West Coast Sunrise
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The sky is beginning to fade into dawn, the stars growing pale. I can feel the cold of the park bench through my jeans. I shove my hands deeper into the pocket of my gray hooded sweatshirt, slouching further down in an attempt to stay warm. I’m at Stanley Park in Vancouver, British Columbia, and it’s four in the morning. I’ve been sitting on this bench for a couple of hours waiting for morning.

Stanley Park sits on the northwest edge of Vancouver. The park is littered with benches and tiny pockets of isolation, cliff bluffs hang over the edge of the water, vistas looking out over bridges and beaches. The park is surrounded on three sides by water, a veritable island, a green oasis amidst the concrete landscape. It serves as an escape for locals; I had adopted the park as my own when I was eighteen and a freshman at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. There were plenty of parks in Bellingham; I didn’t have to leave the country in order to enjoy nature. But there were also people I knew at those parks, people who knew me and expected recognition and conversation. The parks in Bellingham forced me to be social, friendly. I had started driving the forty-five minute commute to get to Stanley Park when I needed to be alone, to think, to drop the social construction of myself and be anonymous.

I hear footsteps behind me, and my right hand finds the pepper spray in my pocket. “Morning,” a voice announces. It sounds more like a proclamation than a greeting. He comes around the corner of the bench. He’s elderly, carrying a tripod and a green backpack. He sets both down on the ground and gives me the tentative half-smile of strangers.

“Hello,” I mumble.

He begins to unload camera equipment from the backpack. He’s wearing a crumpled tan bucket-hat and faded jeans. He must be sixty-five, maybe seventy. “We don’t get many good ones, but I always show up just in case.”

“I’m sorry?” I’m in my own head, not tracking what he’s saying. I’m unsure if this is all he’s said or if I wasn’t listening and missed something.

“Sunrises,” he says, making eye contact. I’m uncomfortable with this sud-
den intimacy and look away. “Our sunsets are always better, but everyone sells sunset shots around here. A good sunrise is pretty rare.”

I nod, unsure of what to say to this or if it even needs a response. The combination of clouds, low pollution levels, and geographic luck make the Pacific Northwest famous for its sunsets, nightly spectacles of multi-hued grandeur. A typical west coast sunrise is fog smearing the edges of the landscape, creating a blurry waterlogged grey world. But while we are known for our sunsets, we are also known for the regional prevalence of Seasonal Affective Disorder, the appropriately named SAD.

The elderly photographer sets up the tripod, attaching an expensive-looking camera to it. He fiddles with the dials and aims it towards the bridge, leaning over to peer through the viewfinder. I imagine the shot: the sky a deep purple, melting to orange behind the pale green steel bridge, a few early boaters on the water, the lush forest terminating at the rocks of the distant shore. I don’t want to talk to another old man tonight. I want to be alone. It’s the whole purpose of coming up here.

In a film when someone shoots themselves in the head, it’s gratuitously tense and dramatic. They’re on the phone with the suicide hotline, the gunshot breaks the connection, the phone goes to static.

The volunteer frantically says: “Hello? Hello? Are you there?” Her brows are furrowed and she’s gazing intently on the phone while waiting for a response. Sometimes a busy signal sounds, sometimes a recorded crackling voice saying “If you’d like to make a call please hang up and try the number again.” The scene ends. It’s tense and satisfying for the audience, but it’s not like that in real life.

The office of the Whatcom Crisis Line (we shy from the term “suicide hotline”) looks more like someone’s poorly decorated apartment than a proper place of business. A tiny kitchen and living room are adjacent to the call room, but the majority of a volunteer’s shift is spent in the call room itself—a large room with a low counter top running along three of its walls. The computers sit on one end of the counter, sarcastically referred to as “The Tech Center” due to the ancient equipment and extensive log the volunteers use to communicate technical problems to the next shift. The phone is located nearest the door, also nearest the kitchen, television, and bed. A lumpy single bed, and a battered wooden dresser full of age-softened, clean linens complete the room, creating a modicum of cozi-
ness for the overnight shift. Referral binders and phone lists clutter the desk; the mammoth Call Log Book sits in the middle of the counter. A huge bulletin board hangs above the phone and is the main distraction for volunteers. It is the place we create for ourselves, a haven, an escape from the drama and chaos that enters our lives via the telephone. It is covered with personal debris: pictures of the recent volunteer’s picnic, inspirational quotes from someone’s Page-A-Day calendar, postcards from around the world, cartoons about suicide hotlines, and my contribution—a pink plastic monkey from a cocktail glass.

I used to sign up for the overnight shift because no one else would and it worked into my schedule. Most calls were lonely alcoholics, people confusing me for a phone sex worker, or the mentally ill—who have forgotten to take their medication and needed someone to remind them after the hallucinations start. It was easy. Most of the time I reminded people to eat something (the mentally ill), drink plenty of water (the drunks), or that horniness is not a crisis. The suicides usually call during the seven to midnight shift, which is one of the main reasons I stopped volunteering for it.

