Coming to Terms

My mom tried to commit suicide five times--or maybe it was six times, I don't know. I lost count.

I'm not sure if I recall all the attempts. Not even certain I have memories anymore, just the stories of the memories. It's like I've taken what I remember and catalogued the recollections neatly into labeled boxes, like summer clothes in the winter: SHORTS, TOPS, BATHING SUITS. Only these containers read BEACH TOWEL INCIDENT, THE TIME THE AMBULANCE CAME, AT MY COUSIN'S HOUSE, BLOOD EVERYWHERE, and WHEN GRAM DIED. My ailing memory insists that although a ban on dialogue was not overtly stated, we did not talk about the things that transpired at our house, not even to each other, not then. We subscribed to an unwritten and unconscious vow of silence. "Don't ask, don't tell" was originally my family's standard operating procedure, before the military adopted the phrase. Discussions about the events of our childhood only took place later, after they were over, and the winds of change have blown the sands of time muting the features of the memories.

The earliest incident I remember took place in Brigantine. We lived on 21st Street and Atlantic View Avenue, four houses from the beach. My sisters and I spent our summer days going back and forth from our house to the beach. This particular day Mom lay on the sand sleeping on a beach towel. I didn't think anything about it until the tide came in; the surf was lapping at her feet and she didn't wake up. I wasn't aware at the time she had overdosed, nor do I recall any other details of what happened. I suppose one of my sisters filled me in later that the BEACH TOWEL-WET FEET EPISODE was the first attempt.

Chronologically speaking I guess her next suicide episode was WHEN THE AMBULANCE CAME. We still lived in Brigantine, at the same house on Atlantic View Avenue. It was night, and it may have been late enough that I was supposed to be in bed. Or perhaps not. I know it was dark out because my memory places me in the living room, looking out the front door, watching the oversized white station wagon that served as an ambulance, feeling alarmed that the whirling red lights of the ambulance were signaling to the neighbors there was another shameful situation taking place at my house. Two uniformed men brought my mother from her bedroom strapped to a gurney, down the steps to the living room, with my mother howling "*Don't let them take me. Don't let them take me.*" I guess by that time I taught myself to cover my fear with numbness, because I don't remember feeling anything other than the alarm I mentioned. Maybe because we never talked about our feelings, I didn't have a vocabulary to express mine. I think I was frightened, but that may be my adult mind shrouding the

memory with what it believes should've been there. Linear thinking on my part tells me I was probably ushered into bed after they took her away. She did spend some time after that at her familiar mental hospital, Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute. If they issued reward points at EPPI my mother as a frequent visitor should've at least received a toaster, but based on the number of mosaic ashtrays around our house, I guess the time she spent making them in Occupational Therapy was perhaps the 1960s equivalent.

Next I remember (and I may have the order of these reversed) we were visiting AT MY COUSINS' HOUSE. My mother was sleeping on my aunt and uncle's bed, fully clothed, on top of the bedspread. This was not usual, normal nor approved behavior, but again the policy of silence pervaded. I certainly did not take the risk of asking anyone what mom was doing sleeping on someone else's bed. Children were to be seen and not heard, or there were consequences, usually unpleasant.

Was that the time when she had again overdosed? I remember she spent a prolonged period at Temple University Hospital in Philadelphia, because she had destroyed one of her kidneys. When we visited, she showed off a tube coming out one side of her abdomen and going back into her body a few inches away, both entry and exit secured by white adhesive tape, like a female Frankenstein under reconstruction. Again, I didn't know she had tried to kill herself by taking too many pills. The G-rated version I learned was that Mom had her failed kidney removed (with no cause explained), and our family was rewarded by taking a side trip to the Philadelphia Zoo. I do remember becoming lost at the zoo, briefly separated from the family. Was it seconds or minutes or hours that I was in a panic before we reunited? Did anyone take the time to comfort me or was I scolded for not paying attention and staying close? I think mice have gotten into these memory boxes and shredded the contents, leaving tiny black droppings behind where real events used to be. Time has eroded the sharp edges of my memory like it does to rocky outcroppings, smoothing the painful places and wiping out details.

