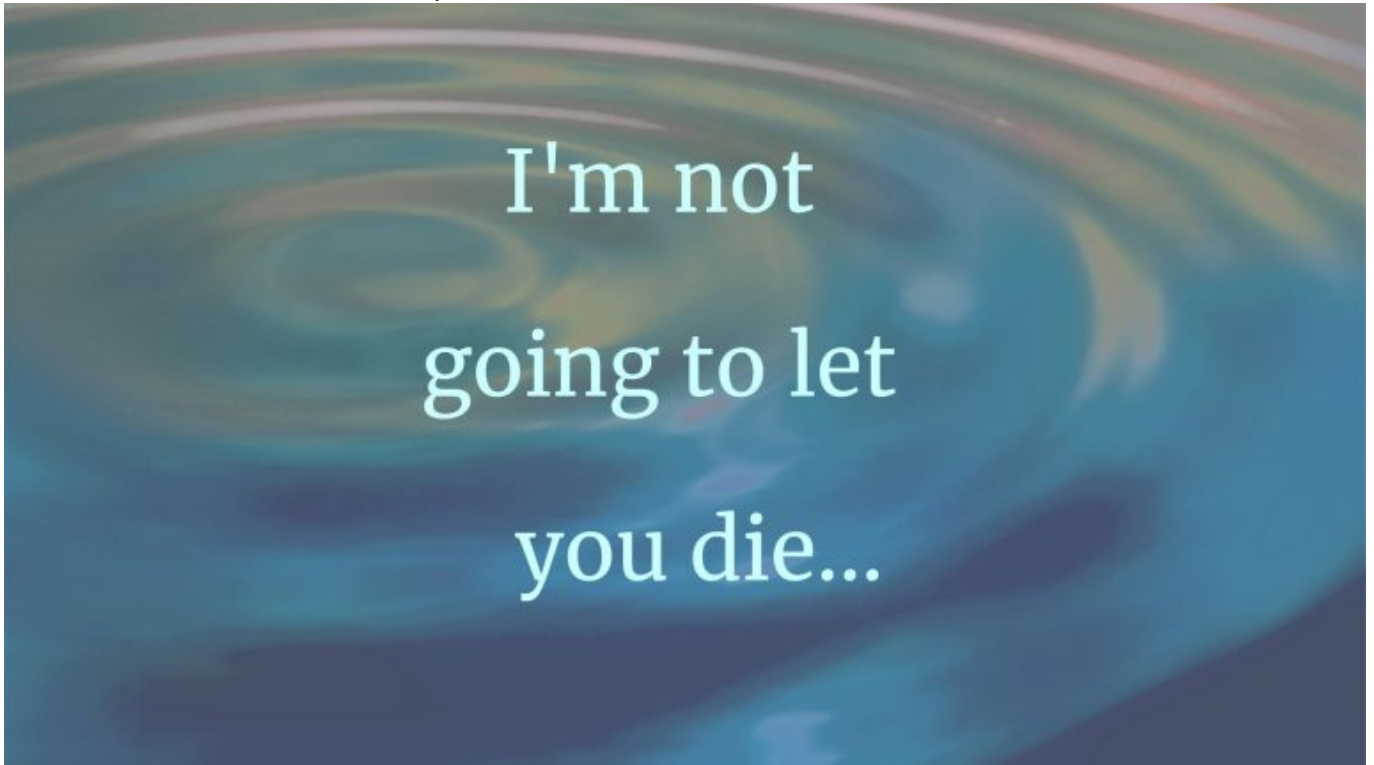


Northern Lights

Category: Stories

written by Becca Baisch | December 2, 2022



"Let me die," you say.

You've listed the reasons, presented the arguments: You're a burden, a mere speck in a world of billions, one that will not be missed. A life that never asked to be born. Why prolong this pain?

"Please, let me die," you say again, this time with a sob that allows no more words.

I hear you, I do. When suffering is all you've ever known in life, death is your last hope. A blank slate, a soothing calm, a nothingness. Infinite quiet. Maybe death is heaven, an abundance of joy. Or maybe death is hell. But life is already hell for you. I know this.

I know you're not afraid of death; you're afraid of life. A life that subjects you to the voices of trauma that haunt your dreams, to depression's repeated shout—an illogical, wholly unoriginal insult: *You are a fuck-up.*

It's been forty-eight days since you were hospitalized with me after your suicide attempt. Though I have not fully experienced your sixteen years of existence, you've guided me into your story, all of it, the parts that hurt the most.

