

BLINDSIDED

BY ELIZABETH BEASLEY

No one tells you about the after. After you wake up. After you don't die. No one talks about that. I was a graduate student getting my master's degree in marriage and family therapy, I should have *known*. Right? Yet, somehow, I didn't. I missed all the signs of depression and suicidal ideation I was experiencing. I ended up in a bed on floor five: the behavioral health unit.

The doors locked behind me and little did I know it was the last time I would feel the sun for a week. I came in in my blue scrubs, my eyes bloodshot and tear tracks etched down my cheeks. I didn't know what to expect; I had never been hospitalized before. The nurse examined me and introduced me to my sitter- a person they assign to someone considered high-risk to ensure you don't attempt suicide in the hospital. I was in shock. How did I end up here?

Flashback to two days before when I lay on my bed, feeling numb to the point I doused myself with water, filling a cup then pouring the cool liquid over my head, soaking the sheets. For weeks this numbness had been eating at me, and I felt trapped in a vacuum of anxiety. Every moment was painful. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't cry, I couldn't even seem to breathe. The world felt hollow, and every thought hurt. I seemed to be trapped with no air and no way out.

When suicide crossed my mind for the first time, weeks before my actual attempt, I told myself I didn't mean it. I'd never actually try it. "Pull it together," I told myself over and over, "You're fine". I fed myself line after line: "You're being dramatic", "You would never actually do this", and "Stop pretending something is wrong with you". My muscles ached constantly. My head pounded. I was doing everything right; what was wrong with me?

Flash forward and I'm sitting on my bed on floor five, my sitter sitting across from me, deciding what to do next. I have red, hospital-provided socks on my feet, the grippy kind. I keep feeding myself the line "You're fine. You're fine. You're fine". We go out into the common area, where I am greeted by

other members of floor five. I became friends with many of them. They tell me at the end of my stay: “I didn’t even think you were a patient at first. You seemed fine.”

Fine. I had begun seeing my first client at my internship the month before my hospitalization. I was maintaining my 4.00 GPA, attending class, and exercising regularly. I had the occasional ice cream but mainly ingested protein smoothies and foods my mom would call “good choices”. I was fine.

Yet, at night, the demons came out. Unable to sleep, I would lie in the dark, until I couldn’t bear it anymore and would go to the bathroom and hurt myself. It was the only way I seemed able to produce tears: through physical pain. I tried to journal but would find my mind was buzzing too frantically for me to catch and write down the thoughts. Everything felt uncertain. Nothing was stable. Where was the girl with the 4.00, the one attending to clients? She was unable to attend to herself.

They released me from the hospital into a storm. The rain hit the back windshield as my parents drove us home. My fiancé waited at the door with a hug. “How did this happen?” They asked as we all sat together on the couch in the living room while my mom cried. “You seemed fine.” “I got overwhelmed,” I said matter-of-factly. “But I’m okay now.” They were confused by my lack of reaction. I wasn’t. I had it all together, I knew what had gone wrong, I had simply been overwhelmed, and now I was going to fix it. Then all hell broke loose.

I began emailing my professors from graduate school asking if I still had a place in the program. They knew I had attempted, and I was terrified they would judge me for it. When none of them immediately answered, I became frantic. Why weren’t they answering me? Did they all hate me? Had I been kicked out? I called my supervisor, desperate for some type of affirmation that I was not hated by the faculty and on the outs with the program. She didn’t answer. I called my professor, begging him in a voicemail to please get back to me, Was I still allowed to come back to the program?

He responded with an email: It would be a good idea to withdraw, and please refrain from messaging him or the other professors and supervisors. I was shocked. More than that, though, my heart was broken. This program had meant the world to me. Now I was out?

Collapsing on the floor, when my family tried to comfort me, I screamed at them, “You don’t understand! I have worked my whole life for this and now it’s gone!” All the tears that wouldn’t flow before my hospitalization began to come out. I was angry, I was humiliated, I was... no longer a graduate student? My whole identity had been built off these two words: graduate student. Now, it was gone.

The next few days were the most painful of my life. I cried for hours every day, sometimes the whole day, first because of my dishonorable discharge from graduate school, but then the realization set in that I could have *died*. I had attempted suicide, and I cried for my precious life. My body ached from tension and my eyes hurt from countless tears. All the ugliness I had so carefully contained before my attempt began to leak out. I was broken.

The following weeks consisted of intensive outpatient therapy, where I quickly made new friends who understood suffering. Yet, I was filled with deep hurt and bitterness. I felt hurt because I had trusted the system. Idolized it, even. I believed in mental health care. I believed in advocating for yourself. I had gone to school for this after all, and I knew as a therapist I could make a difference.

Yet, they didn’t talk about what happens after a suicide attempt in graduate school. We seemed to have missed the subject of suicide attempt survivors altogether. Sure, we discussed suicide prevention. What to do if your client is in crisis. How to keep someone safe from themselves. But what to do after? When you were supposed to have died? We didn’t talk about that. We didn’t talk about what to do if you survive your suicide attempt. There I was: 25, freshly withdrawn from graduate school, still alive, and feeling very confused, trapped, bewildered. Hurt. It felt humiliating and shameful, to go from a student studying how to care for others, to being the one who needed to be cared for.

So, how did I survive? Community. Just as I had bonded with people in the behavioral health unit, I came to know others in my intensive outpatient group. We became a team, a mismatched family of sorts. Tied together by our grief and desire to be okay again. My family showed up for me day after day, and so did my fiancé and friends, all of them letting me know I was loved and supported. But I was one of the lucky ones. Not everyone receives phone calls every day in the hospital. Not everyone had a mom to pick them up from intensive outpatient. Not everyone had someone advocating for them on the outside. Not everyone's family supported them. We say mental illness is invisible, but during my mental health crisis and the aftermath, I saw very tangible evidence of it. I saw the broken communities, homes, and people who desperately needed support but received none. I saw the way mental illness left people isolated, alone, and helpless. It impacted their physical health, their communal health, and their societal health. It left them aching and defenseless. It left them facing the world alone.

So, let this be a lesson. No one tells you what it's like after you survive a suicide attempt. Take it from me. I was a student studying to be a mental health counselor and not only did I miss the signs of suicidality within myself, but I also had no idea what to do after my attempt. My family was left bewildered and overwhelmed by my actions and emotions. We have built a system that values saving life, but not sustaining it. That is what I will continue to fight for. A mental health system that recognizes people even after they have attempted suicide and provides resources for suicide survivors and their families. I will fight for the lives we, as survivors, *deserve* to keep living. The lives we, by human nature, have a right to live.

