

Out of the Darkness Into the Light

A Memoir: Of Suicide Survival,
Strength and Love

By Kerri Gardner

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Dedication

For the loves of my life:

Trevor Gardner,

And our three amazing children,

Sky, Britain and Luke

‘No way!’ my mom shrieked, on the verge of hysteria. ‘You got to be kidding me. You cannot put my daughter in a padded cell. There’s got to be another room for Kerri!’

‘No, ma’am, we are full this month,’ the nurse said. ‘We’ve tried to make the room as comfortable as possible. As soon as another room comes available, we will move her.’ Somehow, that wasn’t very reassuring.

I took another look. The room was about 8 feet by 12 and covered with row after row of brown faux leather with thick padding behind it. In the middle of the room, toward the left outside wall of the building, was a tiny window made of unbreakable glass. The ceiling was covered in the same faux brown leather material with the only break in the pattern being a ceiling light in the center of the room. There was a bed in the corner that looked like it had been borrowed from Alcatraz and a battered old bureau against the wall. A thin white robe with a zipper lay folded on the bed, and a pair of slippers lay on top.

Over a week ago, I probably wouldn’t have cared; I was suicidal after all. Now I felt different as I hadn’t had drugs in my system for more than a week, and the thick fog in my mind was starting to clear. Here I was in this awful place against my will. I had to earn the trust of not only my mother, but also the staff, doctors and anyone else who had the authority to sign the papers saying I was ‘OK.’

One of the nurses stayed in the room while my mom helped me unpack. Everything had to be inspected before I could put it away in the battered old bureau. The power cord for my portable cassette player was confiscated since it could be used for strangulation. My BIC disposable razors were confiscated as well so I couldn’t slit my wrists. The nurse explained they would keep the razors and provide them for use during shower time only. Anything that could potentially be used to harm myself or

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others was taken from me, even my belt. These items which I used every day and which I had no idea could be so dangerous, were put in a plastic box labelled with my name.

A staff member inventorying my confiscated items with yellow stickers marked 'inspected' said, 'Your items are still yours, Kerri, but you do not have the privilege to use them as freely as you did before. Once you prove you can be trusted and are well enough to leave this hospital, your items will be returned to you.'

The whole process was demoralizing. I felt like I was truly in prison. The only things missing were the metal bars, a disgruntled roommate, and a disgusting rotting toilet. It was time for my mom to leave. I looked at her with tears running down my face, and my hands balled into fists. 'Mom, please don't leave me here,' I pleaded. 'I promise I won't ever do it again!'

She gave me the biggest hug; it reminded me of the times when I was little and upset. All I needed was a hug from her that fixed everything. I could feel her tears running down the side of my cheek as she held onto me as tightly as she could. Then, she backed away. 'Kerri, believe me, I don't want you to be here at all, but you need to understand, I don't trust you anymore. I don't know why you did this to yourself, and I don't know if you'll try again. Dr. Green said that you were a danger to yourself. I have to take the doctor's advice and keep you here until they say otherwise, or until we see a change in you.'

She kissed me and said, 'I love you. I am only a phone call away. I'll be back to visit each week.' More tears streamed down her face as the nurse ushered her out.

I felt completely alone and terrified knowing I had to sleep in this horrible room. The padded door with a small index-sized window closed behind them. I sat down on the creepy old bed and cried.

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They call these places loony bins for a good reason. Strangely enough, I felt like I was the only sane one. This place was full of kids who wanted to kill themselves and had been stopped from doing so. Not a day would go by without one of them trying to finish off what they had started, often with gruesome results.

One day, I was playing solitaire with Jerry, a staff member there. Jerry was such a sweet man, who smelled like sour milk. Being friends with him was my only fond memory of the place. He must have been 400-pounds and wore clothes from Big and Tall. His job was to have extra eyes on us kids, a guard, so to speak. It was really hard to inhale his stench as we'd sit every day for several hours playing solitaire, checkers, and other games while discussing everyday stuff like, how did I sleep, what were my favorite foods, was there anything new to tell from the last visit I had with my family? He was the only one who accepted me as I was and didn't pester me with questions about what I did and how I ended up here.

Suddenly, a teenage boy sitting at a long craft table on the other side of the room caught my eye. He had been busy drawing and coloring when he sat abruptly back in his chair. Placing a pencil in each hand, he proceeded to jam a pencil into each of his eyes. He screamed as blood spurted everywhere. Jerry flew out of his chair and hit the emergency alarm...

Author Note with Disclaimer

To write my book, I relied on my personal journals, researched facts when necessary, and consulted with several of the people who appear in the book. I also called upon my own memory of these events during that time in my life from ages 13 to 22 and age 42.

I have changed the names of most but not all the individuals in this book. To preserve anonymity, I also modified identifying details. When needed, I omitted people and events that had no impact on the substance of the story.

