I was reappearing by coming back home. I had no clue what I was doing there. I caught a flash of goofy smile for a second as I shaved my face in the mirror. It was not a happy goofy smile, but one of pure bewilderment.

The Guest Room

The guest room at my mother's house was clean like a hotel. It was very different from my bedroom in the old house we lived in when I was a kid. There were decorative maps on the walls: Paris, London, Rome, Baltimore. She even had one of those heat lamps that ran on a timer in the bathroom. I sat in the bathroom and let the warm red light heat my cold skin. There was a sunroof overhead that played music with the deep fall winds. It had not snowed yet. I hoped it wouldn't.

I imagined the window shattering and being drowned in snow. I imagined the house coming down on my mother. I imagined it happening on my watch. It has been my mother, or at least the thought of her, that has kept me alive almost as much as my fear of dying or cowardice at the end.

On the other hand, people were always calling those who kill themselves cowards. I wondered if these people had ever tried to commit suicide. I thought it took more courage than they realized to go all the way with something like that. To stare down oblivion or hell or heaven whatever it was they thought they believed in when they were alive. It took some amount of balls at least, I thought.

Maybe not balls, but something. Desperation, apathy, recklessness, I thought, but it was still hard not coming back around to some kind of fear at the end. Sometimes we were so afraid of life that we ran from it. Other times we were so afraid of death that we ran towards it.

So maybe those people were right, some of the time. I was not sure whether that explained anything though.

I thought about this stuff a lot. Too much. I also imagined my own many death(s) every day. I'd been told it was called "ideation".

Ideation sounded funny to me. It made it sound like a good thing. It made it sound like I was coming up with good ideas, not as if bad ones were flooding my skull and bubbling around on the inside like a boiling, black liquid. Ideation. No, that did not sound exactly right. I was not the author of these ideas.

These ideas came from somewhere else.

COPD

My mother had emphysema/COPD and so I listened to her cough at night, struggling to breathe through the fluid in her lungs. She was drowning very slowly. Part of me felt wrong for not coming home sooner, that it took someone else's funeral to get me here. I hadn't even been planning to come home for the holidays until I had heard the news of the funeral. I wondered, if I didn't have social media, if I would have waited to come home until it had been my mother's funeral I was visiting.

As a child, I had always thought that I would kill myself the moment after I had buried my parents, especially my mother. When I was very young, I imagined them dying at once or very close in time. Later that would change. But I promised myself that I would wait until they were gone and then I would follow them. Parents aren't supposed to see their children die. I knew that, so I felt guilty every time I tried to go back on that promise. Maybe that was part of why I had been so bad at suicide. I still had something pulling me back, even though I couldn't feel it at the moment. Sometimes we feel things. Other times we don't. The worst times are the times when we want to and we can't or we don't want to and we can't stop, won't stop.

Over It

You ever just kind of over it? I was so over whatever it was.

The Suicide Button

I had forgotten all about The Suicide Button until I heard from Anthony, the Manslug. It was something we had dreamed up in high school. The Suicide Button must have been a secret part of my own desire to come back home, it being so tied into both car wrecks and high school, but honestly I had forgotten all about it. For all of the death spirals of dark thoughts in my head, for all the times I had mouthed the words “I want to disappear, I want to die, I want to be dead” or sang the same words as a gentle chorus in the shower, I had forgotten about the button. It was good to hear from Anthony the Manslug, who still responded to his nickname without hesitation. I liked using old nicknames with people. I thought it made me sound jolly.

“Manslug!” I said when my mother handed me the phone. She had been laughing/coughing into it for a few minutes before I walked into the kitchen. She had always liked talking to my friends, strangers, sales people, anybody at all, and Anthony had been a close friend.

Anthony responded very slowly. He did everything slowly, which was how he had earned his nickname.

“I heard you were in town,” he said, as if that wasn’t obvious. “For the funeral. I figured you might be - made sense, sort of - but I didn’t have your new cell phone number.”

I guess I hadn’t given it to him. Had I given it to anyone?

“Well, you found me!” I said. “We need to catch up while I am in town, bud. Are you going to the funeral?” Now I was afraid I sounded too jolly. We hadn’t spoken in a long time and

we were talking about a funeral after all. I lowered my voice and repeated myself with a cough. “I mean, to the funeral,” I said. “To Lila’s funeral, I mean.”

“I,” he started and then he made a slow chewing sound. “I doubt if I am going,” he said. “To any funerals.”

