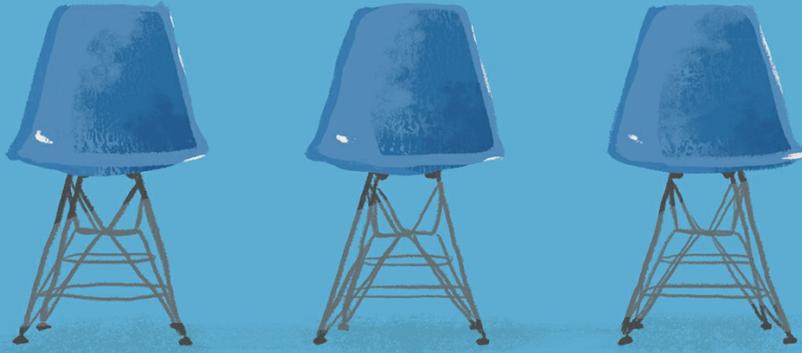


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# GROUP

*How One Therapist and  
a Circle of Strangers  
Saved My Life*

**CHRISTIE TATE**



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# GROUP

*Ur*

How One Therapist  
and a Circle of Strangers  
Saved My Life

*Ur*

Christie Tate

**AVID READER PRESS**

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*For my therapist and the group members with whom I've been  
privileged to share the circle*

*Part 1*

# 1

*The first time I wished* for death—like, really wished its bony hand would tap me on the shoulder and say “this way”—two bags from Stanley’s Fruit and Vegetables sat shotgun in my car. Cabbage, carrots, a few plums, bell peppers, onions, and two dozen red apples. It had been three days since my visit to the bursar’s office, where the law school registrar handed me a notecard with my class rank, a number that had begun to haunt me. I turned the key in the ignition and waited for the engine to turn over in the ninety-degree heat. I pulled a plum out of the bag, tested it for firmness, and took a bite. The skin was thick but the flesh beneath was tender. I let the juice dribble down my chin.

It was eight thirty. Saturday morning. I had nowhere to be, nothing to do. No one was expecting to see me until Monday morning, when I’d report for duty at Laird, Griffin & Griffin, the labor law firm where I was a summer intern. At LG&G only the receptionist and the partner who hired me knew I existed. The Fourth of July was Wednesday, which meant I’d face yet another stifling, empty day in the middle of the week. I’d find a 12-step meeting and hope that people would want to go for coffee afterward. Maybe another lonely soul would want to catch a movie or grab a salad. The engine hummed to life, and I gunned the car out of the parking lot.

*I wish someone would shoot me in the head.*

A soothing thought with a cool obsidian surface. If I died, I wouldn’t have to fill the remaining forty-eight hours of this weekend or Wednesday’s holiday or the weekend after that. I wouldn’t have to endure the hours of hot, heavy loneliness that stretched before me—hours that would turn into days, months, years. A

lifetime of nothing but me, a bag of apples, and the flimsy hope that stragglers after a recovery meeting might want some company.

A recent news story about a fatal shooting in Cabrini Green, Chicago's infamous housing project, flashed in my mind. I steered my car south on Clybourn and turned left on Division. Maybe one of those stray bullets would hit me.

*Please, someone shoot me.*

I repeated it like a mantra, an incantation, a prayer that would likely go unanswered because I was a twenty-six-year-old white woman in a ten-year-old white Honda Accord on a bright summer morning. Who would shoot me? I had no enemies; I hardly existed. Anyway, that fantasy relied too heavily on luck—bad or good, depending on how you looked at it—but other fantasies came unbidden. Jumping from a high window. Throwing myself on the El tracks. As I came to a stop at Division and Larrabee, I considered more exotic ways to expire, like masturbating while I hung myself, but who was I kidding? I was too repressed for that scenario.

I fished the pit out of the plum and popped the rest in my mouth. Did I really want to die? Where were these thoughts going to lead me? Was this suicidal ideation? Depression? Was I going to act on these thoughts? Should I? I rolled down the window and threw the pit as far as I could.

In my law school application, I described my dream of advocating for women with non-normative (fat) bodies—but that was only partly true. My interest in feminist advocacy was genuine, but it wasn't the major motivator. I wasn't after the inflated paychecks or the power suits either. No, I went to law school because lawyers work sixty- and seventy-hour weeks. Lawyers schedule conference calls during Christmas break and are summoned to boardrooms on Labor Day. Lawyers eat dinner at their desks surrounded by colleagues with rolled-up sleeves and pit stains. Lawyers can be married to their work—work that is so vital that they don't mind, or notice, if their personal lives are empty as a parking lot at midnight. Legal work could be a culturally approved-of beard for my dismal personal life.

