

Creative Writing Contest 2022  
“Alive: A Story Still Going” by Amber Ridgeway  
1<sup>st</sup> Place – Creative Non-Fiction

“I need help.”

I never imagined that simple line would save my life. Asking for help was the most courageous and terrifying thing I have ever done.

Broken. Shattered. Destroyed. Take your pick of the three. They don't come close to describing how damaged I am. The noose around my neck tightens with every step I take. It's thick, heavy, and black. As black as my soul feels.

The noose is fraying, of course. Anything would after wearing it for twenty-nine years. The ends of the rope fused together to create the strength needed to hold my head. It's choking me now. Every strangled breath leads me closer to death.

*Please!* I beg of whoever's out there. God? Jesus? The Devil? I don't believe in God anymore, but I certainly begged whoever's listening. *I can't do this. Just kill me. I'll do anything. I don't want to do this anymore.* I'm sure they laughed at how pathetic I sounded. I must have done something pretty fucked up in a previous life to deserve this one. To feel the way I feel. I will never understand it. I have begged God enough to take me away. Maybe there's just something about me that pisses God off.

“We're here, honey. Everything's going to be okay. We're going to get you help,” my friend Amy says soothingly. She looks at me like I'm a wounded animal. I'm sure I look that way. If I could see my eyes in the mirror, I know there wouldn't be anything there. I'm dying inside, everyone who found me knows it. White as a ghost, hands shaking, unable to speak. Horrid, deep, choking wails come out of my mouth.

*Kill me. Please. I'm sorry. Please. I'm so sorry.* Death calls to me every second of every day. It's like a siren's call—alluring and sweet. I greet Death like an old friend, safe and warm in His tattered cloak.

Agony—white hot and never-ending. I'm walking, but each step seems like my feet are encased in concrete blocks. The gray ones with the two holes that I dream about tying to myself and jumping off a bridge or a boat.

*What the fuck am I doing?*

The halls at Pine Rest Christian Mental Hospital are neutral and kind of nice. I'm walking with an intake specialist. I don't know his name. He didn't bat an eye when I handed him my warm cup of pee to be tested, so that's something I suppose. He's extremely kind and is speaking to me the entire way to “my” wing.

“You'll be on the Elm wing,” he mentions. All their wings are named after trees. The doors to the wings are always locked. The main doors lead to four separate rooms on the sides. One is the activities room. The others are for use by the nurses and psychiatrists. The hall opens to a large, gray space that leads to the nurses' station in the middle. The door on the left goes to the women's side of the wing, the right door leads to the men's. We're kept separated until groups, like freak show attractions at the fair.

The hours go by in a blur. Multitudes of questions are asked, many the same ones by different people. After I get on the wing, I have to be searched. Naked. They have to check every skin fold, every fat roll, document every scar, tattoo, and birthmark. I have to squat and cough to make sure I'm not smuggling anything in. They take away anything that can be used as a way to harm yourself or others. Shoelaces are the most common culprits, but we can't forget hoodie, sweatpants, or basketball shorts strings either.

Apparently I answered their questions. How? I have no idea. There's nothing left. So damaged that I don't know what to do. How to act. How to feel. What do I say? What do I do? How do I do this? I can't do this. I can't even kill myself correctly.

My world is upside down... inside out... collapsed. My hands shake. I don't know how to make them stop. I feel like I have glass shards in my throat, heart, and stomach all the time. I don't know which end is up. I have bleeding, open wounds that no one can see.

"Your psychiatrist will be Dr. Miller. It's too late in the day to see him now, but he will get to you during his rounds tomorrow," the psych tech that escorts me around explains. I see multiple nurses, psych techs, residents, chaplains, and activity coordinators during my stay. It would be hard for anyone to remember them all.

The nurses' station splits the wing in the middle. It has all glass windows from about the waist up. The dining room is to the left. It's a fairly big room, with brown brick walls and tiled floors. There's a TV mounted in the corner, and four round tables occupy the middle. A door in the back leads to a small, square outdoor area that has a basketball hoop. We get to go outside for ten minutes a day. On the left is a kitchenette, with a sink and countertops. All cabinets are locked. There's a bar in front of it where they put our food trays. We get three not-so-great meals a day and two snacks. We can ask for more snacks, if we need them. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches become an instant comfort food.