Disclaimer:

Writing this book has been, by no means, easy. It includes my true confessions of attempting suicide, the years that led up to that attempt, and the years of rebuilding that followed. I describe various personalities and their interaction with me, and my perceptions of them from my, admittedly, depressed state. While I have taken pains to ensure that the information included in my memoir is, to the best of my recollection, as accurate as possible, I acknowledge that different people develop different perspectives on the same sets of facts and circumstances. I recognize that words are powerful. While I have no wish to hurt anyone, because I believe my confessions may resonate with others facing emotional challenges, and may help to show them that hope is always around the corner, I have persisted in publishing this memoir. It is my deepest hope that it will provide perspective for those who are contemplating suicide, and that it can serve as a resource for others who want to know why people commit or attempt to commit suicide, and how best to help those contemplating this irrevocable act.

Foreword by Dr. Nicole Swiner

As a family doctor, I am very aware of how impactful depression and suicidal thoughts and attempts are on our lives. I try my best to listen and help patients who are going through tumultuous times and are crying out for help. It's incredibly important to hear their cries and bring them out of their darkness.

This book tells the story of how my friend, Kerri, has been able to come out of her darkness into the light with strength and an enormous amount of courage. You see her when she's at her worst and as she grows into an amazing, beautiful person. I'm incredibly proud of her and her accomplishments. What makes this book great is its raw honesty and truth. It's also a real page turner. As the story goes from start to finish, it has the reader on their toes, and then allows them to leave with a happy ending. It's a very important book to pay attention to.

C. Nicole Swiner, M.D.

Why I Wrote This Book

In the fall of 2012, I received an email from our daughter's seventh-grade school. I knew it wasn't going to be good, but I had no idea that opening this email would reopen old wounds and secrets. These secrets I had kept hidden from my neighbors, co-workers, friends and our children for the last 25 years. Only my husband, Trevor, knew of my scars. What I read shocked me. I felt as if I had been punched in the gut, and I burst into tears. This email would undo everything I had tried to keep buried for so long.

I read that a girl named Mary, our daughter's classmate whom I had never met, had killed herself. She was 13 years old. They described in detail Mary's suicide. Mary went home and took medications out of her parents' bathroom. Pills in hand, she made a cocktail and swallowed. The email informed us about how the school was going to take immediate measures to break the news to the students. They'd also give them the opportunity to speak to a psychiatrist. I knew Mary's death would not only affect the students and staff at school, but also affect our daughter deeply. She would be devastated. She had mentioned on several occasions her friend Mary, how many classes they shared, and how much she liked her. For me it hit home; it felt raw, like *déjà vu*, because, in that moment, I was Mary all over again. I was the 13-year-old girl who planned her own suicide and survived. This secret, the one I had been ashamed of, the one our kids, neighbors, co-workers, and friends didn't know about, was bound to come out. It tore at my heart that I might have had the opportunity to save Mary. That I could have talked to her and explained how I had experienced those same feelings, and to let her know it's okay. I wished I had had the opportunity to show her how happy I was coming out of it, how I found the love of my life who saved me all those 25 years ago. My daughter and I

talked about her day in school, how she witnessed other kids' reactions to Mary's death and how some kids were making fun of Mary's suicide. It was a very emotional and stressful day for her and the entire school. She then told me how the psychiatrist suggested journaling as a way to express her feelings about the tragedy. Listening to our daughter talk about her feelings, all I could hear was pain, anger and confusion. She was so mad at Mary. Sky didn't understand why she lost her friend so suddenly. I kept thinking how I completely understood how Sky felt, as I felt this way trying to rebuild my life after my attempted suicide. There wasn't a day I hadn't felt many emotions and the struggle to deal with each of them. I was also witness to my family's pain. It took a long time for all of us to heal. I felt so sad for Mary's family, the pain that led her to leave this world, she also left for her parents to endure. So many people were hurting. I wanted to stop our daughter's pain and help answer any questions she had. I knew it was a poor replacement for Mary, but maybe it would be enough to help her through the stages of healing. I decided it was time to share my story. I needed to use my story to help in some way. I just knew I couldn't be silent anymore; I had to help.

I made the decision right there and then to tell our kids. I wanted to express my feelings and relate my own experience and why I tried to commit suicide. I wanted to explain to them what I learned after my attempted suicide, that life doesn't have to continue to be painful and horrible. I wanted to share my conviction that it helps to talk with people who love and unconditionally support us about however we are feeling. I decided I would write my story. I needed to make a difference and thought that maybe, just maybe, telling my story will encourage those who read it to never take that final step of committing suicide.

Thus began my newly found mission: to write my book, to get my story told, and to help kids from elementary school age to college age.

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I didn't know how this was all going to happen, but I knew the first step would be writing this book to help others.

PREFACE

I watched the last few passengers boarding the plane, rushing to stow their carry-ons in the overhead bins, and thought about how even though everyone had their own separate journeys, we all ended up here on this flight together tonight. I thought a lot about my past and how those events led me to be on this plane. I was extremely excited and looking forward to planning a life with Trevor.

I also wondered if I would have met him and fallen in love with him so quickly and completely, if I hadn't made the decision to kill myself. Would we have ever been in the same place at the same time? Would we have even met? Would I be on this plane right now?

I felt the panic surge through me as the plane began to roll away from the terminal. This was it. There was no turning back. It was finally happening. I was starting a new chapter in my life. I was overjoyed, enthusiastic, and a little scared at the same time. I thought of all I was leaving behind; my family, my friends, my job, the past 21 years of my life – left behind like luggage I couldn't carry. I didn't know when or even if I would return, but I chose to believe with the love in my heart that it would all work out.

