


Suicide: Years in the Making

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Abstract

In this autoethnographic article, the author struggles to recognize the past in her present, through the discovery of loss and grief in the history of her family and herself. The story of her mother's completed suicide in the author's late teens in the context of multiple losses throughout life portray suicide as a possible cumulative emotional reaction to one's life. The roles of attachment, risk, and resilience are also considered. Returning to the historical socialization of a family and the losses and grief experienced may help explain mental illness, ability, or inability to cope and risk and resilience through the generations.

Keywords

grief, suicide, loss, parental suicide

This story is about me and my mother and grief. Originally, I thought it was about me, and my grief, but as I ventured back into my history, I began to stitch together the grief that our family wore like a warm cardigan. The oral history of our family grieving was shared with me on trips to my mother's birthplace during my childhood summers. There was the inevitable drive to the abandoned homestead that fell deeper into the ground with each visit. In my earliest memories, we were able to walk inside the old farmhouse and my mother's heart would break at the filth and neglect. She would point out the bedroom she shared with her three sisters, the kitchen where her mother cooked three hot meals a day on a wood burning stove, scrubbing the floor daily. "You could eat off Pearl's kitchen floor," her cousin Bing would declare decades later. Soon there was no entering the floorless shell. There was the overgrown garden where the sisters trimmed the grass with scissors. The only sign of a past garden were the lilac bushes lining the west side to break the cold western winds. I would wonder at the severity of life in those days. My mom would reminisce as though it was paradise. Life was simpler back then. It was also harsh.

As a young adult, after my mother's death I continued the annual trek to the old homestead. The buildings gradually dissolved into the ground betraying any sign of the well-kept family home. It became a shadow on the ground with only the stone foundation of the barn visible to acknowledge the civilization of a family farm in a field of stones and brush. I felt my mother's grief at the loss of a longed-for past. She passed her grief on to me to carry like a curl of hair in a locket.

Gladys, my mother, was her father's favorite and he was hers. While the other girls were working in the house learning to cook, sew, knit, mend, and make lace, she was in the

barn with her dad, doing chores, milking the cows, feeding the chickens and hogs, and caring for her horse. It wasn't a riding horse, it was a Clydesdale, but she would ride it nonetheless, bareback, with her long adolescent legs sticking straight out across its broad working back. She was a tomboy and according to her and corroborated by her sisters, being in the barn with her dad was the only place she wanted to be. Gladys was eighteen when her beloved father died from pneumonia, leaving her, her three sisters, and their mother the job of selling the homestead. His death immersed her in an immobilizing grief. It was 1936.

With the farm sold, Gladys moved to the city with her mother and sisters. One married poorly, which made her a divorced, single mom when there wasn't such a thing. One moved to British Columbia, as far away as she could get from the family, and the youngest lived with Pearl. Gladys and her hometown sweetheart, Arthur, married. He joined the war effort as an ambulance driver while Gladys worked in Toronto to do her part. With only an elementary school education her options were thin, domestic work or factory work. With her job in the electronics factory and her young husband overseas, a pact was made between them to save their money to buy back the family farm.

The end of the war brought Gladys' Arthur home safely, and they moved together back to the town he was raised in, closer to the farmland they both loved. The introduction of air travel across the continent required airports to be built in

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strategic places in case of an emergency. The town of Warton on the Bruce Peninsula, where Gladys and Arthur lived, was designated to have such a landing strip and Arthur was going to be a part of the construction crew. With steady work for Arthur they would fulfill their dream of working the family farm again. She was a farm girl, loved the farm that her father had forged out of rocks and brush and wanted only to return to it with her beloved.

There was no warning. There were no sirens. There was just the knock on the door. Arthur had been buried alive while digging a trench at the construction site. Gladys lost everything in a moment, her lover, her partner, their life on the farm, all they had been working for. What goes through a woman's mind and heart when grief strikes so hard, a second time? According to research the challenges are deep. She had to cope with emotional pain, incorporate the loss of her husband into a new identity of her own, and had to find new goals and new purposes in her life (Shields et al., 2015). Was there a possibility that she could find meaning in the death and a way to maintain a bond with her deceased love? Bereavement asks a lot of its bearers and with support those left behind are able to face these challenges (Shields et al., 2017). In 1947 there were no therapists; no one wanted to discuss tragic and unexpected death once the body was in the ground. Once buried, it was time to carry on. Grief unexpressed is a dangerous thing.

Back in the city of Toronto, Gladys took domestic work. Living in a mansion in the Rosedale section of the city was not as distressful as was expected. The mature trees shaded the streets. The yards were park like with gardens brimming with blossoms, and the family she worked for was kind to her. As the cook and housekeeper, she traveled to the lake-side summer home with the family. Every Wednesday was the help's day off. Once the weekend was over and the men of the manors returned to their city jobs, there was a day of rest. It was customary for the household and estate help to meet on an island in the lake to socialize. It was through a friendship struck on a day-off picnic that my mother eventually met my father, Al. Al's sister Laura and Gladys became fast friends, and upon return to the city at summer's end there was an introduction.