When I was 12 years old we moved to Ventnor, a few miles away. Mom was in a holding pattern as far as mental health goes. We traveled across country the following summer, our family of six plus the dog and cat in a 21-foot two-axle trailer pulled by our family station wagon. I guess the constant change that accompanies road travel kept her off the psycho path. But life worsened when we returned to Ventnor. I recall her demanding respect from me and as a budding defiant teenage drug addict, my response was "no fucking way bitch, respect is *earned*, not demanded, and *you* have not earned mine." We did not get along, we did not understand each other, nor did we communicate well. Due to these struggles I was becoming the identified patient and Mom was sending *me* on the rounds for psychological treatment.

Maybe she was planning something. On February 13th, 1973, she gave me a gold ring, engraved inside with our initials and the date. There was no reason for such an extravagant present, and it was completely out of character for her to bestow gifts without occasions. Later when I tried to pawn the ring for drug money I learned it was not gold, only gold-plated.

One day I was coming in the front door from school and my mother was being led out the door by my older sister and my father. Quickly they explained that Mom tried to hurt herself and they were taking her to the hospital. Their parting words to me were "See if you can clean up the mess upstairs." Watching them help my mother into the car, I noticed she was in one of her stupors, not fully conscious but not out cold either. After they drove away, I put my school stuff down and headed up the stairs to my parents' room.

The bedroom was a crime scene. It smelled like the butcher shop. BLOOD EVERYWHERE. The bed was covered with deep red blood, wet and slimy, with clumps in it that I supposed were blood clots. My stomach flip-flopped and my heart jumped into my throat as my head felt faint. I quickly turned around, fled back down the stairs and out to the front porch for some fresh air. There was NO WAY I was going back in there, NO WAY I could "clean up the mess upstairs."

The memory of another incident around the same time is interfering with the accurate recollection of this one, mental static on my playback system. When I press the "memory play" button it tells me I am coming in the door from school, and my mother, my father and my sister are again going out the same door, only this time my *father's* hand is bandaged, because they are taking *him* to the hospital. "What happened?" I manage to ask my sister. "Mom threw a brick at Dad, and he needs stitches," she replies on the fly as they scurry to the car. Again, I watch them drive away.

These are the memories I can salvage. I know my perceptions are warped due to time, psychological dysfunction and profound reliance on illegal substances from my teens into my late twenties. My sister told me that the "BLOOD EVERYWHERE" incident took place in May 1974, a month before both my parents died in a tragic fire at our house, so the attempt that I remember as the last—AFTER GRAM DIED—was actually the fourth try. I have set that memory down in a tale I erroneously titled "The Last Attempt." That first attempt in 1966 took place when I was only six years old. No wonder my mind jumbled the memories, split them apart where they belong joined and mixed up the order of events.

What was all that about? Why did my mother spend her parenting life flirting with and teasing death? Was she mentally ill? It's funny, my sister has gone through a process of writing a book about our lives, and early on she said Mom wasn't mentally ill. Reminds me of when I took this class called "Life Skills" and they asked me if I had been abused as a child, which I vehemently denied. Then I remembered an incident at the dinner table one night.

My mother served lima beans, which I detested.

"I hate lima beans," I declared loudly, and put my fork down boldly. I must've been about 13 years old, which I've noticed in my own teenagers is the peak of defiance and difficulty in parent-teen relationships.

My father sat at the window end of the table, my mother sat opposite him near the access doorway to the kitchen. I was at my father's left, with my other three sisters seated around the table.

"You hate yourself," my father responded gruffly.

"That's right, I do."

My father reached out and slammed me so hard with his left hand that I was propelled backwards out of my chair and knocked into the wall behind me. The shock of the moment dampened any possible response or rescue attempt from my sisters. My mother did nothing.

Slowly I gathered myself up from the floor, righted my chair and sat back down.

"Eat your lima beans," my father ordered, as if his arm had never left his side.

No, I wasn't abused as a child, and my mother wasn't mentally ill. Over the years education has washed my thinking, using a scrub brush of psychology and sociology and human behavior courses. Experience and hours of therapy along with inner searching and outer questioning helped me realize that when someone is causing emotional anguish or physical trauma to another, repeatedly, that is abuse. That someone with a functioning healthy brain does not make the decision to harm themselves. If one is not healthy, she is sick. Therefore, mental illness.