Opening the window shade, I looked out towards the Boston night sky on the Fourth of July. I thought about how ironic it was for me to leave, of all days, on Independence Day. Fireworks were still being lit and exploding beautifully in the night sky. Not only was the entire country still celebrating Independence Day, I too was celebrating my own independence from my old life and was looking forward to a new life with Trevor. I whispered a final goodbye to the United States.

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CHAPTER 1 – THE LAST DAY

Tonight was the night. I doodled idly on my math folder waiting for the bell to ring. I was finally going to end it, once and for all. I had it all planned out. My mom and George, my stepdad, were off for their usual Friday night bingo, followed by the habitual greasy Chinese takeout in front of the TV. I would have plenty of time to take care of things while they were gone. Seventh-grade had been the toughest school year so far, and it showed no signs of getting better. The last two years had been an inferno of never-ending persecution, anguish, and misery. Compared to the friendly, easy-going tempo of fifth grade, everyone seemed to have changed between graduating elementary and starting middle school. Even the teachers' attitudes were different.

I looked up from my doodling and glanced around the classroom, doubting anyone here would notice I was gone. I would just be an empty chair. The Brainiacs at the front would still be the studious teacher's pets that they were, and the boys would still be the same immature idiots, snapping bra straps and making obnoxious noises during class, while the small clique of popular girls at the back would still be the meanest people around. They took pleasure acting like they owned the school—looking down on you, commenting on your choice of clothes or accessories that were not their particular brand. I swear that those girls went to some secret bitch camp last summer and graduated with honors.

All four of them, suddenly aware of my existence, glared at me.

'What are you staring at, freak?' snapped top #1 bitch, the ringleader.

'What did you say to me?' I snapped back. Most kids didn't stand up for themselves, but I did.

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Throughout my years in school, I made sure no one tried to bully me. My brother was a little chubby and smaller than most of the boys in his elementary class, and the mean boys enjoyed picking on him for these reasons. I wasn't able to protect him from the verbal abuse at school because I was in middle school. However, after school, if they tried to hurt him physically, he would always find me to help protect him. It was known if you tried to pick on my brother you'd have me to deal with, and you'd better finish it, or I would. I could hold my own, though I wasn't about to start now. I simply didn't have the time for a distraction.

She turned down her nose to me like I was a piece of shit, turned back to her friends, whispered something, and they all started to laugh in unison.

Returning to my doodle, I violently scribbled through it. I wasn't going to miss this hellhole, that was for sure. Every day, for as long as I could remember, I felt like an ALIEN compared to everyone in my household and the kids at school; I took medication twice a day, saw doctors every three months like a lab rat, and to make matters worse, I couldn't seem to find any happiness in my miserable life. I was suffering all the time, trying to fit in and trying to keep up appearances ... It was incredibly difficult when I felt consumed with depression, and all I ever thought about was how much I hated my life—it couldn't keep going on like this with no hope in sight. For the last seven years, I lived in a black hole of emptiness ... I don't think I was always like this, and yet I couldn't remember a time when I was truly happy. I kept wondering: what does happiness mean anyway? I saw people smiling, laughing and engaging with one another. I felt so completely ostracized by it all.

It probably didn't help that, at thirteen, I was a year older and a foot taller than everyone else in class, because I had to repeat second grade. I stood out in the crowd and not in a good way. This only increased the feeling of being an alien. Just another checkmark on the list of differences compared to the rest of my

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classmates. From the age of six, I had always found my schoolwork difficult and confusing. I had a harder time processing the information being taught in class. Unfortunately, this was one of the many side effects of taking my medication.

When I was little, my mother wanted me to feel more involved with other kids, and around the age of seven or eight, she enrolled me in a tap dance class. I remember one incident to this day. I was given instructions, along with the other girls in class, on a new tap step. We were then asked to perform it. I couldn't do it; I looked around at the other girls who were smiling and performing this new step with ease. I felt frustrated and completely stupid. Sitting down in the middle of class, I started to cry hysterically. My mother had warned me if I threw another tantrum she would take me out of the class. Well, I did, and she pulled me out. That was the last time she enrolled me in anything until I was in middle school. Since then the tantrums stopped. But, the schoolwork became increasingly difficult as the years progressed, as each year, my medication dosage increased. The higher dosage made my brain feel heavy, like a thick layer of fog had settled into my skull. That sensation only increased my confusion, making it harder for me to understand certain subjects like advanced math.

I know when this all happened to me. I've been told the story many times. The summer of 1975. I was two years old when my father took my baby brother and me to visit his family who lived in the country, about six hours away to the north. My mother couldn't come since she had to work. My grandfather owned a large home with a barn that he graciously filled with horses and small ponies. As you can expect, a two-year-old would be itching to get out of the car to run around and play. Once my father's family greeted us with hugs and kisses, we hurried over to the barn. I was in awe of these animals. I had never seen one close up before. Without anyone noticing, I wandered off into the corral for a closer look. One pony, in particular, was hot-tempered. He took one look my way before charging full force at me. The pony's metallic horse-shoe made contact with my head

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as he trampled me down. My father and family heard the commotion and came running. They found me on the ground unconscious, my face and shirt covered in blood. Everyone thought I was dead. I had a nasty head injury, but thankfully it wasn't as serious as it first appeared. I just needed stitches on my right eyebrow. The doctor did a full physical and informed my father I was fine and could go home.