My mother confessed to me on the night she died, she was not really interested in marrying my father. He was a conservative Catholic. She was free-spirited and willing to carry on intimate relations with him without the sanctity of marriage. He insisted on a ceremony to make it legitimate. She told me how he harangued her to give in to him. The wedding took place on a dark, windy rainy day in November. Al was a carpenter, Gladys found factory work. They bought a small house in a working-class neighborhood, got a dog named Ginger, and before long a baby was on the way. My dad was a fraternal twin and the first pregnancy was proof of that. There was going to be another set of twins in the family.

Gladys insisted on leaving the city whenever she could, and with both she and Al having friends and family in small towns and on farms outside the city, weekend travel was frequent. While on a weekend visit to the country late in her pregnancy, early labor took hold. One daughter was stillborn and the second did not survive. Grief gripped the expectant couple. How much loss was a person able to bear? Al had also lost a younger sister to an accidental death and a father to the flu epidemic as a small child. Life was a battle.

Loss from sudden or violent deaths can leave the bereaved suffering from complicated grief, also known as prolonged grief disorder and more recently as persistent complex bereavement disorder (Bellini et al., 2018). Characteristics of the disorder include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yearning for the deceased, intrusive thoughts and images as well as sleep disturbances and alcohol and substance abuse (Bellini et al., 2018). It is also a risk factor for anxiety disorders and suicidal ideation (Bellini et al., 2018).

In 1950, in working-class communities there were no research papers informing physicians or grieving parents of these consequences of grief. In 1950 as in 1947 and 1936, loss was a part of life and it was best to "get over it." Four years later Gladys carried me to full term with much fanfare. I was the miracle baby. Surely, I would complete the family, and all would be well. What is more satisfying than a new family learning to be together in love and care?

Although Dr. Benjamin Spock had published his seminal "Baby and Child Care" in 1946, there were many young mothers in the mid-1950s, especially those less educated, who rejected his influence to be flexible and affectionate with their children, preferring the stark theories of turn of the century child care. According to Keane (2001), early 20th-century infant care followed the scientific developments applied by Frederick Taylor to the making of steel and factory manufacturing. Experts determined at the time that it was important to keep infants on a rigid schedule to instill "good habits of regularity that would last a lifetime" (Keane, 2001, p. 169). Articles were published in women's magazines extolling the convenience of firm scheduling of feeding, sleeping, and playing for infants and children. If a woman was to get her chores done in an orderly fashion, it was important to schedule her infant. Not only were mothers advised to keep a strict schedule, but they were advised to withhold affection. It was believed that excessive contact with the mother would spoil the child, weakening it, making it unable to succeed in the world (Keane, 2001). It was this theory of childrearing that Gladys and her sisters were raised with and hence she chose it to raise her daughter. It was the opinion of Gladys and her family that Dr. Benjamin Spock was ruining children and families with his advice to coddle the infant.

As an infant I may have been loved but I was not treated with affection and there was no attunement, or sensitive responsiveness to my cues (Sroufe & Siegel, 2011), at least not by my mother. That was for aunts to engage in. I was on a strict schedule and rules were followed. I was not picked up when I cried, and I was toilet trained when I was 8 months old. Unheard of these days, it was really a training of the mother, to place the infant on the potty at just the right time and leave her there until the scheduled function took place. Everything was controlled. As I wonder how a mother could allow her child to cry until it gave up hope of being comforted, I realize my mother was treated in the same way. She knew no other way and did not have the resources to explore other methods. Cultural mores are difficult to breach.

I have a book of old photographs held in place by silver corners to black paper. There is my mother holding me, bathing me, me sitting on the potty, me standing beside my parents, our dog, held by an aunt, riding in a wheelbarrow in the garden, always dressed like a little doll. I was touted and on display by my mother. Cuteness and cleanliness were an important part of her equation as a mother. My adorability equaled her good mothering. I was to be seen and not heard, a pleasing little one who knew when to speak and when not to. I was a very lonely little girl. The lack of warmth and comfort from my mother portended a poor attachment. Performance was more important than attachment.

As a 4-year-old, family tragedy struck again. My mother's sister Jean in Vancouver, British Columbia, died. I was bequeathed her six place settings of sterling silver Joan of Arc cutlery. I don't remember my Aunt Jean, although there are photographs of her visit when I was 2 years old for Aunt Bernice's wedding. There is a photo of me in Aunt Jean's arms. Years later, when helping to set a holiday table with the silver I asked how she died. She died of a heart attack. Much later, a cousin told me she had completed suicide. He, being 7 years older than I, overheard the sisters discussing the death when it happened. The story he shared with me was one of a tragic love triangle. Jean's truck driver husband found out she was having an affair while he was on the road and something bad was going to happen to both of them. Jean removed herself from the punishment.

Way back in the past, before Jean's death, or the twins, before Arthur's death or Gladys' father, there had been a hanging in a barn. A grandfather, before his grandchildren were born, also took his life over lost love. A trip to a nearby town to buy farm equipment, a farm wife alone and a traveling salesman couldn't be kept secret. A hanging was a shame on the family. I know of no other details but the fact that it was the grandfather's own hand that brought death upon him. Gladys' grandfather, her mother's father, completed suicide and there began the complicated grieving that flowed through the family.

