

## **Isolated**

*An excerpt from Chaos in Color by R. Layla Salek, Ph. D*

I despised the adult responsibilities Sheri thrust upon me. The mundane of bookkeeping and housekeeping. The task of paying rent and bills. I resented writing checks from her checkbook. I loathed signing her signature perfectly. I detested delivering our rent check to the trailer park office. It was all unbearable. But I had to do these things. I couldn't lose our lot. Our trailer's space. The office secretary never missed an opportunity to spew shame my way. "My mom is busy" or "My mom is out of town" were my excuses as I left the office. Something, anything to stop her pity. I knew she hated Sheri, but who didn't?

As Sheri's slumber settled in with no end in sight, I took her car into town for groceries, another task I hated. We needed the basics. Milk. Food other than instant mashed potatoes or mayonnaise sandwiches. I hated the stares. The eyes and ears of small-town Texas were on me. The loathing was palpable. Everyone knew our business. Everyone knew we were incapable. Trashy. Ill.

I attempted to bop around the store with blissful steps. I wanted onlookers to believe my mom was at home baking. We needed a few things. Nothing to see here. Nothing wrong with us. Unfortunately, my friend's parents owned the store. They knew differently. They knew our patterns. They whispered. Others shouted. Sheri's illness was airborne.

With her depression and weeks of sleeping came MHMRA. This time it came sooner than usual. Just six months ago, we were in the same position. Typically, I opted out of joining her. I preferred the trailer. My sanctuary. My safe place. But I needed the doctor to understand. I needed him to hear me. Sheri's cycles were accelerating. Speeding up.

I got her out of bed. Got her dressed. Got her to the clinic. After hours of waiting and a few minutes with the doctor, I gave my best account of the situation. Despite my story and regardless of the doctor's education, he prescribed Valium. For some unknown reason, all Sheri's psychological interventions involved Valium. Always Valium.

Why did doctors prescribe a sedative to someone who couldn't get out of bed? I never understood. But what did I know? I was just a teenager. Over the years, I learned a valuable equation. Doctors equaled Valium, Valium equaled hopelessness, and hopelessness equaled suicidality.

With each cycle, I blindly navigated life inside my trailer's walls. Confused. Alone. Scared. So confused and scared about suicide. *What if she succeeded? What if it happened while I was home? What was my role, my plan?* Typically, her suicide attempts were just that—attempts. Attempts to stop the pain. Attempts to gain attention. Attempts to get actual help.

I understood she was hopeless and wanted to die. I understood our life was no life. I witnessed her despair. I understood suicide was a viable option. An immediate option. A permanent option. Possibly the only option. It was a fair, just ending. I was practiced in her mental illness. I was clear. I understood. I wondered if this time her suicide talk would lead to suicide. I wondered if this time she would pull it off.

Some days I dragged myself to school, but was present in body only. I walked the halls unfocused. Removed from reality. I acted fine. Laughed with friends. Slept in class. Pretended to be a teen. Imitated a human. Still, my mind remained in the trailer. I anticipated what came next. I waited for disaster. I waited for death.

When I arrived home on these days, I pried the door open and looked toward her room. If Sheri was awake, she greeted me with grogginess, slurred words, crazy hair, and googly eyes in a confused state. If she was asleep, silence, stillness, and a horrid smell greeted me. I administered my breath test. When she breathed, I exhaled and got busy being busy. Busy being anxious. Busy waiting.

I nervously, anxiously redecorated the trailer. Moved furniture around. Set the table with wine glasses and napkins. Adjusted the figurines on the glass shelves. I checked on her periodically. Sometimes I tried to wake her. I tried to give her food and water. Tried to provide warmth and comfort. I felt like I was sharing space with a corpse.

One of these mornings, Sheri startled us awake. Snuggles hid. The trailer shook. Sheri yelled and stomped around. I walked closer but not too close. She looked crazed. Irritated. Hostile. Insane. Black.

“When I’m six feet under, it is going to be your fault. Do you hear me? YOUR FAULT!”

I stood paralyzed. I stared. And. Did. Not. Move. She continued for a few slurred, inaudible minutes. When she moved to the bathroom, I scurried to my room. Threw clothes on quickly.