Four years later at age six, my parents were divorced. It was my father's scheduled time to take my brother and me for our annual visit to his family, a place where accidents tended to happen. During our journey, my father stopped at a friend's house to rest a bit before continuing to our grandfather's home.

I remember the day vividly. The start of our journey, I felt fine. The three of us had our snacks and drinks, and we sang along to songs on the radio from some of my favorite singers - Carly Simon, Simon & Garfunkel, and Joni Mitchell. The time passed by quite quickly in the car, without incident. As soon as we arrived at the home of my dad's friend from high school, my head started to ache, and I began to feel nauseous. Those symptoms gradually became worse, and then I began to sweat. I asked my dad's friend if I could rest. He said, 'Sure,' and led me into the living room to his brown leather couch. As I lay down, I placed my head on the armrest. I remember feeling thankful I could rest my hot head against the cool leather. Lying there, my head began to pound with pain, sweat beaded on my forehead and down my neck, my stomach felt tight, and the slightest movement increased the nausea.

After several minutes, the leather armrest started to heat up. I didn't know why until I opened my eyes and noticed the sun pouring in through the window. I needed to move. I got up, switched to the other side of the couch, closed my eyes and that's all I remember. I am not sure how long afterward, but I could hear screaming, and I understood the screaming was coming from my brother. Then I heard our father's voice, and he was demanding to know what my brother did to me. Joe said he

didn't do anything. My poor four-year-old brother was beside himself, watching me convulsing on the floor, choking on my tongue and seeing the whites of my eyes as they rolled back into my skull. I was having a full epileptic seizure. My father gathered me up on his lap and held my head in one hand while using the other to stop me choking on my tongue. I finally came to and was out of breath, drenched in sweat and terrified. My body ached from head to toe. I had no idea how I ended up on the floor. I could only remember the screaming.

My father called my mother who took the first flight out from Boston and met us at the hospital. It was the same hospital I had been rushed to four years earlier after the pony accident. An MRI, CAT scan, EEG and blood work revealed that as I was growing up, a substantial amount of scar tissue had developed as a result of my head injury. The scarring eventually obstructed my normal brain activity and induced a seizure. I like to compare it to a stroke when the brain sends a signal to the heart to pump, and the blocked artery doesn't allow that to happen. With my body still steadily developing, the doctors knew I would start to have regular 'episodes.' To control them, I needed to be put on drugs. The drug of choice was phenobarbital, a barbiturate. Along with the promise of controlling my seizures, my parents were also warned of the drug's side effects in children my age. Depression, agitation, mood swings, dizziness, confusion and many others I'd soon learn about for myself. I was sent home with a prescription and a game plan to have me re-evaluated every three months with blood work, CAT Scans, EEGs, and MRIs. The drug did, in fact, stop the seizures, but it also crippled me mentally.

From the age of six to the age of thirteen, I lived in a black hole. I felt imprisoned in my mind. I knew there was something really wrong with me, but I didn't know how to explain this to my mom. My head felt heavy with depression. I was frequently confused and thinking, *why do I always feel this way?* Why can't I smile like the other kids do all the time? Why do I have to be different? In school, I would feel anxious because I found it hard

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to grasp new teaching points. It took me twice as long to learn something new, than the other kids. This infuriated me, because I could see the other kids coping comfortably with the same assignment. My schoolwork began to suffer. I was confused all the time. This constant depression and anger continued to build. I was on edge; at any moment, I could burst out crying for no apparent reason. On many occasions, I did.

Due to my difficulty in learning and retaining information, my mother was advised to hold me back in second grade. Not knowing what else to do, she reluctantly agreed with my teachers. To get left behind was one thing, to feel left out at the same time crushed my self-esteem entirely. Staying back in second grade was when I started to refer to myself as an ALIEN.

At this point in my life, I hated each and every day. While repeating second grade was what I needed, I also found myself being bullied by the kids, especially the ones I thought were my friends from my previous class. They started to make fun of me because I had been kept back.

On top of that, my mom met our soon-to-be stepfather, George, and had him move in sometime after her divorce. I remember at the time feeling safe knowing we had a new dad who would love and take care of us, unlike our 'real' dad. Unfortunately, several years revealed the harsh reality that he never wanted kids. He only wanted my mother. My brother and I were an unwanted part of the whole package. Even so, my mother loved him and tried to make the relationship work between the three of us. Sadly, she was always caught in the middle, defending us to him and defending him to us. It was the Bermuda Triangle. Nothing good came of it. The same string of problems that never got solved were swept under the rug for us to stumble across, again and again.

The last bell of the day buzzed loudly through the overhead speakers, distracting me from my thoughts. The classroom instantly became a bustling inferno of energy as everyone

gathered their belongings. I gathered my things and followed the herd into the corridor, dodging others as I scrambled towards my locker. My locker had once been decked out with pictures of TV heartthrobs, doodles and brightly colored locker accessories, much like everyone else's. I cleaned it out over the last few weeks, trashing mostly everything inside and giving away whatever else I had to whoever wanted it. All that was left was a few books on the shelf and a lone picture of Davy Jones lining the inside of the door. I stuffed it all into my bag. Seeing there was nothing left, I closed the locker and headed for the bus.