Along with the pain of loss, the bereaved families of suicide are subject to negative reactions from their communities following the death of a loved one by suicide (Sheehan et al., 2018). Family members are more likely to be distressed and consider suicide themselves (Sheehan et al., 2018). They often feel blame and judgment from others and are ignored in the community due to the difficulty of discussing the cause of death. There is gossip, and often the family is criticized for not preventing the death (Sheehan et al., 2018). Members of the bereaved families can be seen as strong to deal with the situation, as victims of the suicide or they can be considered contaminated by their relation to the suicide (Sheehan et al., 2018). Fear of contagion from the suicide bereaved family, and a belief that a suicide in the family was a sign that the family may be affected by abuse, mental illness, or a family secret can leave family members alone without community support (Sheehan et al., 2018). Family members are often told not to discuss the suicide or to lie about the cause of death (Sheehan et al., 2018).

I was still a very little girl when I began to understand that when my parents drank, they became different people toward me as well as others. My mother's boozy affection repulsed me, and I was aware that my reaction was painful to her. Although I desperately desired her attention, I couldn't stomach her drunkenness. I was ashamed of my parents when they drank. They acted with a strange aggression, and I was often frightened of them. It was the Easter Sunday before I would begin kindergarten, 1959, that I was awakened by the bright ceiling light in my bedroom and my parents engaged in a knock-down, drag out, drunken fight at the foot of my bed. It was still dark. Were they play-fighting? They were in serious combat as to whether I would attend the city public school or Catholic school. Over her dead body would she allow me to acquire a Catholic education. My mother abandoned her converted faith when a priest, during a marriage counseling session, told her to get along with her husband, and agree to whatever he decided for the family. My mother was a strong willed and independent woman before she met my dad and she would remain that way. There was great strife in the family at this point, which was never resolved.

The lack of attachment and the fear of what my alcoholic parents might do made me an anxious and shy child. Attending school was torture. I was teased for the pretty outfits my mother dressed me in and for her rants that everyone on our street could hear, especially in summer when all the windows and doors were open. Shame coursed through my body when I heard her voice rise after a few drinks. Oh no, here it comes.

I'm not sure when the first attempt was or how old I was. But the first remembrance of finding her unconscious coincided with my ability to read simple sentences. I came home from school and the note said something like, "Do not wake

me. I took something to help me sleep.” When my father arrived home from his carpentry job, he understood what was going on and knew what had to be done. I watched them rush my mom away. Had this happened before when I wasn’t there? I wanted to go to the hospital to see my mom, but my dad wouldn’t take me. He told me that she did not deserve to have visitors. I was very confused. If the ambulance had taken her away, she must have been very sick. I dared not ask any more questions as I could see my dad was not himself. He cried. I heard him sobbing. I don’t remember how I got to school or if I even went in the following days. I don’t remember how long she was away or her coming home or what life was like after. I guess we just carried on.

There was no therapy. There may have been a doctor’s prescription. There was no talk about the ordeal. Life went on. Vacations were taken. Work was done on the house. Mom worked and we ate dinner together at the end of each day. Parties were hosted on weekends and the drinking continued unabated, as it started to carry into the workweek.

If I had not recently asked Uncle Alan, my only surviving relative who knew my mother, I would not have known that she made more attempts than I was aware of. I remember three. The one I described above, another harrowing find as a young teen, and her completed suicide when I was almost eighteen. There are two attempts I have no knowledge of. My father called Uncle Alan after each attempt. On the fifth he just said, “She did it this time.” The brothers-in-law were close. Four attempts, and one completion, label my mother as a multiple attempter. Evidence shows that suicide attempts are real predictors of future attempts and completion (Farberow & Shneidman, 1953; Sher et al., 2017). The same research suggests that each attempt increases the likelihood of subsequent attempts with the caveat that those who make multiple attempts are more impaired and more suicidal than those who stop at one attempt (Sher et al., 2017). In some cases, it is believed there may be an addiction to attempts, and those with addiction issues (alcoholism) have mental disorders “characterized by hypo-functionality of the brain circuits mediating reward and motivation” (Sher et al., 2017). However, the most common conditions associated with suicide attempts and completion are mood disorders, including depression and anxiety (Sher et al., 2017), psychological pain or “psychache” stemming from “thwarted or distorted psychological needs,” thwarted love, frustrated achievement, broken key relationships such as by death or leaving, and the attendant grief, excessive rage, anger, or hostility (Shneidman, 1996, p. 4).

There is a kindness in forgetting. As life continued on and no questions were asked or answered, the event seemed to fade into a dream. Did it really happen? Gladys seemed fine. She worked every day cleaning the homes of well-off professionals. She cleaned our own home on the weekends with my help. I was the duster and she wielded the vacuum and scrubbed the floors. It was the only time we worked

together to accomplish something. Every Saturday morning was cleaning time and although I did not look forward to my job, I lost myself in the tidying and arranging of objects. There was pleasure in order.

Once chores were completed, weekends often entailed a trip out of the city on Saturday afternoon, in time to join a party, wherever we happened to land and wherever my parents went there was a party. My father played the guitar and he and my mother sang harmony. It’s the only time they appeared happy to me. I loved when they sang together. My mother insisted that it was the city that drove her “crazy,” so we spent a lot of time on the road. Long drives in the backseat while my parents drank pink lemonade laced with gin in the front filled me with anxiety, fear, and dread. Once the adults got together, the kids were all on their own. We roamed the towns and countryside exploring the woods and riversides. There was goodness in the wild places, and we formed our own little support group without knowing what we were doing. We could talk about if dad hit mom, or who passed out from drink first. There was such acceptance and resilience in us. There was the occasional sober grandmother or elder aunt offering food and a watchful eye. Cocktails flowed freely in everyone’s kitchens. The counters were sticky with booze, soda, and maraschino cherry juice. The drunken drives home on Sunday night were unimaginable. I sat on the edge of the back seat between my parents, watching the road, cajoling them awake, and keeping us from veering into the oncoming traffic. If I took my eyes off the road, I knew we would crash. It was the sheer will of a child that delivering us safely home. The next morning, we would all head back to our daily routines, work, school, eat, sleep, as if this oft repeated abomination was normal.