I took my first practice law school admissions test (LSAT) from the desk where I worked at a dead-end secretarial job. I had a master's degree I wasn't using and a

boyfriend I wasn't fucking. Years later, I'd refer to Peter as a workaholic-alcoholic, but at the time I called him the love of my life. I would dial his office at nine thirty at night when I was ready to go to sleep and accuse him of never having time for me. "I *have* to work," he'd say, and then hang up. When I'd call back, he wouldn't answer. On the weekends, we'd walk to dive bars in Wicker Park so he could drink domestic beers and debate the merits of early R.E.M. albums, while I prayed he'd stay sober enough to have sex. He rarely did. Eventually I decided I needed something all-consuming to absorb the energy I was pouring into my miserable relationship. The woman who worked down the hall from me was headed to law school in the fall. "Can I borrow one of your test books?" I asked. I read the first problem:

A professor must schedule seven students during a day in seven different consecutive time periods numbered one through seven.

What followed were a series of statements like: *Mary and Oliver must occupy consecutive periods* and *Sheldon must be scheduled after Uriah*. The test directions allotted thirty-five minutes to answer six multiple choice questions about this professor and her scheduling conundrum. It took me almost an hour. I got half of them wrong.

And yet. Slogging through LSAT prep and then law school seemed easier than fixing whatever made me fall in love with Peter and whatever it was that made me stay for the same fight night after night.

Law school could fill all my yearnings to belong to other people, to match my longings with theirs.

*ur*

At my all-girls high school in Texas, I took a pottery elective freshman year. We started with pinch pots and worked our way up to the pottery wheel. Once we molded our vessels, the teacher taught us how to add handles. If you wanted to attach two pieces of clay—say, the cup and the handle—you had to score the surface of both. Scoring—making horizontal and vertical gouges in the clay—

helped the pieces meld together when fired in the kiln. I sat on my stool holding one of my crudely sculpted “cups” and a C-shaped handle as the teacher demonstrated the scoring process. I hadn’t wanted to ruin the smooth surface of the “cup” I’d lovingly pinched, so I smushed the handle on it without scoring its surface. A few days later, our shiny, fired pieces were displayed on a rack in the back of the studio. My cup had survived, but the handle lay in brittle pieces beside it. “Faulty score,” the teacher said when she saw my face fall.

That was how I’d always imagined the surface of my heart—smooth, slick, unattached. Nothing to grab on to. Unscored. No one could attach to me once the inevitable heat of life bore down. I suspected the metaphor went deeper still—that I was afraid of marring my heart with the scoring that arose naturally between people, the inevitable bumping against other people’s desires, demands, pettiness, preferences, and all the quotidian negotiations that made up a relationship. Scoring was required for attachment, and my heart lacked the grooves.



I wasn’t an orphan either, though the first part of this reads like I was. My parents, still happily married, lived in Texas in the same redbrick ranch house I grew up in. If you drove by 6644 Thackeray Avenue, you would see a weathered basketball hoop and a porch festooned with three flags: Old Glory, the Texas state flag, and a maroon flag with the Texas A&M logo on it. Texas A&M was my dad’s alma mater. Mine too.

My parents called a couple times a month to check on me, usually after mass on Sundays. I always went home for Christmas. They bought me a giant green Eddie Bauer coat when I moved to Chicago. My mom sent me fifty-dollar checks so I’d have spending money; my dad diagnosed problems with my Honda’s brakes over the phone. My younger sister was finishing graduate school and about to become engaged to her longtime boyfriend; my brother and his wife, college sweethearts, lived in Atlanta near dozens of their college friends. None of them knew about my unscored heart. To them, I was their oddball daughter and sister who voted Democratic, liked poetry, and settled north of the Mason-Dixon Line. They loved me, but I didn’t really fit with them or Texas. When I was a kid, my

mom would play the Aggie fight song on the piano and my dad would sing along at the top of his lungs. *Hullaballo-canek-canek, Hullaballoo-canek-canek*. He took me on my college tour of Texas A&M, and when I picked it—primarily because we could afford it—he was genuinely thrilled to have another Aggie in the family. He never said so, but surely he was disappointed to learn that I spent home football games in the library highlighting passages in *Walden* while twenty thousand fans sang, stomped, and cheered loud enough that when the Aggies, scored the library walls vibrated. Everyone in my family and all of Texas, it seemed, loved football.

I was a misfit. The deep secret I carried was that I didn't belong. Anywhere. I spent half my days obsessing about food and my body and the weird shit I did to control both, and the other half trying to outrun my loneliness with academic achievement. I went from the honor roll in high school to the dean's list in college for earning a 4.0 for most of my semesters there to cramming legal theories into my brain seven days a week. I dreamed of one day showing up at 6644 Thackeray Avenue at my goal weight, arm in arm with a healthy functioning man, and my spine shooting straight to the sky.

I didn't think of disclosing to my family when my troubling wishes about death cropped up. We could talk about the weather, the Honda, and the Aggies. None of my secret fears and fantasies fit into any of those categories.

I wished passively for death, but I didn't stockpile pills or join the Hemlock Society's mailing list. I didn't research how to get a gun or fashion a noose out of my belts. I didn't have a plan, a method, or a date. But I felt an unease, constant as a toothache. It didn't feel normal, passively wishing that death would snatch me up. Something about the way I was living made me want to stop living.

