

Forward

This short story is a tribute to Justin Graham. On April 3, 2015, Justin became the victim of suicide. After struggling with Bi-polar disorder and depression, the disease overcame him. This story is fictional, but is derived from the experiences of others and myself. While the character in the story finds solace in skateboarding, the purpose of the paper is not to make claims that skateboarding is the ultimate remedy for depression, but that there are ways for those with mental illness to combat the self-deprecating thoughts and dark feelings common among those afflicted with this common, but misunderstood disease. Above all, I want to raise awareness of the seriousness of mental illness. Over 40,000 people died in 2013 from suicide. It is estimated that 90% of those suicide victims were suffering from depression. As one who struggles with depression, I can testify that the most prevalent feeling I get when depressed is loneliness. I feel totally alone and I feel like I will never get better. I can only assume that many of those 40,000 felt the same way. To those of you who are suffering: YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

Skate to Fight

As I stood with the knife to my chest, I kept thinking about the burden I would be removing from the world. My girlfriend wouldn't blame herself for not being able to make me feel better. My friends wouldn't have to try and cheer me up. My boss wouldn't have to find people to cover for me when I couldn't get out of bed. I would no longer bring anyone down.

People say that suicide is selfish. It's not. Sure, I wanted this seemingly unbearable life to be over too, but truthfully, that was the last thing on my mind as I stood in my kitchen, poised, ready to end my life. I had written my final thoughts and come to terms with my choice. Purgatory, hell, or any other form of post-mortal condemnation couldn't be worse than the dark, deep and lonely place to which I had sunk. My sweaty hands gripped the handle of the kitchen knife. I said my last prayer to a God that I was not sure was listening, closed my eyes, and braced myself against the soon to be crimson refrigerator. I heard movement in the hall. I panicked. *This isn't part of the plan!* I thought. I threw the knife in the sink and turned, ready to play business as usual. As I locked eyes with my roommate, only three words left his lips. "Brian. I saw."

I tried to look confused and to formulate a convincing denial. Three eternal seconds passed. Then all of my resolution melted into a torrent of emotion. I fell to my knees, sobbing. Half from shame and half from complete and utter hopelessness.

The office was small, quiet and lit with only lamps. There were no signs indicating its presence other than a simple, hand painted sign with the psychiatrist's last name on it. Graham.

As I sat in the high-back chair, I thought about my last few weeks. My roommate, who was a long-time friend, called my parents and they immediately brought me home. My mom didn't know what to do. She treated me like a porcelain doll. I couldn't fault her for it though. She was one of the most positive people I knew. As much as I wished she could understand, I was glad she couldn't. I wouldn't wish that kind of empathy on my worst enemy. My dad understood though, having struggled with depression for many years. He insisted I see his therapist.

So there I sat in the waiting room. I had never met with any kind of shrink. My knowledge of psychiatry was limited to what I had seen in movies. I envisioned a man in a tweed jacket with a mustache in a leather chair showing me cards with ink blots. I never put much stock in this kind of thing. How was *talking* to a person going to help me. Truthfully, I was here to get my Dad off of my back.

The receptionist poked her head into the waiting room. "Dr. Graham will see you now." I was ushered to a door, the receptionist knocked, opened the door and I went in. I took in my surroundings. It was different than I expected. Just a normal couch with some throw pillows, some plants and a window. It looked like a living room. In the corner was a desk with a computer and many thick books that had the letters DSM on them. Medical books probably.

Dr. Graham stood up from his desk chair and shook my hand. My assumptions on his appearance were totally incorrect. No tweed jacket or mustache. Just a khakis and a light blue, untucked button-up. Nothing about him made me think "Psychiatrist". He was just...well...normal. I sat down on the couch.

"So why are you here?"

I was taken aback. *Isn't he supposed to ask me how I feel and wriggle his way into my psyche?* Still, I appreciated his straight forward approach. "I almost committed suicide a few weeks ago. I have been dealing with depression for a couple of years and it just became too much."

As he took notes on a yellow legal pad he asked, "How have you been feeling since then?"

Here we go with the feelings. "Honestly, like a mental case." He kept writing. "And why is that?" *This is stupid.* "Because I have always just been a normal person and now I just feel like damaged goods. I just want to be normal. To just be me."

After scribbling a few more notes he looked up from his legal pad. "Well, you are not a mental case, or abnormal. You are just a person with a disease that affects almost 15 million people in the United States. "

I once again was surprised by his frankness. This was not going the way I expected. I felt kind of defensive. Sure I didn't know what to expect coming into this but I think I expected at least a little sympathy.

"So how are you supposed to help me?" I probably came across a little impatient. I didn't care.