As I reached the age of twelve or thirteen, my parents decided I did not have to join them on their weekend forays. I was getting more vocal about the horrors of their drinking, and they decided to cut the buzz kill. I stayed home alone. I could invite a friend to stay over if I wanted. The peace and quiet were heavenly, but the deep worry and anxiety late on Sunday nights when I knew they were driving home inebriated was paralyzing. I couldn’t study or go to sleep until I heard the car in the driveway. I was still guiding them safely home with my psychic energy. It was exhausting.

It was at this time that a long-distance call came from my mother’s hometown. Telephone service was expensive and most communications between my mom and her friends and relations were made by letter writing, so when Aunt Minnie was on the other end of the line it was evidently going to be bad news. Her youngest sister, my mother’s youngest aunt, had been killed. Hazel was a beautiful and glamorous woman. I remember her visiting our little suburban house when I was about eight. She slept in my room and let me look through her jewelry bag trying on necklaces and earrings. She had recently married a very wealthy man.

We were told he was a millionaire who lived in Florida with an orange grove surrounding his mansion. He was really old. She must have been in her early fifties at the time. Her wealthy husband was over eighty and she had a plan. It was discussed after the news of her death that she had been pestering him to change his will to include her. His adult children were his beneficiaries, but she insisted that she deserved to be looked after, should he die. He finally agreed to make her a beneficiary, and an appointment was made at his lawyer's office to make the necessary changes. Once the paperwork was revised and signed and Aunt Hazel and her old man were home in the mansion in the orange grove, he shot her dead, then shot himself. Another violent death for the family, perhaps the most violent. The shock of the sudden death of the youngest sister, the youngest aunt, affected everyone. Once the funeral was over, however, it was just another sad story to tell. According to Dyregrov (2011), grief reactions are a result of a group's culture, their belief systems, values, expectations, and norms for relationships. These inform the expression of and duration of grief reactions across cultural settings (Dyregrov, 2011). The nieces openly discussed Aunt Hazel's troubling naiveté in trying to access the old man's wealth. The family was clear about knowing their place in the order of life. Apparently, they believed that you take your life in your hands if you dare to transition to a higher social level. I remember listening quizzically to this discussion. Did they think it was her own fault that she was shot dead?

The most violent image I cannot empty from my head is the second time I found my mother in an attempt. Was I in high school yet? Because she was already home when I came bounding in the door. Her car was in the driveway, not yet put away in the garage. Maybe she came home early for something and was going out again. I remember descending into the basement and catching a glimpse out of the corner of my eye to a disruption in the laundry room and there she was. She was folded into the laundry tub that was filled to overflowing with water. Her head lobbed to one side and I could see wires floating down from the opened hot water heater beside the tub. She was holding onto those wires. I couldn't find my voice to call to her. I was sucker punched. I have no recollection of what happened in the ensuing moments or hours. I only know that my father came home and had to do what only he knew how to do. Did he carry her dripping wet upstairs to his car and drive her to the hospital or did he call the ambulance? I don't remember anything but the image in my head. I was blank. Did I leave the house to go to a friend's, a neighbor's house? Did I just go into my room and go to sleep? I don't know. But I know what I saw, and I realized a short time later the reason she chose that location. It could only be because my father washed up every night in the laundry tub as soon as he arrived home from his carpentry job before coming upstairs. I was not supposed to be the one who found her. I was seething angry. It was hideous.

By now I understood that my mother was faulty. There were doctor's appointments and talk of EST (electric shock therapy) and hormones, for she was going through "the change," was depressed, drinking, and angry. There was discussion of her returning to school. She was not happy cleaning other people's houses, she would like to be a nurse, but the idea of having to get her GED before even thinking about nursing school discouraged her. One night as we watched a television show together in the living room there was a scene in which a mental patient was given EST. The visual of the patient's body jerking around in response to the electric shocks disgusted my mother, and she swore that no one would have the opportunity to do that to her. I felt a hole in the pit of my stomach. What therapy there was available would not be given a chance. My mother's doctor now refused to give her prescriptions for pills. All medications would be administered intravenously at the doctor's office. The doctor told her she had to give up drinking.

My mother thought she needed something to occupy her and enrolling me in modeling school was just the ticket. She would oversee my modeling career and create a new role to distract from her working days and sober nights. Once she signed me up for the lessons, she would drive me to the subway station, and I was to take the subway all the way downtown twice a week. The independence of entering the subway in suburban, working-class Scarborough alone and exiting in the middle of downtown Toronto was exhilarating for a 14-year-old. I was free to roam the streets after my classes on the weekends and found my way into Yorkville, the Haight-Ashbury of Toronto. I felt very sophisticated, with my false eyelashes and black eyeliner, mini-skirt, and go-go boots.