Oh, I just thought she was crazy.

In a way, I find it easy to understand my mother's mental illness because I inherited the disease of alcoholism from her. According to the Twelve-Step model, alcoholism is characterized by selfishness and self-centeredness. Where the disease originates--nature or nurture--is of no consequence to people in recovery. To us, alcoholism is a spiritual malady that requires an ongoing commitment to a relationship with a Power Greater than One's Self, a letting go of control and manipulation, and a surrender to Life on Life's Terms.

The Great Depression birthed my mother in 1933, in the house where the family lived in Fords, New Jersey for generations. A small piece of land on King Georges Road served the family since they had the house built in 1915. For three glorious years my mother was the Lone Princess of her domain, until my aunt was born in 1936. I'm not sure when it began or how intense it was, but their sibling rivalry continued until my mother's death.

Consider the following: My mother played the accordion. It was my aunt's birthday. My aunt was dressed up all pretty and my mother was pressed into providing the music while my aunt danced for all the adults present. An accordion is a large bulky instrument which can weigh up to 20 pounds. How long did my mother work that accordion while my aunt received all the attention including money thrown at the beautiful birthday dancer? It must've been about 30 years because that's how many years later my mother told me the story, still lamenting that her sister had received compensation for work my mother performed.

Once my sisters and I were playing board games. My mother disturbed our fun, entering the room weeping and gnashing her teeth that she was lonely for my father.

"Mrs. White's husband works eight hours a day, Mrs. Clark's husband works ten hours a day. But my husband, my husband has to work 12 hours a day! I never get to see him."

Compassion is a learned behavior. Very little was demonstrated to my sisters and me as children, and we easily returned that to our mother.

"What's for dinner Mom? Dad will be home later."

None of us realized it then, but the reason my father had to work two jobs was to support my mother and her burgeoning medical bills and unrealistic drive for perfection. A family friend explained:

> *Your mother had to have everything perfect. She had to have the house on the corner, which your father couldn't afford. You girls had to be dressed up in fancy clothes when it was a holiday outing. She wanted to be part of local society, even when she wasn't invited. No, your mother brought most of her problems on herself. If she could've accepted her life the way it was, she would've been much happier. But she kept trying to live beyond your father's means. It caused many problems for your parents.*

The sibling battle between my mom and my aunt for my grandfather's attention was brought to an abrupt end. It was 1957, and my mother was winning because she was pregnant with the first grandchild. My sister was due in March and my mother was sitting in the proverbial catbird seat. But on

February 4th, my grandfather suddenly died from a heart attack at the age of 48. My mother was devastated. If the family values were rooted back then, she was probably given a minute or two to mourn, then advised to get on with her life. My oldest sister entered the world on March 11th, and the next daughter was born a year later. My mother had two little babies, and before they finished toddler-hood I burst onto the family tree in January 1960. Another sister followed me in November 1961.

When did my mother have time to mourn the death of her father? The Protestant cure for any of life's ailments was to stay busy, punctuated by holidays and family celebrations, all of which required more busy preparations beforehand and extensive cleanup afterward. My mother had help in the beginning; my father had several nieces in their teens who helped my mother with caring for four little girls.

My maternal grandmother financed my father's college education and he became a teacher. He secured a position nearby but didn't get tenured. So in 1965, with my sisters and I aged 3, 5, 7 and 8, we moved 100 miles to the south when my father accepted a teaching gig in Atlantic City. At first we rented a house while my parents shopped for a more permanent home. You guessed it, a large brick home perched on the corner. Twenty-one hundred Atlantic View Avenue, it even sounds regal. Four houses from the beach.

If my history is correct, it only took my mother eight months to fall off the deep end of sanity, looking to ease her emotional pain by chemical escape from the loneliness and self-dissatisfaction that consumed her. In Fords, we lived in the house in which she grew up. She had girlfriends and a family support system to help her navigate marriage and parenthood. But on the island of Brigantine, she was an island unto herself. She didn't fit in with the local women whose husbands were a few notches up on the social scale. All her girlfriends were gone, my aunt far away. Long-distance phone calls were prohibitively expensive in those days. How often did my grandmother call her? How often did we return to Fords to visit? I know from my own experience that once you move away, the place you left is no longer home. The locals have moved on and accepted your absence. We are the ones who cut the cord, and sometimes the wound becomes infected.