“Oh.”

I was going to ask why not but I knew why not already. I knew Manslug had not been close with Lila but he didn’t even bothered to say that. Instead he asked me if I remembered The Suicide Button.

Critical Self-Analysis

It didn't feel that hard to believe that humanity’s best evolutionary trait might be to make jokes about ourselves via critical self-analysis. Did other animals feel the need to look inward constantly? It felt like picking on ourselves made some people immune to it and other people do it all the time in an effort to get better, to find something or cover something up.

Better at what though?

Being alive?

There must’ve been a way to live without worrying about getting better at it all the time. We didn’t seem to be getting any better, despite all the worry.

Meditation

If you’ve ever been the kind of person who asks a search engine how to meditate yourself to death, you’ll know what I am talking about when I talk about The Suicide Button. Likewise, some of those who might be reading from prison or someplace even worse might understand.

Even those of you who just don't see any point in being alive but are as afraid of uncertainty as you are of either life or death, you'll probably get why we used to think this was so funny too.

The Suicide Button was something we used to talk about while driving around at night in high school, car full of smoke, throwing beers cans and nitrous oxide cartridges out the window, speeding and sometimes crashing our cars. At first we envisioned – it had probably been my idea first although it became kind of a group joke, I guess – The Suicide Button as an automotive device, a feature that could be added on at the dealership if you bought the car fully-loaded. It would be a button located somewhere near the steering wheel – discreet and protected but large enough to hit easily in case of emergency – that would kill the driver instantly via a number of sure-fire methods. The car would fill with nitrogen gas as cyanide or ricin was injected into your feet through the pedals and bullets were fired into your skull from the back of the seat before an explosion beneath you blasted the car high into the air where it burst in a billion tiny pieces and rained down on the scene like dust. Or something like that. We were always coming up with new ways The Button would work. That was part of the fun.

The point of The Suicide Button, if you haven't figured it out yet, was to have an escape route in case you had done something irreversible while driving intoxicated like plowed over a bunch of special ed. children or barreled a truck through the lobby of a police station. It was kind of the opposite of the Jaws of Life. The Suicide Button was every driver's personal Jaws of Death, which would have probably been a better name for it.

“When escaping life is your only escape...Press The Suicide Button!”

Anyway, The Suicide Button – or The Button, as it eventually became known – became a running inside joke amongst our scene of teenagers in north Baltimore back in the day. After a while, when cell phones came into the picture, it stopped being associated with cars and became

a portable button that could be pressed at anytime, anywhere, on any occasion that one needed to badly escape from. Since we were teenagers, that felt like half of the occasions in our lives so we joked about pressing The Button a lot.

It is funny, the little jokes and things you forget and remember as you get older.

Holy Days and the Days That Surround Them

Anthony and I made plans to meet for drinks. I asked my mom how many cigarettes she smoked today and she got agitated with me. I told her I was just worrying about her because I loved her. She was putting out Christmas decorations, although she said we would not bother with a tree. I did not want to have Christmas at all this year. I told her and her face crumpled. She lit a smoke. Christmas makes people sad because it never lives up to our memories or expectations. I like the holidays nobody cares about, dumb ones like Arbor Day or Groundhog Day. I didn't want to get into a fight with her and I could feel one coming so I went outside and walked around the block, smoking one of my own. It was warm enough outside that I didn't have to button my jacket, but I knew it would get cold soon.

I thought about the seatbelt and Lila McKye's suicide in order to get my mind off my mother's own mortality. Sometimes I am drawn to conspiracy theories, even though I never believe in them. They at least attempt to explain things. I began to wonder if she hadn't killed herself but had been strapped in to the car with the pedal held down somehow. Apparently she had not even tried to brake, I heard on the group message I had been sent online. It seemed like something that happened in movies a lot, although I couldn't think of any specific movie off the top of my head. I didn't know how a person - a murderer, maybe a cabal of them - could fake a

vehicular suicide like that but I was sure it must be possible. Just about anything could be possible.

I didn't know why I was fixating on the stupid murder idea, except to let my mind wander away from itself. I also didn't know why anyone would want to murder Lila McKye, mostly because I had not seen her in years and she was barely active on social media so I didn't know much about her current situation. She never seemed like someone who would grow up to be a murder victim, but she didn't seem like someone who would grow up to commit suicide either.