All the bedrooms on the wing are wrapped like a horseshoe around the common rooms—the quiet lounge that has another TV, the laundry and supply room, the snack room, and everyone's personal favorite, the "calm down" room. They didn't call it that, but we all did. There are awesome things in there: fidgets, a rocking chair, a bean bag, strong smelling lotions,

and more stress balls than anyone can imagine. I loved the bubbler. It's like a long lava lamp that creates bubbles to stare at. I felt like Bubbles from *Finding Nemo* when I watched them.

The bedroom I'm in is like two rooms in one. My bed is on the left, my roommate's is on the right, with a wall separating us in the middle. On my side is the shower and a sink. The shower has a plain, blue shower curtain. On my roommate's side is the toilet, also donning a blue shower curtain, and another sink. There are cabinets with no doors that line the back walls to put my clothes in. The beds are flat as a pancake. I get one pillow with a white pillowcase, a white sheet, and a blue blanket. The beds can't be moved. My guess is so that people can't use them to kill themselves or others. My roommate could definitely smother me with her pillow though, and I lie awake that night hoping that she would.

A nurse gives me medications all day. I see my psychiatrist for an update for ten minutes a day. Psych techs check every patient every fifteen minutes, even when I'm pooping. I have to stick my head around the curtain so they can see that I'm not dying. I get to call my family whenever there isn't group. I get multiple groups a day, some activities, and some talk therapy. I learn a new lesson each time. I start to get used to being there about three days in. Four of my loved ones came to see me throughout my stay. I was happy to see them and to show them all the cool things I'd been creating, including my favorite piece.

"Today, everyone is going to pick out three cards that describe how you've been feeling in the past month," Beverly announced. Beverly is our activities coordinator for the day. She's short, skinny, and has black hair. She's stern but not strict—a good balance between kind but not taking any shit.

The cards were green laminated squares with negative emotions on them. I pick out the words miserable, scared, and sad. Our lesson is to think of our happy place when we are feeling

those emotions. We close our eyes and visualize it. Mine is standing on the pier in South Haven. Even with my eyes closed, I can clearly see the catwalk that leads up to the red, gleaming lighthouse. I can smell the water and hear the waves crashing on the shore. After we picture our happy place, we pick a yellow card, all of them with positive emotions, that we want to feel. I pick alive.

Alive. I feel afraid to live. How do I live? I don't know how to live. How does someone live? Feel alive? I'm not allowed. I'm unworthy of love, happiness, comfort, or joy. Depression has only allowed room for survival.

I hate being this way. The darkness that lives inside me grows with each suicidal thought. Growing. Festering. Bubbling. It's in my bones. In every fiber of my being. I live in a hamster wheel, constantly spinning for fear I would lose everything if I dare to stop.

In our group craft, I picked oil pastels, and Beverly cut me off a piece of the white paper roll. We're not allowed to have scissors ourselves. I drew the pier in South Haven. The bright red lighthouse standing tall at the end. The black catwalk that runs down the pier with the lights at the top. There's a small yellow sun in the corner and a light blue sky. I made the water with dark blue waves. For the finishing touch, I used white to write the word *alive* in the water. I left my seat to throw something away and caught Beverly looking at my picture with a wide smile. A small smile, as crooked and ugly as it was, came to mine for the first time in a long time. I had forgotten what that felt like.

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I'm about to step out of this door. The one that locks and we're not allowed out of. The one my loved ones saw close on me when I stared at them and they stared back, holding themselves together for my sake. I'm being discharged. My medication is working for now, and I have tools I need to keep me from dying: a notebook tucked under my arm with reasons to live written inside, a safety plan, deep breathing exercises, my happy place, self-care ideas, and a psychologist to start seeing every week. Everything will be monitored—medications, access to guns and knives, and my phone location on at all times. The noose isn't so tight anymore. Maybe I can do this.

There's no magic solution to make me realize life is worth living. I have to figure that out myself. I hope one day I'll want to be here as much as everyone else wants me to. On my worst days, I tell myself my only job is to keep living—one step at a time. Some things cannot be fixed. They can only be carried.

I know how easy it is to be yanked from this world. I know what it's like to have wished for death, and death never finds you. I also know that you can keep going, long after you think you can't. It's part of living. A part of being alive.

For everyone who's had to fight for tomorrow: it might not be for a long time, but we can recover everything that the darkness has stolen. We are not alone. We belong here. We can carry each other. We are always worth the energy and will it takes to stay.

*Alive. Deep breath. You are enough, and the things you carry do not change that. You are a story still going. Deep breath. "Tomorrow is worth the fight."*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Miracle" by Shinedown.