My mother was very pleased that I was able to join the ranks of the beautiful elite at the modeling school, but my increasing independence was a threat. I was learning things she had no way of knowing. There were no report cards or grading, no teacher meetings or open houses. I was on my own. This was her dream for me, and I went along with it because it allowed me to spend time away from the house, away from the stress of mother's mood swings. I found I had power over her by not sharing what I was doing downtown. I became distant and practiced not worrying about her and her ups and downs.

At the end of the short course, there was a contest with the grand prize being a trip to New York City for a modeling convention. The contest included a fashion show featuring the graduates of the course and a display of photos, to be judged by industry insiders. I was oblivious to the whole affair and paid little attention to the contest, which apparently worked in my favor. I won the trip. I assume it was because I did not try to impress, I was just a 15-year-old girl walking and chewing gum at the same time.

My mother was thrilled with my success and loved to see me in the catalogs and newspaper ads. She lived vicariously

through me. There is one particular instance of her loss of context and reality that stands out during this time. She received a phone call from my agent asking if I was available to go on a date with a celebrity who was in the city to appear on a television show. The well-known personality had seen my picture in the paper advertising my winning the modeling award, "Best Model of the Year," and wanted me to accompany him to a gala. My mother accepted the date on my behalf. I was 15 years old, a 10th grader, and I was being told I was going to a gala with Tommy Smothers of the duo, The Smother's Brothers. He was a grown man and I refused to do it. It was evident that my mother thought more of her status, through my implied success, than my safety, needs, and desires. Another round of distance making came upon us, as I realized I was being used. She became more demonstrative with me, telling me how much she loved me, always with the question, "What would I do without you?"

I had a boyfriend, who was jealous of my success. He did not like other boys and men seeing me in print. He told me that boys and men would masturbate while looking at pictures of me, especially the ones advertising pantyhose. I was horrified. Only a few months earlier I had walked past a car on my way home from school and seen a man pleasuring himself in a parked car, right on the street in the middle of the day. Paul told me that I had to quit modeling if I wanted to be his girlfriend. He and his parents had become a loving family to me, taking me on vacation with them and allowing me to hang out at their house for hours on end escaping the unfavorable conditions at my house. I attended church and had Sunday breakfast with them weekly. They lived a lovely sedate life.

Although my mother quit drinking, she was not a happy person. She behaved irrationally and aggressively. She blamed her bad behavior on "the change" and was required to go to the doctor weekly for hormone injections. She couldn't be trusted with pills. I never knew what mood she would be in when I arrived home from school, a booking or a friend's house. It was getting impossible to be at home. I would look in the daily newspaper want ads to try to find an apartment. The weekends were peaceful. My parents had finally purchased a small piece of property in the countryside where my mother had been raised. Her dream of country living was finally coming true, at least on the weekends. They were building a cabin, had a vegetable garden, and were spending almost every weekend both summer and winter working to complete what would be a retirement home. I was spending every weekend with my boyfriend, Paul, sleeping in my mother's bed, having sex, and enjoying playing at being a couple.

I decided that I was not going to continue modeling because I could not give up what Paul had to give me. I was making more money than I ever imagined possible. I was working often and was well liked within the industry, but

my boyfriend's love was very real to me. My little life was being impacted, and my need to feel safe and secure within that life was paramount. I had to broach the subject with my star-crossed mother. She was so enamored with my success that I knew it would be a struggle for her to let go.

"If you quit, I'll start drinking again!" Are you really saying this to me? Is my being on the cover of a catalog, on the back of a bus, in the daily newspaper so important to you that you would blackmail me? You will give up your sobriety, your daughter, and your family if I don't do as you wish? Well, fuck you! I quit! I gave it up to prove a point and feel safe in the love I felt from my boyfriend and his family. It was a strange and tumultuous ride the rest of the way. What makes a daughter give up on her mother? If she could let me cry myself into a hopeless oblivion as an infant, perhaps I could allow her to as an adult. How can attachment theory explain this kind of reversal in the relationship? Sroufe and Siegel (2011) explain that as infants a frightening or abusive parent's behavior sets up an unsolvable conflict. On one hand, the infant wants to move toward the primary caregiver to be protected from the source of fear, and on the other hand the infant wants to flee the source of fear, which happens to be the supposed source of comfort (Sroufe & Siegel, 2011). The caregiver triggers both approach and avoidance, and a disorganized response is created. Bowlby's theory as explained by Sroufe and Siegel (2011) suggests that a child's interactions with its early caregivers determine the quality of the attachment relationship, whether secure or insecure. Allowing me to cry alone in my crib to set a schedule for my life was clearly not providing the necessary comforting and safety needed to provide a secure attachment. Slade (2004) makes clear that because children are inherently motivated to preserve attachment no matter how distorted, it is common for children to adapt to the wishes and projections of the caregiver's mind. These adaptations can explain the acceptance of fearful behavior on the part of the caregiver by the child and an ongoing need for the child to please to be accepted by the caregiver.

It is the attachment to secondary caregivers and relatives that I credit for my resilience in my teens to my mother's frightening behavior. At the time of her manipulations to keep me modeling, an acceptable and necessary means of social advancement (which she assumed would benefit her), I felt empowered by the love and support of friends and relatives to make my own decisions. The confusion of whether I quit modeling to please my boyfriend or to please myself is still with me. However, the need to take control of my own decisions and not allow my mother to manipulate me by threatening to drink again if I did not do her bidding was a powerful reason to decide to end my modeling career. My insecure attachment made it easier for me to make my own decision separate from my mother's perceived needs.