'Hey, Kerri,' Teresa greeted me as I sat next to her.

'Hey, TT,' I answered. Everyone called her that.

'You wanna hang out on Sunday?' she asked.

'Uhh, sure.' I shrugged, not that I had plans beyond today.

Teresa was a year older than me, but that didn't stop her from becoming my best friend. She was one of the first few people I had met when we moved three years ago. I remember the day we met. My family and I were unpacking and moving boxes into the house. She was riding her bike around the neighborhood and stopped by to introduce herself. That was pretty much it. We clicked and became fast friends. I was excited she lived so close, just down the street. We hung out practically every day after school at her home and swam in her pool during the summer months. It was a welcome break from school and home to be with TT. While most people saw me as a nobody, and my family, I felt, saw me as a burden, TT accepted me for who I was. I knew she would be devastated - I would have been as well if she made the decision to end her life as I had. I was truly sorry for that, but I had made up my mind.

The decision to kill myself wasn't something I reached in a day. These thoughts had been around since the beginning of seventh grade, even though I had hoped a new school year would

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usher in a new beginning that would save me from the black hole I was living in. That same year, however, I hit puberty and got my period. Sure enough, I needed a heavier dose of medication to control my seizures on top of my ever-changing body and additional hormones. My depression spiraled as a result. I thought my decision through, and a month before the attempt, I chose to give my belongings away. By doing this, it solidified wanting to end my life as I was no longer going to be here to use them. I made sure I didn't completely empty my room, which might have tipped my parents off that something unusual was afoot.

The bus stopped at the corner of my road, and I fought the urge to give TT a big hug. I had to keep up appearances, so I meekly said goodbye and got off the bus. I headed straight for my house and let myself in through the front door.

'Joe!' I called out to my younger brother.

There was no reply, which I took as a good sign. That and the lack of vehicles in the driveway meant that nobody was home. I went into the kitchen and dragged a chair over to the refrigerator. Standing on the chair, I opened the door to the cabinet above the fridge, finding the bottle of phenobarbital in its usual spot. Emptying the bottle on the kitchen counter, I counted the small white round tablets. There were 64 left. Would it be enough? I decided it would have to be, and carefully put the pills back. These pills were the cause of so much of my suffering. Surely, they could be used to put an end to it?

I made myself a ham and cheese sandwich, poured myself a Pepsi, and retired to my room, ignoring the dirty dishes in the sink and the basket of laundry waiting for me on the couch. I had been slacking on my chores for the last week or so, but I'd be gone soon, and it wasn't like my mother would be able to ground me. I sat on my bed with a pad of paper and a pen and wondered whether I should leave a note. If so, what should I write?

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Goodbye, I hope you all enjoy life better without me?

No, people usually gave some indication as to why.

I hate my life, and I can't stand to live a minute longer.

I stared at the blank paper for a while. I finally decided that I wouldn't leave a note. I didn't see the point.

'Kerri!' I heard my brother calling as he entered the house.

'I'm in my room,' I shouted.

I heard him coming down the hallway. He found me still staring at the blank paper.

'Whatcha doin'?' he asked.

Joe was so beautiful to me. He still had a baby face with wavy dirty blond hair, striking blue eyes, small rounded nose with rosy red cheeks and full lips. Short for his age and a little chubby, he was surprisingly strong, and would always win when we had an arm wrestling match.

'Nothing.' I tossed the pad of paper and pen on the floor and looked up to see him making the weirdest and most disturbing faces at me; scrunching up his face while sticking out his tongue. The grossest one was when he took his fingers and pulled his eyelids back.

Joe was exactly like how a baby brother should be – annoying. I did my best to ignore him. Not getting any reaction, he gave up and turned around, tossed his school bag into his pigsty of a bedroom across the hall.

'Joe, can you please close my door?'

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He slammed it shut, and I heard him stomp down the hall, back towards the living room.

‘Thank you,’ I yelled.

‘Whatever,’ he yelled back. Then I heard the TV come on.

That was the gist of our typical conversations, on a good day.

George came storming into my room as soon as he got home and saw the undone dishes and laundry.

‘What have you been doing?’ he shouted, raising his voice and emphasizing the last word of each sentence. ‘I’m fed up with you not pulling your weight around here. You know your mother is at work all day, and the last thing she should be doing when she gets home is housework. You need to help out.’

‘Well, what about Joe? He doesn’t do anything. He doesn’t even keep his room clean. I don’t see you shouting at him.’

‘You watch your mouth, young lady,’ he yelled, leaning so far forward I thought he might lose his balance. ‘Who the hell do you think you are, talking to me like that? If I tell you to do something, you do it. You’re grounded for a week!’

‘What? That’s not fair,’ I protested.

For half a second, I was furious and almost forgot my plans. What did I care if I was grounded anyway? It wasn’t like it was going to last for long. After tonight, I was FREE.

‘That means no going out, no friends, no TV, and no phone. You will come home from school and go straight to your room. ‘

Breathing heavily and red in the face, he turned and left, his weighted footsteps receding to the living room where I heard Joe protest as George changed the TV channel.