A few weeks before I had talked to a woman for twenty minutes who became increasingly incoherent as the call progressed. She admitted that she had taken a full bottle of Demerol halfway into our conversation. I back-traced the call with 911 and medics were dispatched to her house. A cop thanked me from her end of the phone and said that one of her kids had let him in. The caller had told me she didn’t want to be alone when she died, but hadn’t mentioned she had children in the house. For weeks, I imagined her children waking on a sunny, Wednesday morning, to get ready for school and finding their mother cold and lifeless slumped over the breakfast table.

Last night, someone had called in sick for the seven to midnight shift, and because I live a block away from the call center, Tim, the volunteer coordinator, figured I would take it. I did, and it had been a slow night. I had just finished watching the eleven o’clock news with my bag of microwave popcorn and was settling down at the desk with a bad horror novel to wait for the phone to ring when Bill called.

Bill was an ex-cop, seventy-one, a widower living with (and dying of) M.S., and was estranged from his adult children. He stated he was in constant pain and needed to die. I started the risk-assessment questions. How would you kill yourself? When would you do it? What do you need to get done before you die? When asked, Bill
replied "I'm ready, I cleaned my old service revolver this afternoon." I rolled the office chair down the long desk to the other phone line and started the back-trace for 911. I turned to the computer screen and started typing to the dispatcher.

"Bill, I need you to listen to me for a minute," I started, hoping to drag the call out to give 911 a chance to trace the call. "Is there anyone you forgot to say good-bye to? A high school girlfriend or an ex-partner from being on the job?" Everything I know about law enforcement was pulled directly from television and movies. I sometimes did this, dangerous improvising, pretending to be knowledgeable about topics I knew nothing about. It was something we covered in training as a last resort to keep clients talking. Sometimes it worked and engaged the caller, drawing them out to talk about themselves, their lives. Other times they would catch on to you, and you would lose them; they would realize that they had called a phony and figure if we were willing to fake certain things, then we must be faking the caring about their well-being. It was a gamble, but I wanted to keep Bill on the line.

He sighed. "No, I wrote letters to my boys explaining things."

"What about pets? Do you have pets to make arrangements for?" I was fidgeting with the edge of the desk, waiting for a response from the dispatcher.

"No pets." I heard faint clicking on his end of the phone. The dispatcher typed Having problems with trace. Keep him talking. This was another trick they covered in training, but I was running out of the Big Topics: family, friends, work, their health—the things people could talk about for hours even if they were miserable about all of them. I had even pulled out the guilt question: what about pets. When all else fails, I remembered Tim, the volunteer coordinator, saying in training, talk about pets. Most suicides forget to make arrangements for their pets, and if you make them feel a little guilty about that, you might buy them another day or two.

I heard Bill take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm sorry you have to hear this, you seem like a nice kid."

"Wait," I said, and listened to see if he was still there.

"Yes?"

"Why did you call here if you knew you were going to do it anyway?" Most suicides aren't serious; they don't have a plan. They're lonely and depressed and need someone to tell them not to do it. Our job is to talk them out of it. Actual suicides don't call. Tim assures you of this when you sign up.

"It's selfish, but I didn't want to die alone." I was stunned. This was the
second time in a month someone had said this to me, and I couldn’t understand it. I had just moved into my own apartment a year before and was enjoying the isolation, the freedom, the undisturbed alone time of being self-sufficient. I couldn’t understand this final need for human contact, this desire to connect to another living being at the moment of death. Despite my brief immersions into the lives of the callers, I was clueless about their fears, their reluctance to let go of that last connection to the world, their desperate reaching-out to a twenty-year-old stranger who had never truly known isolation and loneliness. I was unprepared; no training could cover this, no training could help me understand their needs.

“I’m sorry,” Bill says.

This is the part I remember clearly, from this moment on. Everything up until this point is fuzzy and unclear but probably happened just like it’s written. I probably said those things to him, because I said them to so many people. It was my script. But this is what I really remember: there was a sound like wood cracking, and then a muffled rubbing—like someone running their hand over the mouthpiece of their phone. I sat there silent, staring at the blinking cursor on the computer screen and listening for his voice.

“Bill?” A car drove by on the street below, and I heard a woman laugh. From Bill there was nothing. The computer screen blinked. Trace complete, units dispatched. Keep him talking until they get there. I heard a low moan in my ear and startled.

“Bill?” I asked again quietly.

The cursor kept blinking, and I remembered that I had forgotten to call my brother back about my now-solved computer problem. I looked out the window of the call room and saw the children’s dance studio across the street. The windows were dark, but through them you could see a large papier-mâché pink flamingo and the word ‘Grace!’ in cutout construction paper letters. I wondered if I had remembered to mail my cable bill. I watched the leaves on the tree outside the window rustle in the night breeze. I heard the moan again, this time softer.