“Bring me some water! Now! This is on you!” she yelled.

I knew what she meant. In her stupor, she blamed me for her pain. She blamed me for her suicide. She wanted to place the blame for her actions on someone. Anyone but

herself. She hurt so she wanted me to hurt. I, too, wanted her free from pain. I wanted me free from pain.

I complied with her request. Poured her water. Grabbed my shoes. The bus honked. Cautiously, I entered her room. I placed the glass on her dresser. I felt her glare. I refused to meet her eyes. I bolted. I pushed the front door open. I kicked it closed. She screamed from her dark, primal abyss as I walked to the bus. The bus driver was shocked to see me. And I, him.

I failed to alert anyone. I failed to call for help. I failed her. I knew exactly what she was doing. This familiar pattern. This familiar emptiness. I sat in class, but I was hollow. I placed my head on the desk. Prayed to God. I asked Him to handle the situation. I prayed for no specific outcome. I just wanted God to carry my weight. Remove the gravity. Remove the pain. *I'm a kid. I'm just a kid*, I repeated silently.

I knew He knew I wanted her gone. Removed. Out of my life. Gone from this world. Free from torture. I wanted forgiveness for my feelings. For my hatred. For my silence. For my inaction. I wanted forgiveness for the fucking glass of water. Tears rolled down my face. I excused myself from class. My teachers acted unfazed. They'd stopped asking about my behavior and home life long ago. I muddled through the day. Smiled when I needed to smile. Spun tales. Gave bullshit answers. Talked on command. Ignored most.

With the last bell, reality rang. I walked to the bus like a zombie being pulled through life, by life. On the bus ride home, I stared out the window. Blank. I wished for an empty trailer. I longed for the days of Snuggles, Roni Rabbit, and me. But I knew this situation was in full motion and on repeat. It was a recurring nightmare. A recurring scene.

As the bus turned my corner that afternoon, the penetrating sound of an ambulance filled the park. I refused to react. The bus stopped. The students fell silent. I reluctantly moved forward. The bus driver peered at me with pity.

My heart burrowed in my throat. My only thought was, *She did it*. As I walked to my trailer, unidentifiable emotions filled my cells. I hated strangers in our trailer. Hated the blind sense of urgency. Hated the paramedics' hurried tone. Their breathless explanation made my skin crawl. Little did they know, I was well-versed in suicide.

"Sweetheart, let me explain," I wanted to say, but I allowed the paramedic to drone on. I declined to ask if Sheri survived. Whatever the answer, whatever the outcome, the damage was done. I remained stony. Detached. Pissed. Continued walking briskly to my room.

"She's alive!" another paramedic shouted.

From my bones, I wanted to scream *Let her die! She wants to die! Please let her die!* with everything I had. But I refused to bend. Refused to let them in. I hid from their unsolicited concerns. They knew nothing of us. Nothing of our situation. I felt sorry for them. Sorry they used their resources and skills on us. *What a waste! Don't they know this is what she does? Her coping skill. Her hobby. Her destiny.*

I retreated to my room. Waited for them to hurry me out. They wouldn't leave a minor in the trailer. They felt compelled to rescue me. Compelled to be my heroes. I supposed poverty and children evoked pity in others, but I needed to talk to myself. Needed to hear the walls' opinions. Snuggles' feelings. I needed my trailer. My friend.

Since staying wasn't an option, I called some adult and left. I refused a hospital visit. I opted out of pretending. Opted out of caring. The days of feeling excited for her survival were over. Long. Over.

After this hospital stay, after the drama waned, I assume Sheri returned as she always did. Defeated. Agitated. Embarrassed. Pissed to be alive. I assume she apologized. But whether she did or not, I no longer heard her. My brain was too tired. With every suicide attempt, a hush fell over us. Shame silenced us.

At some point, shame and trauma blocked my memories, emotions, and thoughts. I was left with a void. I don't recall anyone processing these situations with me. I don't recall any conversation about these events. I don't recall the details of each episode. I don't remember where I stayed, what hospital admitted Sheri, if I went to school, or what method Sheri used in her attempt to off herself.

Life simply moved on.