Slade (2004) explains that a child's adaptation to disorganized patterns of attachment can act to maintain "critical

primary relationships, and, in pathological situations, insure the continuing distortion of the child's capacity to directly express attachment needs" (p. 271). Distortions such as these can disrupt mental structures essential for regulation of affect and self-experience and can compromise the capacity to develop interpersonal knowing and understanding (Slade, 2004). Clearly the insecure attachment to my mother and the disorganization of those patterns of attachment made it easier to ignore my mother's needs and desires and follow my own needs.

During the summer of 1970 I took a job at a retail gift shop. My mother began drinking again and within 18 months she was gone. The spiral downward was fast. There were complaints after the fact of missing liquor in the homes she cleaned. She arrived home from work already inebriated and at one point completely disappeared for a number of days. I was detached enough to not care where she was or if she came back. Only now am I interested to know the circumstances that surrounded her disappearance and what happened during her absence. There were constant phone calls checking to see if she had been heard from. I do not know if the police were asked to investigate. Her return one warm evening as my father and I were sitting down to dinner in the kitchen appalled me. We heard her car drive into the driveway and looked at one another expectantly. All ears were pricked to discern the mood she would bring into the house by the way she closed her car door and opened the back door to the house. As she stumbled up the back steps, fear was like a fog in the kitchen. Her body was slumped as she shuffled into the room, her face was dirty, and her hair had grass in it. Her clothes were stained, and I have no recollection of what happened next. Did I stay or leave? Did dad put her to bed? Did she have a bath? The effect of her entering the family home in such a state was so powerful that I scrubbed all memory of it. I only know it happened. No details were ever shared with me, but I did hear from my cousin years after the fact that she had been involved in some kind of accident, which was going to require her to stand trial and quite possibly go to jail. I can imagine her driving drunk as she had so many times before with me in the seat beside her and finally being unable to function enough to avoid a fatal or near-fatal crash. I remember meetings with lawyers but that is all. I wasn't told and I didn't ask.

Life became an exercise in detachment and disengagement. How could I continue going to school and work, pretending that I was a normal teen with a normal family, without compartmentalizing and avoiding the truth of my life. During the summer of this event I had broken up with my high school boyfriend and his family and started to see an older boy from my mother's hometown. He moved to Toronto to look for work and was invited to stay at our home for a short time until he found other accommodations. One Saturday while I was at work at my part-time retail job,

my mother evicted him from our house citing a history of drug dealing, information that came from a disputable character in his hometown. I was distraught as I searched for him at the bus station downtown. Unable to find him my disdain for my mother and her controlling ways peaked. Slade (2004) states that many distortions in a child/caregiver relationship are the result of the caregiver's lack of capacity to care for and provide security for the child due to their own disrupted capability. The impossible gulf between my mother and I was set in motion many years prior to our own insecure and disrupted attachment. Our histories determine our futures.

Late in November, another long-distance phone call set in motion a deeper and more disturbing round of events. James, my small-town boyfriend whom my mother chased from our home, was the passenger in a Volkswagen Bug that struck a tree along the bay road. The driver, James' best friend, must have been speeding as the tree sliced through the passenger side of the vehicle leaving little of James intact. The mortician did a heroic job trying to recreate sweet James' beautiful face, but it just wasn't him. I had put off getting my driver's license and was now in need of someone to drive me to the town 3 hours away for the funeral. My mother offered and I accepted. Thrown together by circumstances I did my best to be kind. She tried to reach me, understand me, and comfort me, but it felt inappropriate considering her past feelings about James. After he had moved back to the town, James and I continued long distance, but I had started seeing another boy, the captain of the football team. I was not honest with James and we had recently had an argument, which led to angry words and a hang up. My last words were in anger. I was going to break up with him. Now he was gone, and my guilt was deep. I tried to maintain a connection to him by remaining in touch with his town friends. Soon after the funeral I passed my driving test and was able to drive to the family cabin when my parents were not there, to be close to where he lived and died. I visited his mother every time I was in the town and I partied with his friends to keep him close. Who else would understand the pain of his loss but his mother and friends? Balk et al. (2011) explain that bereaved adolescents who have lost a peer report feeling anger, guilt, fear, sadness, loneliness, and confusion. There is often a sense of a lack of meaning or purpose to human existence (Balk et al., 2011). Teens who lose a peer to accidental death are more quickly thrust into adulthood than unaffected peers (Balk et al., 2011). Only James' peers would talk to me about him, about the accident, and about the lives they shared. Balk et al. (2011) report that it is often the case that peers will leave the room both figuratively and literally when grief and death are brought up. It is also said that almost immediately and for some time afterward bereaved adolescents will question religious beliefs (Balk et al., 2011). This was certainly the case for me.

The holidays came and went. I was dating my football player and winter settled in for the long haul. As was the custom by the time I got home from school on Fridays, my mother would be home from her weekly food shopping. She would have a meat pie from the butcher warmed for me to eat before heading out to work at the gift shop. It was Friday, January 28, 1972, and I was planning to head straight from work to a school dance with my beau. My mother would let me drive her car, so I wasn't on the bus for an hour.

