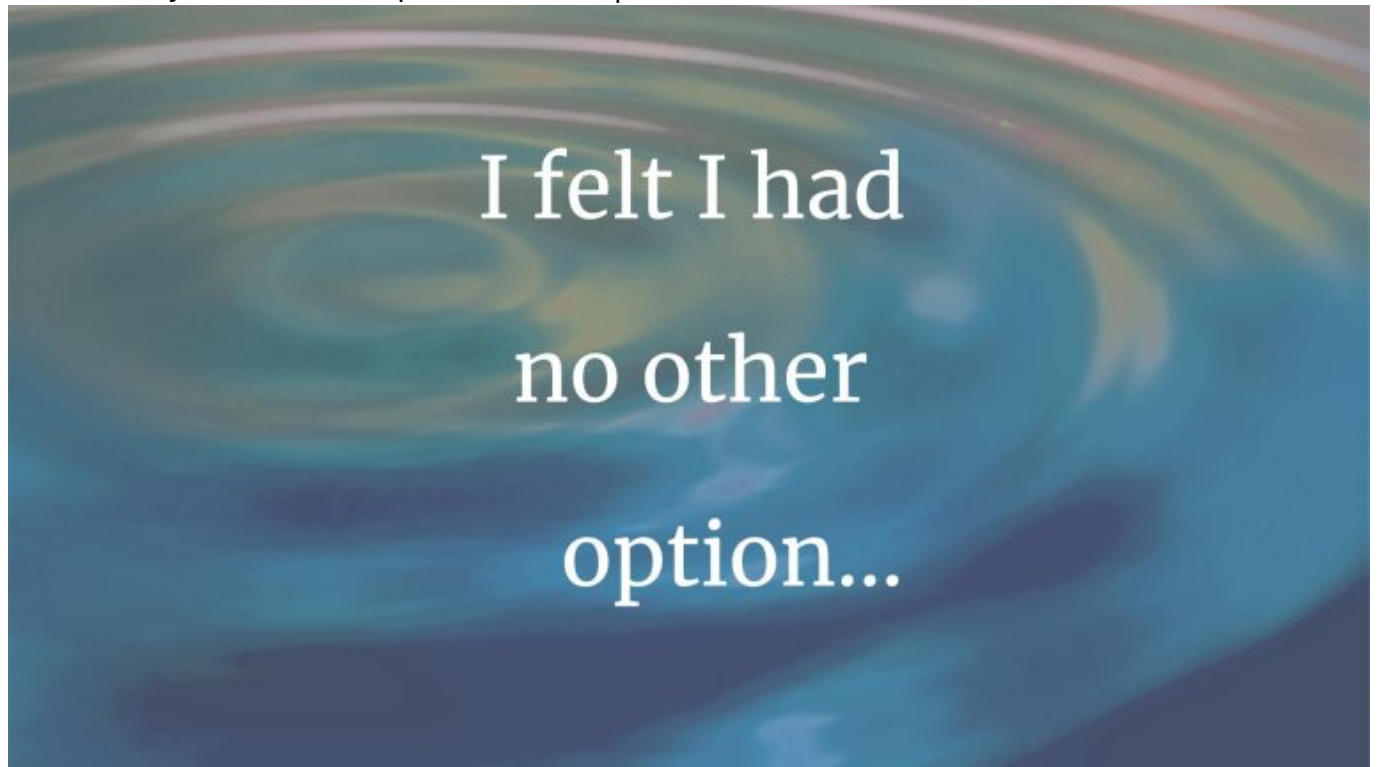


## Saved

Category: Stories

written by Esther Joseph Pottoore | June 16, 2023



It was a spring afternoon in Kottayam, Kerala, India, and I was a seventeen-year-old student, doing my final two years of high school at a local college, as could be done in India. I was the student-body president, with just two months to go until graduation.

And in another five minutes, I was going to end my life.

In a secluded corner of the college library, hidden among the dusty shelves, I sat by a table. On it lay sixty pills and two bottles of water. I longed desperately to escape this fate, but I felt I had no other option...

It had all started three weeks earlier, when the college principal entrusted me with 5000 rupees (equal to about \$500) for safekeeping. She was handling many different funds at the time and needed to keep them all straight; in a month's time, I was to return the money. I kept it at home in a purse, which I checked often, uneasy at being responsible for such a huge sum.

I lived at home, the youngest of ten siblings. Emotionally, we were still recovering from our dad's death from a heart attack, followed by our mom's sudden death from a pulmonary embolus. Within the space of three years, we'd become orphans, and we received periodic visits from concerned relatives, including my mother's cousin Cynthia.

About a week after I'd received the money, Cynthia came to see us. During her visit, I unthinkingly checked my purse, as was my habit.

The money was gone.

Panicked, I made a quick, quiet search, and finally snuck a look inside Cynthia's purse. There was the money. But I didn't dare to take it back: In those days, as now, young people were expected to be very respectful of their elders.