"I can't really do anything," he responded "ultimately your progress is up to you. I just give you tools and encourage you to use them. I can tell that you are skeptical of therapy, but if you are willing to put in the work and trust me, it really can help. What you are going through is serious and is not easy to overcome but feeling alone and hopeless is not what this life is about in my opinion. You can still have a high quality of life in spite of this illness."

I sat in silence, processing what he had said. Of course I wanted help, but I didn't know if I really believed his claims. Still, I felt a tiny, almost imperceptible, glimmer of hope.

"Ok. I'll try."

Therapy became a weekly ritual. Each week, Dr. Graham sent me away with "homework". He was a big fan of using cognitive therapy instead of prescribing medication. Essentially, cognitive therapy was about challenging the negative thoughts I had with positive ones to prevent my mood from spiraling downward. "Mood Logs" were a big part of this. On these sheets of paper, I would write what I was thinking and really try to access the negative thought's validity. It sometimes helped but sometimes I felt like I was just going through the motions. I really tried my best to invest myself, but it was hard when I was not seeing a lot of change.

After a few weeks, I moved back into my apartment and started to slowly get back into my life. Spending time with friends was not the same. It had not taken long for them to all know what I had done. It was apparent they didn't know how to act or to treat me. The impact I had had was obvious.

Thankfully, my episode fell between semesters. School started again and soon my life was full of classes, quizzes and exams. One day, as I walked between classes, I saw a guy riding a longboard. But he was not riding it like those I saw commuting between classes. He was carving back and forth while walking up and down the board, cross-stepping and spinning. I had never seen anything like it. He righted himself, crouched down and spun the board 180 degrees, making the wheels hiss across the concrete. I was awe struck.

I watched him every day as I walked to class, engrossed by the technique and style. Eventually, I stopped him and complimented his riding.

"Thanks! Do you skate?"

I shook my head, "No, I snowboard though. I am Brian by the way."

"I'm Justin. I snowboard too. This is what I do when there is no snow."

"Is it similar?" I asked

“Yes and no.”

“How so?”

“Well how ‘bout you come and see for yourself?”

Geez, this guy wasn’t shy. “I don’t have a board though.”

“That’s cool, I have an extra. Longboarders tend to hoard gear.”

I was hesitant. I kept envisioning myself trying to do one of those slides and slapping the pavement. Snow was like a down pillow compared to concrete. But in spite of the risk, I agreed and we decided on a time and place.

The next day, I arrived at the appointed time and place. Justin wasn’t there yet. I surveyed the hill. It was not too steep but it was long. There were no cars to be seen as it was part of an undeveloped subdivision on the edge of town. Pretty soon, Justin rolled up in a maroon mini-van. He got out, opened the back hatch and tossed me a helmet.

“Safety first!”

I put it on, a bit surprised. My limited exposure to skateboarding culture didn’t involve helmets. But I didn’t object. I anticipated a lot of falls today. Justin then handed me a board. It was different from any skateboard I had ever seen. It was just over three feet long and had cut outs on both ends, clearly exposing the trucks and wheels underneath. *Probably to keep the wheels from hitting the board when you turn.* The trucks were also mounted on top of the board and went down through a hole cut in the board. This made the board ride a lot lower to the ground.

“Ok, let’s just cruise down the hill. Think you can handle that?”

“Sure.” The hill wasn’t too steep and I was sure my snowboarding experience would make it a fairly easy feat.

We started riding down the hill. It was not too fast, and it was actually really fun. Pretty soon I was carving back and forth across the pavement. Justin, however; did not just cruise. He would do little slides, checking his speed. Sometimes he would do 360’s and 180’s. All without putting his gloved hands to the ground. Each time he slid, his wheels made a satisfying hissing sound.

“You are doing a great job. You ready to slide?” Justin asked with a big smile on face.

“Yeah right.” I responded. I thought he was joking.

“Seriously! You can totally do it.”

I was hesitant, but I agreed to try. “So what do I do?”

“Well first you need to put these on.” He threw me a pair of gloves with hard plastic pucks attached to the palms with Velcro. I slipped them on and the lesson began.

“You are just going to go down the hill, crouch down, put your hand on the ground and carve hard. You are trying to do a 180. Don’t go too fast but keep in mind that the faster you go, the easier it will be to slide. Here watch.” He went down the hill and successfully brought his board around 180 degrees.

“Now you try!” He called up the hill.

I made sure my helmet was secure, put my foot on the board and pushed off. My first attempt yielded no results. I chickened out at the last moment and couldn’t get myself to crouch down. But Justin just told me to try again. So I did. Again and again.

After not too long, I started to get the wheels to break loose and slide a little bit. It felt cool but I didn’t feel like I was in control. With each failed attempt, Justin gave me encouragement and tips to improve. Eventually, I was consistently getting my board about half way around but I couldn’t complete the full 180.