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George was not one for back-chatting to. When he gave an order, he expected you to listen. I never felt George really loved us. I felt he put up with us - the baggage that came with my mother. I felt we both deserved better. I saw him for who he was. He thought dishes, housework, and laundry were women's work. He was a man, and men did stuff like yard work or fixing the car. That was probably why Joe never had any real chores to do. The few chores he did have, he still ignored, and I did them so my mom wouldn't have to. It was a never-ending cycle.

When my mom came home from work at the office, I heard her arguing about me with George in the kitchen. Moments later, she came into my room to talk.

'I understand you haven't done your chores for the last few days,' she said. 'George and I have discussed your behavior, and I have to support him in grounding you. I'm sorry, Kerri, you need to stay in your room for the evening. You can't come out, even after we're gone.'

'Fine,' I said, indifferent. This wasn't a big surprise; she sided with him most of the time.

'We'll discuss this in the morning, okay? I love you,' she leaned over and kissed me, and then slowly got up, closing the door behind her.

After they left, I waited ten minutes, and then went to find Joe. He was lying on the floor watching TV.

'Have they gone?' I asked him.

'Yeah,' he answered, not bothering to look up.

I proceeded to the kitchen and took down my pills from the cabinet above the fridge. Pouring them out onto the countertop, I divided them roughly into sets of four and five. I poured myself a large glass of orange juice and started swallowing the pills, one

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set at a time. I thought about my life since my first seizure and when I had to start taking these pills. I was done with being constantly pinched and prodded at by doctors every three months, never knowing if the tests would ever stop. Hating school, the continuous problems with my father, the arguments I overheard concerning Joe and me between George and my mother, and my father and his new wife. I swallowed the last pill with a big gulp of orange juice and felt as if a huge weight was rising from me. I washed out my glass, dried it and put it away in the cupboard, thinking George would be so proud that I had cleaned up after myself. I put the empty tablet bottle back in its place in the cabinet and returned to the living room.

Standing behind the coffee table so Joe wouldn't notice, I took a last long look at my baby brother. He was twelve and still in that awkward stage of pre-puberty; his chubby frame was dressed in matching gray sweatpants and sweatshirt. I watched him pat his wavy dirty blond hair with the permanent cowlick in the middle of his forehead. Seeing Joe's innocent, sweet round face, full lips, and cleft chin, reminded me of our childhood days when I wanted to be his little mother and take care of him. I felt so much love for him at that moment. When he wasn't pissing me off, he could make me laugh. Joe loved all his heroes: Batman, The Hulk, and Superman, to name a few. On many occasions, Joe was our comedian, coming up with something crazy to say to Mom and me. He would do this by imitating his heroes' voices while telling a joke. It would catch you off guard, and we would always burst out laughing. He and I had been through so much together with our parents' divorce and the addition of our stepparents. We were a team once upon a time, getting along and protecting one another. Because we had to share a bedroom for almost seven years in the apartment, we used to spend a lot of time together; playing with our toys, games, and creating forts in our closets. When we moved to our new house, we had our own bedrooms, and as time went on, we hardly spoke to each other. If by some miracle we did, it was simply to argue about trivial things. I loved him and would miss him, but I needed to go. There was nothing left for me here.

I kneeled down next to him.

‘I love you,’ I said and reached out for a hug.

‘Yeah,’ he murmured, eyes still glued to the TV.

I returned to my bedroom and shut the door. Closing the blinds, I got into bed, turned off the lights and lay myself to rest. Lying there, I wondered how this would work. Would I fall asleep? Would it hurt? I had read in a newspaper how the effects of an overdose would affect the body. I didn’t know how long it took, and would I be aware of the moment just before my heart stopped beating? Soon enough, I started to feel drowsy. I was having trouble keeping my eyes open, and I eventually dozed off.

‘Kerri ... Kerri.’

‘Kerri!’

I struggled to open my eyes. My brother was leaning over me, hands clasped on my shoulders, shaking me awake.

‘Get off me,’ I muttered, trying to get my eyes to focus.

‘TT’s on the phone, and she says it’s urgent.’

I didn’t know how long I had been asleep, and I was in no mood to talk to anyone.

‘Tell her I’m asleep,’ I snapped at him.

‘She won’t get off the phone until she talks to you,’ he insisted. ‘She says it’s urgent!’

‘I want to be left alone! How hard is that for you to understand?’ I hissed back at my brother. He winced.

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I threw the covers off and got up. My head felt too heavy to hold up on its own, like I had several cement blocks stacked on top of it. Within seconds of standing, my body tingled. It felt as if I had put on a full-bodied sumo wrestler's costume, and I was sliding around in it, rather than it belonging to me. I was practically tripping over myself trying to walk my way to the phone.

'Ello,' I slurred.

'Oh, my God, Kerri, I almost got abducted!' she screamed at me. 'I was walking home from the corner store and out of nowhere this white van pulls up, the door opens and this man tried to grab me. I ran as fast as I could to get home. Kerri, I'm freaking out, I'm so scared.'