As I ate my meat pie my mom began to reminisce. It was very odd for her to talk to me about anything, but she seemed to want to share some of her story with me. She told me about having an affair during the war while her beloved Arthur was overseas. "Wartime is different," she said. Everything was upside down and one never knew what the next day would bring. She took a lover who died on the European front, but her husband returned. She told me about how my father was intensely jealous of her, suggesting early in their marriage that she was having an affair when she returned from her hot, factory job one day with her girdle and stockings in her purse. She talked about how hurt she was by his suspicion. She told me how my father had begged her to marry him, and she gave in only to stop the begging. She told me there was no such thing as God or love.

When I returned to the house later after the dance it was quiet, and a soft crystalline snow was falling. They were out. Not long after I got into bed, I heard my dad's car creep up the driveway and my mother stumble into the house. I listened carefully as he put his car in the garage and closed the garage door. The garage was just outside my window. It sounded like he fell down as he closed the garage door. I could tell. My practiced vigilance kept me informed of everyone's mood and sobriety level. The bar just closed, and there was nowhere to go but home.

By the time my dad got into the house my mother was indignant, wanting to know where he had hidden the beer. He would not tell her, citing her present condition and no need for more. She was furious and spent a long time looking and hollering. I tried to ignore the upheaval praying for it to stop. At last she hollered loud and clear, "Well, you're going to be sorry!" slamming the back door. The garage door opened. Where was she going? The beer stores were closed, and she was too drunk to drive. I wanted to get out of bed, but I couldn't move. I listened carefully. After she opened the garage door it closed again and then her car started. I thought about that sequence and realized she was attempting again. She was drunk and disorderly. I was tired. My dad was in his room. If he heard her would he do something? Did he hear her? Was he passed out? I could not move. I lie in my bed listening. I think about wearing my black dress with the red rose broach. I fall asleep.

For the first time in my memory, I slept through the night waking only to my alarm in the morning. I would usually wake in the night when I smelled my mother's cigarette

smoke. She would wake, smoke, and then go back to sleep. I vigilantly waited until I no longer smelled smoke before I could relax. We learned in school that smoking in bed was deadly. This day, I was amazed to have not been disturbed through the night. I woke up refreshed and ready to go to work. Saturdays I picked up my friend Louise and we drove together to the shop. As I opened my dark brown blackout curtains, the sun reflecting off the new fallen snow blinded me and then I saw the exhaust seeping out from under the garage door. I had forgotten. It was as though I had dreamed it. I mechanically walked into my dad's room and woke him. I told him that she was out in the car in the garage all night with the car running. His face was blank as he dressed, grabbed his coat and hat and wallet, and went out to the garage. I watched from the back door as he backed out of the driveway without closing the garage door. He must have had to push her across the bench seat to the passenger side. As he backed out down the driveway, I saw my mom, unconscious, pushed up against the window, her face distorted and very pale.

I wouldn't be able to go to work. I knew she was dead. I called Louise and told her I was sorry, but I wouldn't be able to drive her to work that morning, my mother had died. She still remarks at how matter of fact my explanation was. As if I had a cold, or a flat tire. I was alone. The phone rang. It was my dad calling from the hospital. Hours were minutes and minutes were hours. He told me she was dead. Just like that. "Your mother's dead." My aunt was on her way over so I wouldn't be alone. But I was alone. I don't remember hanging up the phone, but I remember falling from the chair onto the floor and sobbing until I thought I would turn inside out. As my sobs slowed down, I realized there was only one thing to do on Saturday, and that was clean the house. I called a girlfriend who lived nearby and asked her to come over to be with me. By the time my aunt arrived I was deep in cleaning, dusting, scrubbing, and polishing. There was sense in putting things in order. I didn't cry again until June.

I wore my black dress with the red rose broach. After the funeral there was a party at our house. Everyone brought food and booze, and it went on all day and into the night. There was no sadness, just celebration of Gladys. She was loved and so she was fêted. I knew people felt sorry for me, but I wouldn't give them a chance to say so. I was not going to feel anything like sorrow or sadness. I was angry! I was ashamed! And I drank a lot. It is widely known that those bereaved by suicide struggle with shame and stigma and often will conceal the cause of death (Shields et al., 2017). I was instructed to tell anyone who asked that my mother died of a heart attack. Hell, no! I would not. That's the lie they told about Aunt Jean. I would not keep any secrets. It was well known within the family and throughout her friend network that my mother had previously attempted suicide and I was not going to lie to anyone about it to save face. I

was defiant in light of all that had preceded this act. Shields et al. (2017) explain that suicide bereavement is different from natural death bereavement in three ways: trying to make meaning of the death; higher levels of blame, guilt, and responsibility pertaining to the suicide; and more feeling of being rejected by the loved one with greater anger toward them. The feelings of anger, being blamed, feelings of guilt, and a direct responsibility for the death are particularly difficult problems unique to suicide bereavement (Shields et al., 2017). Family members bereaved by suicide are at risk of completing a suicide themselves and developing psychiatric disorders such as depression and PTSD (Shields et al., 2017).