I typed slowly: I think he shot himself. What do I do?

There was a long pause before the dispatcher typed back. Hang up, the medics should be there soon.

I heard the moan again. I don’t think he’s dead, I can hear moaning.

This time the reply was immediate: Is he responsive?

No.

Hang up, the medics will be there soon. The icon for broken connection came
up on the screen.

I pushed away from the computer and rolled back down the desk towards the phone. I stared at the bulletin board, my eyes resting on the pink drink-monkey. I thought about the night I got it: the tacky Tiki bar in White Rock barely on the Canadian side of the border, Katie’s drunken laughter, playing foosball in the basement of a dorm on the University of British Columbia campus, the drink monkey hanging from its tail on the metal hook of my overalls. I heard Bill moan again. I rested my finger on the disconnect button, the plastic cold under my finger. I didn’t want to hang up. I decided to wait until the medics arrived. I was staring at the phone when it lit up, signaling a call on the other line. I startled and unintentionally pushed the button. The call time flashed on the screen: 6m 26s.

I logged the call: the time, the content, 911 involvement, and hesitated briefly before checking the box: ‘Successful Suicide.’ I called Tim for the required debriefing. I lied: telling him my boyfriend was staying over tonight, and yes, I would call my mother-the-therapist as soon as I got home, and no, I didn’t need him to come down to the office. I wouldn’t call my mom about this—she would threaten to drive the four hours to my apartment to talk about it. She had already made her disapproval of my volunteering clear: *Two weeks of training and you’re supposed to be a trained counselor?* and, *Yes, I know it’s an important service but I don’t want my daughter dealing with all those crazies.* and *You don’t need the stress, do you want to have to mess around trying to balance your meds again?* I knew that any call would end with a plea for me to quit volunteering, a personal referral to a local therapist, an implied *I told you so,* and a “surprise” visit the next day—by both her and my father. I didn’t want the hassle. I was done talking for the night.

When I left the office, I walked past my apartment building and continued to the parking garage where I kept my car. I didn’t want to call anyone, or talk about anything, or even go home and have a drink. I wanted it to be morning. I wanted to run away. I wanted to be alone.

“You’re not drinking your coffee,” the photographer says, pouring steaming liquid from his metal thermos into its cup. I look at the paper cup sitting on the bench next to me. Black glyphs from the barista’s Sharpie marker decorate its side, various boxes checked and slashed out.

“It’s empty,” I say.

“Do you want some of mine?” I hesitate, imagining myself drugged and gagged in the back of a panel van. He takes a sip of his own and fidgets with a
“Sure, thanks.” The coffee is strong and rich and tastes like hazelnuts. It reminds me of skiing with my dad and older brother, drinking coffee from a battered green Coleman thermos in the Jeep on the way back down the mountain, my nose running and my face wind-burned. Watching the snow-covered trees zip by, while Jon relives every jump and fall to Dad and me; his hands gesturing wildly, while I try to press my feet further against the heater vent and wrap my fingers tighter around the hot tin cup.

The sky is getting lighter and fog congeals over the surface of the water. Traffic is already backing up on the bridge. The view is urban and grey, the blue of the water diluted with fog, the green of the forest faded and mute. Everything looks flat and bland.

“Well, it’s not going to be today I guess,” he says after awhile, unscrewing the camera from the tripod. I get up from the bench and stretch my legs.

“Thanks for the coffee,” I say, taking my keys from my pocket. He nods. “You know, whatever it is, it’s not that bad.”

“What?” I’m surprised and a little confused.

“Whatever you’re here for,” he smiles. “You know, I don’t just come here for the sunrises.” Great, I think, he’s going to tell me about Amway or Jesus, I shouldn’t have taken the coffee. “I come here to think. Whatever the problem is, it’s not that bad.”

“It’s just work stuff,” I reply lamely, feeling guilty for assuming he was selling something.

He laughs. “Work stuff? That’s nothing. It’s just a job; you’ll have plenty of jobs in your life. Nothing about work is the end of the world.” He shakes his head and continues to detach his camera from the tripod, humming to himself.

Driving home, I think about Bill and the photographer; I think about work and how “it’s not the end of the world.” I think about strangers, and isolation, and broken connections. I think about needing to be with someone to die—and needing to be alone to think. I think about death, and fog, and cold park benches. I think about calling Jon to remind him to call Mom on her birthday, about the paper I have due in a week. I think about accepting coffee from strangers, about warmth and heat in a cup, about kindness and crumpled bucket-hats. But mostly, I think about morning breaking to grayness, and traffic, and disappointment again and again, and showing up anyway with a thermos full of coffee and a camera, waiting to capture on film the one rare perfect moment of an enigmatic Vancouver sunrise.