There had been reports of a white van with two men cruising through our neighborhoods for months trying to pick up kids late at night. You would think the local police would dispatch several cars to patrol the neighborhood every night, pulling over all white vans on the road until these guys were caught and put away. Instead, the police sent a notice to all residents, assuring everyone they were doing everything they could to apprehend these men and to ensure all children were off the roads and safely in their homes by sunset.

My mind was fuzzy and I was finding it hard to concentrate.

'TT that's awful, are you okay?' I asked, my voice lacking any conviction.

'Ah, yeah, I'm okay,' she calmed down a little. I think she noticed. 'Kerri, you don't sound right. Are you okay?'

'Err ... hmm, yeah, I'm fine, just tired.'

My legs were suddenly very shaky, and I knew they were going to give way any minute. I couldn't stand here much longer.

‘You don’t sound like yourself. What’s going on?’ she pressed.

‘I’m fine; I gotta go.’ I really needed to lie down now.

‘I’m coming over!’

‘No, TT, don’t!’ I snapped.

By then, I was fed up with her questions. This was an intrusion I hadn’t planned on, and I didn’t want to waste any more time on the phone. I could feel the pills really kicking into full gear. I didn’t have the strength to stand; every muscle in my body was becoming numb. I needed to end the conversation.

‘If you must know, I took the rest of my seizure pills,’ I snapped at her, loud enough for only her to hear me, ‘so leave me alone to die in peace!’

After that, I hung up. I dragged myself back to the bedroom and shut the door, this time locking it. I made it to my bed just as my legs gave out. Mustering whatever strength I had left, I wiggled myself beneath the covers. I was suddenly cold. My head continued to feel weighed down, and it seemed to sink right into the pillow. Once again, I started to pass out, hopefully for the last time.

BANG, BANG, BANG!

The knocking resounded in my head like a bad dream. It seemed close yet so far.

BANG, BANG, BANG!

‘KERRI! KERRI! It’s Teresa’s mom. Open the door, sweetie.’

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I could hear my brother crying hysterically in the distance. He sounded so scared. I didn't think about that. Not once did I consider how people would feel about me killing myself. I felt terrible for him. These thoughts were so unexpected and came charging at me like the pony did all those years ago, leaving me feeling trampled and paralyzed.

'Joe, listen to me,' TT's mom said to my brother. 'Call your mom and tell her we're taking your sister to the hospital, okay?'

BANG, BANG, BANG!

'Kerri, please open the door, honey.'

'No, I can't, go away.'

My voice didn't even sound like me. It seemed to come from somewhere outside, almost a whisper. I was telling the truth. I couldn't have opened that door even if I wanted to. I could hardly move. It took every bit of energy I had just to move my head to look at the door. I felt a sudden surge of panic as I listened to my brother and TT crying, along with TT's mother shouting through the door. It was never my intention to hurt anyone, just me.

I imagined my mom answering the phone call at the bingo, my brother screaming for help, telling her what I had done.

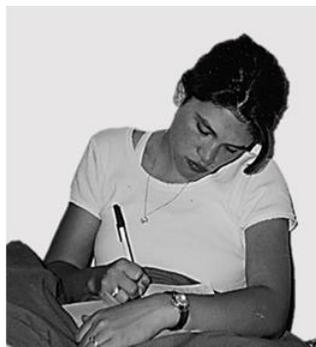
The banging continued. Soon, everything grew fainter and fainter. I caught a fleeting glimpse of the door bursting open as the world faded away.

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Pictures



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Left Page: a selection of pictures 1994 - 1995 inc. Trevor and Kerri dancing in Trevor's parents living room; Caricature, Faneuil Hall, Boston, MA May 1995.

Top of this page: Trevor and Kerri making silly faces in Oxford, August 1994; Trevor age 15, 1987; Kerri age 20, journaling her memories of England; Wedding Day - "trying to cut our cake", February 24th 1996.

Acknowledgements

They say: “It takes a village to raise a child.” I can honestly say this memoir, gestated over the last three years, is my fourth child. It would not have come to fruition without the help of my village, made up of wonderful people both near to me and all over the world. As a first time author, I had no idea how much time, commitment and help I would need. Thankfully, that help has been forthcoming. My husband, Trevor, our children, Sky, Britain and Luke, and others in my village (you know who you are) have provided continual support and encouragement. My heartfelt thanks go out to all of you who have helped me make the dream of telling this story a reality. I am very blessed to know all of you and feel forever grateful.

If it were not for Teresa Haskins (a.k.a.TT), I wouldn't be alive. TT you were my guiding angel. You entered into my dysfunctional life when I needed you. Your love and friendship enabled me to be a little “normal” when I first moved to town, thoroughly drugged and depressed over being such a burden. You took the “Alien” I thought I was and made me feel “accepted”. Had you not called on the night of my attempted suicide, I would not have had the opportunity to meet Trevor and to have three beautiful babies. I will be forever grateful for your friendship during my darkest days and for saving my life. Thank you TT.

It is to my ‘Dave Jones’, my husband, Trevor Gardner, that I owe my deepest thank you. No matter what venture I choose to undertake, you always support me. When it came to writing my book, you encouraged me to never give up on my dreams, and to never stop writing, no matter how difficult it was at times. You have been my guiding light, my rock. Thankfully, you have put up with all of my craziness, going on 21 years now. I cannot

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picture my life without my best friend. You not only helped me write this book, you took several hours over several months to help edit the draft as well. I THANK YOU and will love you ALWAYS Trevor.