Which came first, the alcohol or the pills? My mother had emotional pain, and she sought relief through medicine, religion and psychiatry. Too bad none of it was sufficient for her. Her disease of alcoholism festered and grew. She received plenty of prescription "fixes," but these only helped her to escape from her pain, not to face it and overcome her fears.

Perhaps she read too much Sylvia Plath. Was her suicide ideation real? I mean did she really want to die or just want attention and relief from the pain? No one can say. But from my own experience with alcoholism and attempted suicide, I can infer the following.

Emotional pain robs us of sanity. Instead of facing our demons, we seek to escape them by any means necessary. Some seek solace in sex, others turn to obsessive behavior like gambling or shopping. Many stuff themselves with food. All these activities release neurotransmitters in the brain, which wash us with comfort and a temporary feeling of well-being. But those of us who discover drugs and alcohol have hit the mother lode. It's like putting money in the slot machine and hitting the mega-jackpot every time. The euphoria that comes with substance use is off-the-charts higher than any elation that accompanies those other fixes. Not only is our pain abated, we feel sublime and sweet and nothing else matters.

Then we come down. We suffer hangovers, withdrawal symptoms and remorse. Guilt about our escape from reality enshrouds us. Reality festers and picks at us like an old dog with open sores. Because now, in addition to the problems we sought to escape, we have unmet responsibilities, hurt feelings, and angry family members. We remember the relief we found in our substance, and we seek out our only friend with a zeal and a willpower that astounds even us. We return to our bottle, our pot, our pills, our syringes. We don't need anyone, especially those people around us who say they love us yet they have nothing but distain and disappointment for our behavior. We start to believe that we ARE our behavior. We are lying, sneaking, low-down drunks and junkies. We can't be trusted. We are not worthy. The pain is too much and eventually our substance stops working for us. We discover there is never enough of it anyway, and the things we have to do to get more: cheating, manipulating, debasing ourselves, the pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization, is it really worth it?

Suicide appeals to us. It is darkness, absence, release. No more pain or hurt loved ones. No more guilt and embarrassment. No more shame and self-loathing. Just an easing, and a bliss, and it's all over. We only want relief. We find an easy way out. A momentary pain: cold steel exploding in our brains, a concrete sidewalk ramming our feet up through our heads, the cold whoosh through space and time just before the hard splat on the surface of the water below the bridge; or a quiet easing off into sleep, never to wake up. And then, eternal peace, we think.

The rational mind says: *What about our loved ones? Think of the pain this act would cause them.* The sick mind, if it even contemplates this, brushes it away. *Our* pain now is greater than theirs will ever be. We need relief now, that's all we know. They'll probably be better off without us anyway. We act

without thought of the consequences or we push them away annoyingly. Emotional pain causes tunnel vision: we cannot see another way out.

For years, I asked myself: Did my mother set the fire that killed her and my father and changed our lives forever? Was she in a psychotic state, wasted on her prescription medications, finally prepared to put aside the amateur razor-blade attempts and really end it once and for all, taking us all with her? In 1974, this would have been a very rare occurrence, for a mother to kill herself and her family in one tragic murderous-suicidal rage. But now we have the benefit of a modern history of mothers who've committed filicide, as the horrific act is called. Researchers claim these psychotic criminal behaviors can be attributed to depression and disturbances in levels of serotonin, a neurotransmitter involved in functions such as sleep, memory, mood and behavior.

I understand it, somehow. I don't keep weapons or live on the top floor of a tall building. Alcohol and drugs are prohibited items in my house as well. Because in just one freaky moment of "*Fuck all this,*" I can envision myself holding that gun up to my head and quickly squeezing the trigger, or grabbing that beer from the fridge and pouring it down my throat before I change my mind. I felt this way during my own suicide attempts. Looking down at the pills in my hand before I swallowed them, believing at the time that death was certain, my thoughts were consumed with "*So what, who cares, fuck everyone, oh well, here goes nothing,*" and cavalierly tossing the pills down my throat, in a desperate attempt to end the pain of my current situation.