I was anxious to get back to school. Being home was unnecessary. I missed a trigonometry exam and although I tried studying for it, I couldn't make any headway. My teacher told me I didn't have to write it. My grades were good enough. I joked that my mom saved me from the trig exam to my friends. No one wanted to hear it. As a matter of fact, no one really wanted to talk about it at all. I found myself alone at school. People I had previously been friendly with ignored me or gave me a wide berth when we met in the halls. My boyfriend told me he could no longer see me. His parents told him that I would be troubled and too needy due to my mother's death. Besides the loss by suicide, there is the experience of negative reactions from the community (Sheehan et al., 2018).

My father continued his weekend trips without my mother as if life was meant to carry on as if nothing out of the ordinary happened. Kuramoto et al. (2009) point out that "the quality of parenting of the surviving parent and their mental health status" (p. 138) can have an effect on the functioning of the child. I found myself alone, except for a core group of girlfriends. When I turned 18 less than a month after the suicide, we could all legally drink in bars and so that's what we did. I drove my mother's car to school and up to the cottage on weekends. It was freedom for me. While my dad was traveling to his weekend destinations I was traveling to mine. We never spoke about what happened. I organized shared chores, cleaning, cooking, shopping, laundry, and life went on.

I maintained contact with my mother's sisters as if I was her. I called them on the phone about as often as she did to check in with them and to feel a part of family. When asked by her youngest sister how I was doing a few short months after the suicide, I replied that I was feeling a little depressed. I was told in no uncertain terms that I had no reason to be depressed. I was a young girl with no problems. That was the end of my being honest about my feelings, not that anyone asked.

The most striking thing that happened after the suicide was the nightmares I had. I would dream that my mother was really alive, that she had come back or never died and all the

problems that plagued us while she lived returned. I had to be wary of everything I said and did, walk on eggshells in order not to provoke her. My fear of her was palpable. I would wake in a terror then realize she was indeed not in the room next to mine. She was gone and I was safe. Nowhere in the literature on suicide bereavement that I researched is there any data reporting relief upon suicide completion. I suffered tremendous guilt not only from the relief I felt by her absence but by not making an attempt to go out into the snowy night to drag her back into the house. I let her go. Self-blame and guilt are prevalent in suicide-bereaved individuals reflecting distorted ideas about responsibility and one's inability to prevent the suicide (Honeycutt & Praetorius, 2016; Praetorius & Rivedal, 2017; Rabalais et al., 2017; Schneider et al., 2011; Shields et al., 2017). In my case, this blame and feeling of responsibility is not distorted but very real. Could I have done anything to prevent it? I could have struggled to open the garage door, turn off the ignition in the car, and fight to get my drunken mother out of the car and into the house. Then the struggle to get her into bed would ensue. It was too much. I couldn't do it, but after the fact I was certain that I should have. It was a savvy therapist some 30 years later that suggested I search for the death certificate. I learned that not only was she asphyxiated but she also had a belly full of pills. If one method didn't work the other would. I could have wrestled her into bed only to have her die in her sleep in her own bed in the room next to mine. Did this fact change the way I felt about my actions? Was I still responsible for her death? I was not. But I was guilty of relief. No one is supposed to feel relief upon the death of a "loved one." You can feel rejected and punished (Honeycutt & Praetorius, 2016; Rabalais et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2019; Shields et al., 2017); angry (Honeycutt & Praetorius, 2016; Rabalais et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2019; Schneider et al., 2011; Shields et al., 2017); intense pain, fear, distress (Rabalais et al., 2017; Shields et al., 2017); betrayed (Shields et al., 2017); wounded and violated (Shields et al., 2017); abandonment (Honeycutt & Praetorius, 2016); trauma (Shields et al., 2017); stigmatized (Praetorius & Rivedal, 2017; Ross et al., 2019; Schneider et al., 2011); embarrassment and shame (Rabalais et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2019; Schneider et al., 2011); resentment toward the deceased (Schneider et al., 2011); isolation (Schneider et al., 2011); a consuming desire to know why (Praetorius & Rivedal, 2017; Shields et al., 2017); depression (Ross et al., 2019); anxiety (Ross et al., 2019); and loneliness (Rabalais et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2019). Relief is not a recorded emotion in the literature I researched. I cannot be the only person who has felt relief.

Through the years I have sought help through numerous therapists of different theoretical backgrounds and although I have suffered and blamed myself for my mother's demise, I had to come to the conclusion that it was her will to end

her own life. The fact that she made my life miserable was not her problem. She had so many more problems than that. The pain of her grief built up inside of her until she could no longer live. Her pain and losses adversely affected me and by her taking her own life she set me free. It has been a long and treacherous journey to begin to understand that fact. There was a transformative nature to her suicide for my father and me. My father remarried a woman who worshipped him, and he spent the last 20 years of his life happily retired, traveling and enjoying life each and every day. Although it took years to shake off the feeling of responsibility, I recovered a strong will and desire to look positively into the future. Transformative learning requires disorientation, a disruption of one's views of the world, a shake-up of one's perspective and assumptions (Sands & Tennant, 2010). These dilemmas lead to a critical reassessment, and self-examination. These assessments can be transformative leading to a new "meaning perspective" (Sands & Tennant, 2010). They can lead to a truer and more justified guide to life. Sands and Tennant (2010) refer to the way in which individuals bereaved by suicide can follow an "ontological process where participants experience a change in their being in the world" (p. 137). I am aware that my mother's death freed me to become the person I am today without the constriction and control that she was bound to attempt to apply to my life.

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