To our children Sky, Britain and Luke, who have endured almost three years of my continual writing and editing - if they needed me when I wasn't at home or at work, they came to know that they would find me in front of my computer, writing my book. They have been wonderful and supportive and have given me the time I needed to write and have understood WHY writing this account has such significance to me. I am very blessed and grateful to have three great kids. I hope I have instilled in them how important it is to follow through with your passion and never give up on your dreams. You three and Daddy are my daily WHY. The reason I wake up every day happy and excited, feeling fortunate to still be here and have a fulfilling life.

Thank you to my very cool, very unique and lifelong friends Melani and Robin. I am super grateful for the times I called each of you to pick your brains at moments when I couldn't quite remember details that you knew. It meant a lot to me to have both of you read through the very first drafts of this book. I appreciated when I asked and received your very honest opinions. Throughout the last three years, no matter if I was struggling with the book or thought I was done, you were both my personal cheerleaders - through phone calls, texts or PMs on Facebook, you encouraged me to never give up. Thank you, Melani and Robin from the bottom of my heart! I love you both, and I couldn't have completed my book without you two!

After 24 months of writing and two state moves that brought us back to Raleigh, I decided it was time to find an editor. I came across a familiar name; Alice Osborn. Alice and I had met during my first year in Raleigh, back in 2007. We met through BNI – Business Networking International - when I was a sales rep for SendOutCards. I called Alice and we set up a meeting. I hired her after that meeting and am grateful for all the support

and hours we both put in, collaborating on my book and all of her endless edits. Thank you Alice, you were an important part in my journey, and I will forever be grateful!

After completing my edits with Alice, I decided to publish on Amazon.com. That's when fate intervened and I met Susie Bencen of iAMO Marketing Agency at <http://www.i-amo.com>. Susie is a one-stop shop! She's brilliant, patient, funny, a perfectionist, my friend who has helped me publish my book on Amazon. Her main focus is helping business owners grow their business and she also helps authors build a marketing platform they deserve at www.bestbookbuzz.com!

It's been an adventurous almost six months working with Susie. Through her guidance, I have learned how to become a better writer. I have had my book edited yet again and found areas where I was missing vital information for character building that I didn't think necessary at the time. I also learned more about memoir writing and how to build the foundation of my new author/speaking business. Susie hired Jennifer FitzGerald who designed the Book Cover. The three of us have put our heads together and, using an idea suggested by Susie's husband, my book cover came together beautifully! I loved all the help she gave me, her listening ear through all my tears and frustrations. No matter what, she has provided unending support to me on my book creation journey. I highly recommend Susie for all of you wanting advice with book marketing or growing your business. I'd also recommend Jennifer FitzGerald for book covers!

My village wouldn't be complete without all the support and generous donations I've received from my friends during my GoFundMe campaign. I didn't want to create a book that would sit on a shelf or stay in a box. I wanted to positively impact others' lives through my personal story. I wanted all who read my book to really hear me, to know that they would never have to take the measures I did to get rid of their pain. I needed them to understand that no matter where they are in their lives, their

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pain is temporary. That finding a permanent solution to a temporary problem is not and will never be the answer. If it weren't for all those who contributed to my GoFundMe campaign, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to fulfill my dream of helping others of all ages.

I want to give a BIG SHOUT OUT AND SAY A BIG THANK YOU TO ALL WHO CONTRIBUTED TO MY BOOK FUND AND WROTE LOVELY MESSAGES OF ENCOURAGEMENT:

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About the Author

Kerri Gardner is a wife, mother, author, blogger, motivational speaker and suicide survivor.

Kerri graduated High School in 1992. She attended and graduated from Bay State College in Back Bay Boston in 1994. She considers herself a JILL of All TRADES.

Unlike other authors, Kerri didn't go to school for writing. Instead, for years after her attempted suicide, she started writing and collecting journals. She excelled in Literature class in both High School and College. Writing was always a true passion; she never believed it could be a career choice for her.



After years of “trying out several careers,” including Travel Agent, Admin Assistant, IT Help Desk Support, Sales for 15 years through a home based business, Real Estate Agent and Dental Assistant. Finally, Kerri realized her true passion was to follow her heart and write that book that she had longed to write for years, yet was afraid to try. Being ashamed of her attempted suicide for 25 years, it took an email from her daughter’s school explaining that a friend of her daughter killed herself over the weekend. While Kerri realized that the school would be taking whatever measures it could to ensure each student had help in dealing with the loss of their classmate and friend, the email was

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the catalyst that enabled Kerri to stop being ashamed of her suicide attempt and use her story to help others dealing with depression, bullying, and suicidal thoughts.

Kerri is an optimist, a true leader, and a believer that we all can have our “BEST LIVES NOW,” regardless of the pain from the past or current circumstances. Kerri believes we live in an abundant world full of exciting new opportunities. She feels that with positive consistent action toward your dreams, you can produce a happier, more fulfilling life of your own design. Kerri lives with her husband Trevor and their three children in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Kerri Gardner is available for select speaking engagements. To inquire, please contact Kerri through her website www.kerrigardner.net

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