One thing I've come to understand is that any human being is capable of any act, given the right circumstances. We've all seen the movies where the characters are forced into roles and behaviors that run contrary to their personal values. Hungry people steal. Desperate immigrants swim rivers and cross deserts to escape horrific lives. Soldiers kill strangers. These are my fellow humans, and in a spiritual sense, we are all one. Anyone who says "*I would never do that,*" doesn't know themselves very well. Because we need the caveat "*In my current situation,* I would never do that." We really don't know what we're capable of, if we get pushed into a corner, we see no other solution, we want relief, and we want company. My cousin was diagnosed with schizophrenia. He shot his sister and his father before taking his own life as the SWAT team surrounded the family home. His mother has reconciled her grief with the belief that he killed his sister in order to save her. In a very twisted way, it makes sense. We've all experienced someone under the influence who is not thinking clearly. Murder and suicide are not rational acts.

But after 40 years puzzling over whether my mother was responsible for her and my father's deaths, my sister finally hired a world-renowned forensic investigator. This man, who wrote the textbook on fire investigations, eventually pronounced that the fire which killed my parents was an accident, probably ignited from a smoldering cigarette ash. It turns out that my mother wasn't a dramatic and murderous perpetrator, she was just another victim of her own wasted carelessness.

I finally realized that if my mother was not an arsonist and a murderer as I had always believed, then I was guilty of the same act as the people who believed I was the person responsible for setting the fire. But according to this expert, no one set the fire, at least not purposefully. I had to stop accusing the ghost of my mother and work on un-tarnishing her bad reputation that my misguided thinking had created.

I heard someone share in a meeting the other night that her mother was a mentally ill alcoholic like mine was. They found *her* mother dead in a motel room from an overdose. She wiped a tear as she proclaimed, "I like to think that my mother died so that I could find recovery."

Is this what happened in my case? Did my mother die so I could find recovery and its side effects serenity and a productive life? Let's see, I started drinking and using in 1972, my parents died in 1974. I had graduated to the needle by 1976 and made it to my first rehab in 1987. Longer and longer periods of sobriety ensued, punctuated with devastating relapses, until in 2005 I embarked on lasting sobriety. It would seem my mother was more of a catalyst for my addiction than a placeholder for my recovery.

I prefer to think I found recovery in spite of my mother, not because of her. I've spent years in therapy and read dozens of books and written a number of personal inventories about my mother. An old photograph of her had resided in a frame on the wall in my bedroom. Damaged by the fire and time, it symbolized her: she never did get to reconcile her feelings about her life, her father, her relationships with others. No closure for her, just a ripping away of all she held precious. No wonder she drank. No wonder she tried to escape. She had no idea how to cope with her emotions, and medical science treated her symptoms, not her disease.

On Mother's Day last year, I scanned the old fire-damaged photo and posted a copy of it to my Facebook page. My good friend Bill in Florida asked me, "Why did you never get that photo restored?" It got me thinking. Why didn't I? Because I never thought about it, that's why. Because the memories I had of my mother were as damaged as the photo was. It was entirely fitting that the photograph I had hanging of her on my bedroom wall was covered with soot, faded and damaged by time and tragedy.

My daughters have grown up in the shadow of the family dysfunction, but with the umbrella of recovery shielding them from the insanity and chaos that enshrouded my childhood. For her photography class project, my oldest daughter asked if she could take the damaged photo and restore it. This coincided with my sister writing her version of the family history, and the release of the fire expert's report exonerating both my mother and me. Subsequently, the siblings and offspring gathered and memories were compared. Our family drew closer together, survivors of a shattered past who finally realized that time itself has nurtured us to safety.

My daughter unveiled the restored photograph of my mother. No more burnt, torn edges, the photo reveals a lovely woman with bright eyes and a slight Mona Lisa upturn of the lips.

"You look just like her," my daughter reminded me.

We laughed and nodded knowingly.

"You're right, I do. What do you say we go and get a new frame for that picture?"