

The Talking Cure: Cyclone

written by Guest Contributor | August 26, 2019



In the aftermath of Hurricane Wilma, my best friend and I rode our bikes to CVS, which was closed. We rode to the bank so she could take twenty dollars out at the ATM. We rode around our desolate town, saw cars lined up for hours to get what was left of the gas, thanked God for the storm. My cellphone was dead. My mom ordered pizza and we ate in the silence of depleted electricity. Joey, a boy I was talking to at school, rode his bike to my house and rang the doorbell. My best friend hated him, said he was loud and always smelled like hamster food, but she handed over her twenty to him so we could get high.

Hurricanes were an excuse to get high. Wilma hit in 2005, I was a junior in high school. School was cancelled for two weeks. Joey rode his bike across storm debris laden streets to get to me. Palm fronds and garbage lined all the roads. It took FPL an entire week to get back power. But at least we had drugs.

South Florida was a mecca for the bad kids. We lived in gated communities with guards and uniform houses. We swam in the pool at our clubhouse. But once we became teenagers, we developed a taste for our parents' painkillers, our uncle's dry gin, our big brother's acid tabs. I've always wondered what it was about our town that made us this way. My mom jokes it's something in the water. I remember finishing my history homework and making a bong out of a soda can or an apple. I remember meeting Drew or Ben or Travis outside to pick up a baggie. I remember feeling like I was escaping something, something greater than I understood and would simply rather not face. I remember wanting to die, or more so, not wanting to be alive. I wanted something to happen to me, and since it didn't, I continued to use drugs.

During that hurricane in 2005 my brother was studying at the University of Miami. He stayed up for four days straight on a coke binge; ate nothing, drank nothing, only did cocaine. He wrote an entire screenplay, a story about a boy who falls in love with a girl and doesn't get what he wants. He emailed me the script the same way he opened up a LEGO treasure chest of oxys, like he wanted me to tell someone, but I had to keep it a secret. After I read it, I asked my mom if I could see a therapist. I told the therapist everything knowing she couldn't breathe a word of it to anyone else. Confidentiality.

I remember college so well it kills me. Indiana was freezing cold; I wore leggings under my jeans, my brother's old turtlenecks under my sweaters. The cold made you feel alive, like you had to struggle for your own survival. Every step in the snow was a step towards a warm classroom, a warm dorm room, a warm bed. I remember feeling like I had a sense of purpose, a reason to get up every day and go on, move forward. My instructors took attendance and contacted me if I was not in class. The campus nurse gave me antibiotics when I was sick. Friends knocked on my door, sent me Facebook messages, saved me seats on the bus. Drugs and alcohol were passed around so freely, so generously. Everyone in college was a pal.

I met Kevin in English class, Romantic Lit, fittingly enough, and he laced a joint with Angel Dust, unbeknownst to me. It was the first time I did "hard drugs." I did not like it. I felt as if my body was growing like a tree, my head extending up to the sky and my legs rooting down. I kept seeing Kevin. I thought maybe I could get him to tone it down, perhaps read at least one required book for class. He asked to use my car one night and I sat in the passenger seat as he drove us into the woods, thirty minutes from campus, and screamed into a quarry like that scene in *Garden State*.

It felt good to be close to someone who had it worse. I thought that if I stuck around Kevin, put myself in danger, I'd be able to protect myself later. I could recognize the act of danger. But nothing really prepares you for that. Your reaction to it will be less than acceptable.

Sometimes I think about Joey and what's become of him. He was engaged to a girl but I think they called it off. He loves to cook. I find pictures of him in chef whites. He was the first boy to ever go down on me. He broke my heart at one point, at many points in time. He saved my best friend and I from boredom with those drugs. He rode his bike home that day through the rubble, his eyes red, his uniform khaki pants starting to rip at the knee. If I forget about him I forget about my past. He's tried to reconnect through the years, but it's better to watch him from afar, to search his name online and keep my distance. To this day, he still uses.

My brother slammed his fist into the computer keyboard when he wanted to get clean. I was upstairs at home. I heard my mom scream. I climbed out the window onto my roof to smoke. I shut the window behind me and only heard the Florida bugs buzzing and clicking. I created my own eye of the storm in my family by getting high. I imagined my brother, his face contorted in a swirl, a cyclone, asking for help without having to ask. I imagined my dad signing the check for his rehab, my mom wondering if there was another way. I remember my brother walking down the stairs and the two people I hadn't met and would never see again who took him to a facility in Lake Worth. "Lake Worthless" a waitress at Outback told us the week we moved to Boca. "Nothing to see out there." It took seven years for him to stay clean.

It went like this: I get in the car, open the center console and make sure there's a baggie. If I'm low, I call my dealer. If I have enough, I pack a bowl and take a few hits, put the car in drive, go to work like a normal person. When I park at the restaurant, I unfold my apron and tie it around my waist, loop it around the back and knot it in place. I lock my purse in the trunk and only take inside a pack of gum, colored pens, and a Nature Valley honey and oat bar that's been crushed up beyond recognition that I will never actually eat, but will throw away once it has become a fine dust and is no longer a tangible "bar." Sometimes things go to waste; food, people, lives. All I do is smoke weed and serve people expensive Italian food. All of my friends are lowlives.

Years later when I'm out in California I will think about them all. I will remember when Joey said he wished I hadn't lied so we could be friends. I will remember laying on couches and smoking and watching other people play video games while my brain melted in the Florida afternoon heat. I will remember going to parties, seeing who had stuff, using, and leaving. I will remember the restaurant Christmas party; smoking an entire blunt myself and walking in and everyone staring at me. I will remember walking into the ocean, stopping at my ankles, confused which way I had just come from, if I was entering or leaving the water. I will remember my mom kicking me out because I reeked of pot, staying at a MMA fighter's house for three days and eating only leftover birthday cake. I will remember letting boys kiss me so I could leave with the drugs, letting people hate me so I could go on not feeling. And then someday, like a magic trick, I decided I wanted to be a writer instead, I could no longer throw my life away like something the kitchen overcooked. It turns out it's not magic, but responsibility. I am responsible for my own life.

The day I quit serving there's a tropical storm warning. I call work and tell my manager I don't feel safe driving across A1A. He takes this as my resignation. At night, there's a calm. I want to go outside and shine a light into the atmosphere to watch it shine forever, something my brother taught me. I wonder if my brother knows to take cover. I wonder if he's safe out there.



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