I know of the so-called friends who smeared your name in a social-media campaign of cruelty. I know of the chronic back pain that cages you inside your body. I know that when in family therapy you disclosed being raped, your

father said, "You shouldn't have been at that party." And I know the love you have for your younger sister, and your efforts to shield her from your parents' toxic marriage, their scathing fights that suffocate your home.

I could tell you that I know how this feels. Those words might seem empty. But I'll try.

I have felt rejected. When my own so-called friends spread cruel notes about me at school, invited others to join the I Hate Becca Club and waited by my locker every day to call me "Bitch." At age thirteen, who but your peers has the final say on your human worth?

I have felt that *fuck-up* pain. I remember how, in my senior year of high school, the pain would descend in the middle of an interminable night and rearrange my insides. Too often I skipped classes, immobilized by having to face slipping grades, responsibilities that I had no desire to fulfill, friends I'd pushed away and parents who didn't understand why Prozac and therapy weren't restoring my smile. Nothing defines *burden* like hearing a mother weeping outside your bedroom door, saying she doesn't know how to help you anymore.

I have felt despair. Near the end of my third year in medical school, depression dragged me into that familiar, awful place where time stops, like a star collapsing in on itself, becoming a black hole.

And then I discovered that I was pregnant.

I wrote a letter to my unborn child, told her that I loved her, but that I felt too overwhelmed, and wanted nothing more for her than to have a capable, un-shitty mother. That I'd be better off dead.

So, no, you don't have to convince me that death might be the best option. But I want to share a story that might change your mind.

I once saw the Northern Lights in the middle of the city, a year after I'd graduated college. Convinced that I was meant to be a psychiatrist, I spent my days cramming in premed classes, but my grades weren't cutting it, and I'd just bombed the entrance exam.

Having arrived in the parking lot of my dingy apartment complex, I stepped out of my old Mitsubishi Galant and—*whoa!*—fluorescent green and yellow lights were zigzagging across the night sky. So large and luminous, I felt I could touch them. How could this be?

Just for that moment, I was not scrounging inside my mind, jamming pieces of thoughts together to try to make sense of myself and my failures. The universe had reached down as if to say, *I see you.*

Why do I tell you this?

Not because you should live to see the Northern Lights, but because I can't guarantee that death will bestow upon you such wonder. And hope.

Despite my less-than-stellar merit on paper, I took a chance and applied to medical schools. I was accepted into one.

“Death might be better than the Northern Lights,” you could say.

I suppose that’s possible. Except how many times have I sat with you while you’ve cried and told me that the worst part of life is uncertainty? Can you tell me with certainty that death would offer more texture and color and sound than life, or that it would give you sublime moments that expand your heart and fill your eyes?

I still have that letter I wrote to my daughter. She’ll be your age in two years. Not long after I finished it, her dad gently sat me up in bed, releasing me from the inertia. He put on my shoes, tied them and said, “Let’s go for a walk,” and put one foot in front of the other for me.

We went outside and talked. I mostly cried. It was late afternoon; the sun was hot and seemingly oblivious to my circumstances. But I remembered that I’d experienced those ethereal lights years before, illuminating a path toward hope.

I’ve said this before to you, and I’ll repeat it: I am happy that you’re here. Clearly, I take no delight in the physical and psychological scars that leave you raw and transparent. But I do delight in that transparency, that keen intelligence and empathy of yours that shines when you greet other patients—the light that tells them, *I see you. I understand you.*

Because I don’t believe that it’s happiness we truly long for. It’s connection. Even the heartbreaking connections. Even the briefest ones, which—like the Northern Lights—can be breathtaking.

You might tell me that I’m full of it.

Of all the people in your life, you know I wouldn’t bullshit you. On my first day as a psychiatry resident, I was told by the program director, “There are only two kinds of psychiatrists. Those who have had a patient die by suicide. And those who *will* have a patient die by suicide.”

But I’m not going to let you die.

Here in the hospital, locked away, I will surely keep you from dying. But I fear that I may also be keeping you from living. And so I’m going to write the discharge order, unlock this hospital door and release you into the world.

But only on one condition.

You must wait to end your life and instead come to my office tomorrow. The office that’s located not on the locked ward but at the intensive outpatient program.

The office that you must pass under the open sky to reach.

Because this I'm certain of: Death will eventually find you, and it will eventually find me.

But so could the Northern Lights.