I started getting frustrated. “I think I am going to call it for today”

Justin shrugged, “That’s up to you but I have skated long enough to know that you are right at the point where you need to try just a little bit longer. You are super close. You got this!”

I decided to trust him and try again. I climbed the hill and ran through the tips my new mentor had given me:

“Keep more weight over the board”

“Don’t grab stink-bug”

“Turn your hips more”

“Remember to put your weight on your front foot once you get the board around”.

I got to the top, pointed my board downhill, and pushed off. I carved out to the right side of the road then to the left. I crouched down, put my glove to the ground and carved hard right, twisting my body. The wheels broke loose and the board came around all 180 degrees. I adjusted my weight and stood up.

“YEAH!” Justin yelled

A feeling of exhilaration came over me, new and unexpected. The feeling was intoxicating and addicting. I felt elated and wanted more. I stepped off my board and started walking back up the hill, determined to get my fix. I was hooked.

"It just made me feel better! Now, all I can think of is going out again!" Dr. Graham took notes as I expressed my enthusiasm for my new found hobby. After a few minutes, I realized I had not stopped talking for quite a while. Embarrassed, I stopped. "Sorry, I am just excited."

"Don't be sorry about excitement. Necessity may be the mother of invention, but passion is the father. Why create and improve if we didn't care? It seems like skateboarding really helped you?"

"It really did. I felt like myself, even if it was just for a while. But even now, just thinking about it helps me to forget the issues I have."

He nodded with understanding, "That doesn't surprise me. There is a lot of research that shows a strong correlation between physical activity and reduced symptoms of depression. There are lots of theories as to why this happens, but there is substantial evidence that exercise increases the availability of neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine. Depression occurs when your levels of neurotransmitters are low. Exercise counters those low levels. It looks like you have honed in on a really effective coping mechanism."

"I hadn't thought about it that way! Who would have guessed? Longboarding?!"

I felt like there was a light at the end of the tunnel. A way out. But as these thoughts formulated, they were countered by a concern. "There is just one thing."

The timbre of my voice had changed. Dr. Graham stopped writing and looked up. "What is that?"

I was getting better at expressing my thoughts and feelings, but it still wasn't easy. "I am just nervous that this will wear off. The newness, the excitement. Kind of like when you get a new toy as a kid. When you first get it, you are so pumped! But how many toys have I told my Mom to take to the thrift store over the years? Is this just going to be like that?"

A few moments of thoughtful silence passed. I could tell he was formulating an answer. "Did you see your buddy skateboard or did he just teach you?"

"No, he skated. He was amazing!"

"How long has he been skateboarding?"

"Four or five years I think."

"Do you want to do the stuff he was doing?"

"I don't know if I could ever do *that*"

"You didn't answer the question. Do you want to skate like him?"

I paused, a little confused. "Well...yeah."

For the first time, Dr. Graham laid aside his notebook. “Unless your friend is a skateboarding savant, I am sure he started out just like you. Small. Little by little, he has improved and developed his skills to the point he is now and I am guessing there are professionals who are better than him. Right?”

I nodded in agreement.

“You are afraid of losing the excitement. But from what I can tell, skateboarding is a sport of unlimited progress. It seems like you can always go a little further and get a little better. The only way it is going to become boring or stale is if you stop trying to improve. That’s when the skateboard just becomes like an old toy you take to the thrift store.”

Dr. Graham leaned forward, his eyes looking at me intently.

“If you never stop trying to improve, this hobby could make a big difference in your life. It could help you to combat the negative thoughts you have better than any mood log or medication. Sure, you may someday move to something else, but right now, at this moment, I think skateboarding can help you. It might even save you.”

2 Years Later

For the one millionth time, I walked to the top of the hill we had affectionately named “Everest”, a long steep hill that went higher up the mountain than any other road in the valley. I stopped at the top and sat down on my board and removed my helmet, taking in the view.

This hill had become my refuge. When the fog of depression would settle on my mind, I knew I could come here and find that ray of light I needed to keep going. Skating helped to lift the fog and unveil a vista of hope.

A lot of time had passed since my first slide. I had improved a lot but that wasn’t important. What was important was that I had learned how to fight against the illness that had brought me to the lowest point of my life. There were still rough days. Days where I couldn’t get out of bed. But they were less frequent. Some days, all I could get myself to do was skate.

But those days taught me that there was always tomorrow, even if today was hard. I would inevitably come out battered and bruised. That just came with the territory. But even if today yielded no dramatic results that was okay because it wasn’t the end.

My ultimate success was only effected if I gave up on tomorrow, today.

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