So I watched, silently despairing, as Cynthia hugged each of us and then left to go home, a two-hour bus ride away. I yearned to confront her, but years of training to be deferential held me back.

*If I tell my family, will they even believe me?* I wondered.

Now here I was, the money gone, and too terrified to tell my family or my college principal. I didn't want to be labeled a thief, nor did I want Cynthia's name tarnished among our tight-knit community. What could I do?

My fevered brain came up with a solution: *Death*.

Over the next two weeks, I thought it through.

*How will I kill myself?*

*Idea #1:* Hang myself. The problem: I'm not very good at tying knots (to this day!). I discarded that idea.

*Idea #2:* Stab myself. I didn't think I could stand the pain long enough to finish the job.

☐☐*Idea #3:* Rat poison. Easy to buy at the store, but when I thought how I'd look, frothing at the mouth and doubled up in agony, I rejected the idea.

☐☐*Idea #4:* Drowning. A fast, deep river flowed beneath a bridge near our house, but just dipping my head underwater gave me the shivers, so I couldn't see myself jumping off that bridge.

*Idea #5:* Stepping in front of a train. What if I didn't die—what if, instead, I were maimed for life? Or I could jump from a bridge and onto the tracks, but my aim has always been poor...No.

*Idea #6:* Suffocating myself with a pillow. I actually tried this, but snatched the pillow off after thirty seconds. Not an option.

*Idea #7:* Lucky seven! *Pills*. There were plenty in the house, as my brother suffered from severe asthma, epilepsy and mental illness. I could mix sixty pills in a cocktail, drink it and die.

Now that I knew how I would do it, I needed to figure out when and where.

I started with the where. My home was impossible, as one of my siblings was always present. Our yard was visible to the neighbors, so that wouldn't work. My college was too busy, bustling with students, teachers and visitors. But what about the huge cathedral that stood opposite the college?

I started making spot checks—a literal stakeout—and observed that from 2 to 3 pm, the cathedral was empty. I had my where. Now the question of when.

All the while, I was hoping against hope for a reprieve: I honestly did not want to die.

I had to be careful, as one of my sisters, Pam, was very observant. She's five years older, but we were and are the best of friends. At home, I faked a gay façade while my heart secretly cried out in fear and loneliness.

A long holiday weekend was coming up.

*I will give God the weekend and Monday to fix my problem, I thought. If that doesn't happen, on Tuesday I'll take the pills in the college library, then walk across the road to the church, sit in front of the Mother Mary statue and die peacefully.*

Monday came and went without a solution. It was time to put my plan into action.

On Tuesday morning, after a restless night, I woke up crying.

Quietly, I washed my face to remove all trace of tears. I put the pills, wrapped in newspaper, inside my backpack. My brother had so many medications, he would never miss them.

Trying desperately not to cry, I managed to eat a few mouthfuls of my last breakfast, then gave my sister a tight hug and left before she could sense that something was wrong.

I walked to college, weeping as I imagined my family's reaction to the news, a few hours from now. As the youngest, I'd always felt protected and very much loved. Walking towards the college, I'd never felt so lonely and afraid.

Now I sat in the library, five minutes away from downing the pills.

I felt a hand touch my shoulder.

I spun around. It was Jaan, a girl I'd met one day on the way to class; we often walked to college together.

Jaan glanced from my tear-streaked face to the pills on the table and back again.

"What are you doing, Esther?" she asked very calmly. "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

I nodded mutely, shoulders heaving with sobs.

She pulled up a chair next to me and held my hands lightly in hers.

"Can you tell me why?" she asked.

I did. Silently she listened, then pulled out a clean handkerchief and gave

it to me.

“Blow your nose and wipe your tears,” she said. “Come with me. I have a way out.”

Bewildered, I stood up.

She swept the pills back into the newspaper. Holding my hand tightly, she walked me to a nearby bathroom and flushed them down the toilet. Then, never letting go of my hand, she walked me out of college and to her house. We went to her room, and she took \$500 from her purse. (Her family was very wealthy.)

We walked back to college and straight to the principal’s office.

“Give her the money now,” Jaan said. After I’d done so, and received the principal’s thanks, Jaan and I walked out together.

“I don’t have money to pay you back,” I stammered.

“It’s okay. Help others when you can,” she said kindly. “That will be payment enough. And promise me you will never kill yourself.”

I hugged her and whispered, “I promise!”

Then I asked, “Why did you come looking for me in the library?”

“A little voice inside kept nagging at me all day, telling me to find you,” she said. “After going from classroom to classroom, I finally felt inspired to check the library.”

### *Epilogue:*

Over the next two months, Jaan’s family moved away. I graduated, then traveled to another city to pursue my nursing degree. Jaan and I lost touch with one another—but, as a registered nurse, I’ve kept my promise to her by helping others for the past thirty-three years.