Something like Happy

It wasn’t so much a cookout as it was another humid night on my grandmother’s patio. No idea what we ate. Hotdogs, maybe. The grill, if there is one, is still warm. No father, unfortunately. The pool is blue-green made greener from the pool light at the deep end, a yellow blanket spreading from the inside out. Wait at least thirty minutes before swimming. I swear I waited an hour.

The drowning is sudden. My wild kicks are nothing to the pool’s bulging viscosity. My arms slap the water, tiny fingers scrabble for purchase. Where’s my brother? My grandmother is racing back and forth across the patio, unwilling to do more than to wail her distress. Green water crests through my mouth. A splash, bigger than any I could make. White stars sputter and spill in front of my eyes.

My mother levees my seven year old body from the pool. I didn’t see her dive in, but things eventually come into focus: I am on her drenched lap, pruned and shivering. We sit on a white plastic chair, my trunks pulled tight across my hiccupping legs. My grandmother, out of sight. Brother off to the side. Above us, a blanket of tiny white stars wrap around the Floridian sky. I have air, so I do what makes the most sense: I scream.

* 

I start leaving a few months after—or maybe before—the pool accident. I think, at the time, it was curiosity more than anything else. I have a secret: I race downstairs to the guest room and let
myself in. I leave the door ajar. My mother and grandmother are at work. My brother, who is eleven, is upstairs on the family computer. No one will think to find me here. This makes me giddy.

I lay back on the comforter, staring up at the white ceiling. There are too many dots to count, and my feet hang off the bed. I make a scarf of my hands and put it around my neck. Cool air conditioning settles over me. My throat sinks under the pressure. When I can’t stand it any longer, I let go, and I fall up to the clouds, dizzy and free.

“What are you doing?”

* 

It’s harder to say when I stopped being happy, or if I’d ever really been. I’m sure I was. In fact, I have proof: a few years after my mother left my father, I watch an episode on Oprah about happiness. The guests take a seven question test that rate their happiness from 1 to 5. When Oprah reads the questions, I follow along, getting a decent score, something like twenty-two or twenty-six. Some of the guests are higher than me.

There’s one woman, though; she gets a seven, the lowest score possible. I can’t look away from her disheveled blonde hair, the crow’s feet at her eyes. She wasn’t ugly, just…tired. I didn’t know it was possible for someone to be that unhappy. My mother smiles; she is surprised my score is so high and tells me so. This is before I learn sadness can be inherited through blood, and I think her
smile is more relieved than anything else. I think she’s happy she doesn’t have to worry about me developing sadness later in life.

*

Startled, I snap back into myself, sitting up. I look at my brother with wide eyes, unsure how to explain that when I’m breathless, eyes glossed over with gone, I feel something like happy, or something akin to it. But I have to say something, have to explain why a seven year old would choke himself in the guest bedroom of his family home, so I say, “I don’t know.”

*

I think I develop sadness at ten. In fact, I’m almost sure of it: even though my mother wants nothing to do with our father, she also wants my brother and I to have the option of a relationship with him. My brother and I still feel obligated to see him, so she buys us a flight to New York for Christmas.

It happens when we were out in the city one day. The New York sunshine spreads across all the metal and brick skyscrapers, turning them as yellow as my father’s Coronas. They all seem so tall to me. As we wait for a cab on the sidewalk, I run around in circles, waving my arms wildly. Somehow, I earn my father’s ire: He snaps, and I remember the sudden slap across my face, how his fingers scrabble around my ear, yanking my frame to him. The yellow flash of a cab. Brother off to the side. The sharp sting and tug of his hand in my hair, lifting me by my scalp.
And then the cab door flies open and so do I. And then I smack onto the seat and I want my mom and she isn’t there and I am floating outside myself, watching myself lay in the back of the cab, not here not here not here I want my mom I want my mom. But there are seven states between New York and Florida, and there’s no way her arms could save me from that kind of drowning.

*

It’s safe to say that ten year old me becomes depressed. In fact, I’m almost sure of it—four years and five moves later, a sort of anger comes to life in me: I sit on my bed as the Texas afternoon sun trickles through the blinds in my bedroom. I take a pair of scissors and cover my left arm in welts. I glance down, wondering if I could exit my body the way the droplets do.

Not exit as in, I want to leave and be someplace else. But rather, I have no further or continued interest in being alive.

*

But I don’t know these things at fourteen. All I really know is that I feel so lonely and isolated that I cannot not bear the idea of reaching for happiness, trying to keep it, and never finding it at all—or worse, having it snatched away. All I know is that I have few friends, and an even smaller social life. My brother is away at college. My stepfather and I hate each other, and my mother, unused to
living in a trailer park, is frustrated with playing peacekeeper between us both. I still can feel my father’s hands in my hair.

In short, I believe myself a burden, and I want to punish myself for being one. So I do what makes the most sense: I cut. Besides, the scissors numb things. It works. I don’t feel anything, not even sad. Not lonely. It works. At least, for a little while.

* 

After that summer, I give up the self-harm, promising myself I would never do it again. And I do give it up, I give it up for nearly three years.

But of course I do it again. And again. And again. And again. And then I’m seventeen, and stealing a razor blade out of a box cutter from a food service job, sneaking in and out of class to hurt myself in the bathrooms. For the next seven months I go, frankly, completely haywire. By the end of senior year, I’ve forgotten what my upper left arm used to look like.