When I looked up her profile after hearing the news, it turned out we were listed as Friends even though I didn't remember ever communicating with her on there. I didn't remember unblocking her. She had only posted a few pictures on there that I remembered: a beach, a castle, a pair of red leather sandals, and a funny old-looking map showing the earth as a flat object like a playing board, ringed with vast oceans and frozen mountains. Other than that, there were only pictures from when she was a teenager and before - sports teams, class photos, pictures posing in groups at parties, a few snapshots of sculptures - which had all been posted by others, mourners mostly. The whole page was filled with people wishing Lila prayers and thoughts, prayers and thoughts. It always struck me as strange that we tell dead people we are thinking about them. Social media pages were the new gravesites. I got sick of scrolling through all those thoughts and prayers after a while. Thoughts and prayers only screamed at the invisible. In a town where it felt like everyone grew up knowing everyone else, everyone definitely knew Lila and they were reminding her now.

I did not know the reason Lila and I had lost touch. We had a brief but meaningful thing - more later - once in our twenties but then we both moved away and stopped talking. We ignored each other on social media. We didn't talk. Was there a reason?

There was at first.

Why does anyone lose touch?

Usually no reason at all.

Or maybe it is just easier sometimes.

Hurts less.

Many people that I once called close friends, I just called friends now and I probably shouldn't even have called them that. I thought I should just call them people I know or more accurately, people I once knew. I would end up seeing a number of these people in the coming months. Years too. The planet was smaller than I knew at the time.

The neighborhood my mother lived in was right inside the City/County line. It was quiet there and there were a lot of families and older people who used to have families, like my mother. The children came home from school and their parents waited outside, chit-chatting, to greet them. There were a lot of animals too: rats, mice, chipmunks, squirrels, cats, dogs, birds, and foxes. Sometimes, a lost deer. We were far enough north of the harbor that she rarely saw seagulls or ducks but my mom still talked about them. My mother liked most animals, but especially water birds, I think. She used to make up stories about how she was friends with a talking duck named Gertie when I was a kid. I had believed every one of them.

I did not grow up in this neighborhood. I grew up down the street in a house that now sat empty. Before he died when I was in graduate school, my father lived over the County line on the other end of town with his girlfriend, the woman he had been cheating on my mother with for

years while they were married. They didn't get divorced when I was a child, although my younger sisters - twins - and I probably wished they had. Divorce is a young person's game. It gives you more time to heal and find a new existence. Many unhappy couples with children had the instinct to wait until their children are adults to split, but that was a mistake.

I worried about my mother living alone, dying alone, for instance, much more than I ever would have when I was a child and she was still young and working and healthy. Eligible, even.

Not that I did much to help my mother, or even come home to visit her. I always ended up frustrated or sad when I visited. I wasn't a very good son as an adult and I didn't remember being a great one as a child either.

I smoked two more cigarettes before going back inside her house.

Self as a Metaphor

The definition of a conspiracy required at least two or more people to be involved in a plot. So premeditated, cold-blooded murder could be the result of a conspiracy but it could just as easily not. The same went for suicide, I thought. I remembered movies where really rich people paid others to have them killed for life insurance. I wondered about the voices in their/our heads. Could the voices in your head conspire? Could they all get together and plot? Was that all that human thought was in the first place?

If you had never researched killing yourself through meditation, you shouldn't have tried it unless you just wanted to feel sillier and more personally mortified than you already must have. Mostly the search results would explain "self" as a metaphor. Not to mention the obvious: anyone who claims they know how to do it is still alive to pass it on, so they must not have successful firsthand experience. All of this was more than enough to make me feel stupid and

erase my search history, even if I I the only one whoever looked at my lonely computer. On the other hand, I realized the flipside of all that was anyone who had thought themselves to death would probably go unnoticed in an autopsy.

I mean, I still doubt that meditation leaves scars.

But I still always doubt everything, I think.

I will try to stay out of the present tense so it doesn't sound like I know anything right now either.

I don't.

Anyway, the brand of stupid you feel when you are doing the research is nothing compared to how much you hate yourself when you are actually trying to meditate yourself to death. Maybe on a bus, listening to a familiar voice in your head repeat "Stop beating, stop breathing, stop thinking..." over and over again, knowing how ridiculous you are, getting distracting as you wonder if anyone else on the bus is trying to do the exact same thing. This is a feeling of silent, secret humiliation.

I can only speak from my own past experiences though. Maybe others have found the same exercise therapeutic.

Hell, like I said: Maybe one day it could actually work.