But during those seven months, the attack on my body brings a fixation onto it. Having gained weight from the job, self-harm no longer appeals to me. It doesn’t do anything anymore. It just hurts. In the last two months of high school, I start counting calories, and even sooner, I graduate and go to my college orientation, which lasts three days in July. Incoming freshmen have to stay on campus the entire three days.
The first day, I choose the bed directly across from the full body mirror. The second night, I eat a cookie and a bag of jalapeño Cheetos in that mirror. It’s my first time, so I don’t know how to use my fingers yet, but I am calm when I walk to the bathroom, when I get on my knees and cough, and cough, until I spew orange across the toilet water. Then, I feel empty, free.

Of course, the eating disorder becomes an extension of the self-harm, albeit a more interesting extension. What better way to make yourself disappear than to actually make yourself disappear? It’s perfect: There’s no anger or loneliness or sadness when all you feel is hungry.

*  

But even eating and throwing up stops being perfect. I become frantic. I can’t keep anything down. I start missing classes, I leave class early to go eat and puke. I can’t sleep. I can’t even take a shit without scarfing down a couple laxatives. I am hopeless. Despair sets in. I want to make myself go away. The eating disorder is no longer keeping me alive, keeping my sadness at bay. It’s just killing me. Either the eating disorder will end me, or I will.

In a bizarre moment of clarity, it occurs to me that the eating disorder is not enough, and I take a stab at recovery. I don’t stop purging, but I stop taking the laxatives. I get off the scale, but keep it in the garage. Baby steps, I tell myself. I promise myself I will try to get better. I tell myself I will stay in my body.
A few days after I hide the scale, I lock myself in the bathroom while my mother is at work. I wrap a scarf around the bathroom closet doorknob, and fasten it around my neck. The yellow light spreads across the blue-sky walls. I’ve resigned myself to no air, so I do what makes the most sense: I sink.

When I’m no less freer, no further away from myself, I catch my reflection in the mirror above the sink and wonder how I’m going to explain the welts on my neck to my mother.

*

Sometimes, I look up the house in Florida. It’s always listed on some website like Zillow or Trulia. The furniture inside the house changes with each click, but the patio remains. The concrete deck is still peach-beige. The tiny waterfall I spent so many summer nights disappearing under still cascades. The Floridian sky is always wrapped in blue and the pools bounces the yellow rays into white stars that rip and spread across its surface. And then it is night and my mother is hauling my body out before I can leave it.

But none of the pictures capture me like this. They only show an empty pool, an empty house. None of them show how I am sad that I survive, how part of me is still that small child, screaming and scrabbling for something to keep his lungs filling with air, and another is that nineteen year old boy, desperate enough to crush his windpipe with a scarf if it means he can go somewhere no one will ever find him, and sometimes I do not know how I can be both of them and sometimes I cannot tell the difference.
It’s hard to say when exactly I became so desperate to escape myself. But I tried, and it didn’t work. It’s also sad: Nineteen years was all I wanted from this world once. It startles me even now, that I could ever want such a brief lifespan, not even a second decade.

There are so many things I could point to as a cause for me wanting to exit early. I could say it was my mother’s relationship with my angry father. I could say it was his raised voice, his biting hands, the turned-inward anger I inherited from him, the way he abandoned me. I could say it was something written in my genes that predisposed me to sadness, to an unhealthy relationship with food; I could say it was my attraction to boys and girls, or my need to avoid pain, discomfort.

Most likely, it was a mixture—a little genetics, some trauma, and an environment and world that favors silence and shame over speaking up, over reaching out. Most likely, I was born into a world and circumstances that I never learned how to fully deal with. It would be even easier to say that I saw I needed to get better and then magically did.

But I did change: just after Thanksgiving, a few days before winter break, a friend convinced me to call one of the student clinics on my campus. “Yes,” I said, cell phone to my ear, hands shaking. “Monday at 9:00 is fine.” And then, months and months later, I started to feel a little better.
In truth, I am alive for very simple reasons. Sometimes, all I can manage is to lay in bed all day and sleep. Sometimes I cry and I want to be someplace other than myself. It has never been some life-altering, earthshaking moment of inspiration that convinced me to give living another shot. I grapple with sadness, even now.

But the difference is that I grapple now. I don’t spend my days looking for the nearest bathroom, for sharp things to pull across my skin. I go into my proverbial toolkit of skills and I pull out things I think will help me live through the day. I go for walks. I call my friends and laugh. I leave my mother a voicemail and tell her I love her. I shower before work. I eat without wanting to purge. I write. I remind myself I am happy. I remind myself sadness and anger and loneliness pass. And on bad days, I pick up the pieces of myself, put them back where they fit, and, quite simply, go on with my day. Being alive is the hardest thing I have ever done.

And yet, I wouldn’t choose anything else.

This year, on World Suicide Prevention Day, I start up a status on Facebook. When it becomes lengthier than I expect, I decide to cut it from the status generator, finish it in a Word document and then paste it back and post it. That I end up removing two-thirds of the content is irrelevant. What matters is this: When I try to refresh my timeline, a pop up appears. You haven’t finished your post yet. Do you want to leave without finishing? It gives me two options: the one to leave this page, and the one to stay. A moment, and then I do what makes the most sense.

I stay.