I don't remember what words I used when I thought about my malaise. I know I felt a longing I couldn't articulate and didn't know how to satisfy. Sometimes I told myself I just wanted a boyfriend or that I was scared I would die alone. Those statements were true. They nicked the bone of the longing, but they didn't reach the marrow of my despair.

In my journal, I used vague words of discomfort and distress: *I feel afraid and anxious about myself. I feel afraid that I'm not OK, will never be OK & I'm*

*doomed. It's very uncomfortable to me. What's wrong with me?* I didn't know then that a word existed to perfectly define my malady: lonely.

That card from the bursar with my class rank on it, by the way, said number one. Uno. First. *Primero Zuerst*. The one hundred seventy other students in my class had a GPA lower than mine. I'd exceeded my goal of landing in the top half of the class, which, after my less-than-mediocre score on the LSAT—I never could figure out when Uriah should have his conference—seemed like a stretch goal. I should have been thrilled. I should have been opening zero-balance credit cards. Shopping for Louboutin heels. Signing the lease on a new apartment on the Gold Coast. Instead, I was first in my class and jealous of the lead singer of INXS who died of autoerotic asphyxiation.

What the hell was wrong with me? I wore size-six pants, had D-cup breasts, and pulled in enough student loan money to cover a studio apartment in an up-and-coming neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. For eight years, I'd been a member of a 12-step program that taught me how to eat without sticking my finger down my throat thirty minutes later. My future gleamed before me like Grandma's polished silver. I had every reason to be optimistic. But self-disgust about my stuckness—I was far away from other people, aeons away from a romantic relationship—lodged in every cell of my body. There was some reason that I felt so apart and alone, a reason why my heart was so slick. I didn't know what it was, but I felt it pulsing as I fell asleep and wished to not wake up.

I was already in a 12-step program. I'd done a fourth-step inventory with my sponsor who lived in Texas and made amends to the people I'd harmed. I'd returned to Ursuline Academy, my all-girl high school, with a one-hundred-dollar check as restitution for money I stole while managing parking-lot fees junior year. Twelve-step recovery had arrested the worst of my disordered eating, and I credited it with saving my life. Why was I now wishing that life away? I confessed to my sponsor who lived in Texas that I'd been having dark thoughts.

"I wish for death every day." She told me to double up on my meetings.

I tripled them, and felt more alone than ever.

## 2

*A few days after I* learned my class rank, a woman named Marnie invited me to dinner following a 12-step meeting. Like me, she was a recovering bulimic. Unlike me, she had a super-together life: She was only a few years older, but she worked at a lab focused on cutting-edge experiments for breast cancer treatments; she and her husband had recently painted the entryway of her colonial Sherwin-Williams's Osage Orange; she was tracking her ovulation. Her life wasn't perfect—her marriage was often stormy—but she chased what she wanted. My instinct was to say no to her dinner offer so I could go home, take off my bra, and eat my four ounces of ground turkey and roasted carrots alone in front of *Scrubs*. That's what I usually did—beg off—when people after meetings invited me to join them for coffee or dinner. “Fellowship,” as they called it. But before I could decline, Marnie touched my elbow. “Just come. Pat's out of town, and I don't want to eat alone.”

We sat across from each other at the type of “healthy” diner that serves sprouted bread and sweet potato fries. Marnie seemed extra buoyant. Was she wearing lip gloss?

“You seem happy,” I said.

“It's my new therapist.” I chased a spinach leaf around my plate with my fork. Could a therapist help me? I let the hope flicker. The summer before law school, I availed myself of eight free sessions with a social worker, courtesy of an Employee Assistance Program. I'd been assigned a meek woman named June who wore prairie skirts without irony. I didn't tell her any of my secrets because I was afraid of upsetting her. Therapy, like being truly close to people, seemed like an experience I had to stand on the outside of, my face pressed to the window.

“I’m doing an all-women’s group.”

“Group?” My neck tensed immediately. I had a deep mistrust of groups after a bad experience in fifth grade when my parents transferred me to a local public school from my small Catholic school where class size was dwindling. At the new school, I fell in with the popular girls, led by Bianca, who gave out Jolly Ranchers every lunch period and had solid gold orbs on her add-a-bead necklace. I once spent the night at Bianca’s house, and her mom took us in her silver Mercedes to see *Footloose*. But Bianca turned on me midyear. She thought her boyfriend liked me because we sat near each other in history. One day at lunch, she offered everyone at the table a Jolly Rancher except me. She slipped a note under my lunch bag: *We don’t want you at our table*. All the girls had signed it. By then, I knew something was off in the connection between me and other people. I sensed in my gut that I didn’t know how to stay connected, how not to be cast aside. I could tolerate 12-step groups because the membership at every meeting shifted. You could come and go as you pleased, and no one knew your last name. There was no one in charge at a 12-step meeting—no Queen Bee Bianca who could oust other members. A set of spiritual principles held a 12-step group together: anonymity, humility, integrity, unity, service. Without those, I never would have stayed. Plus, the cost of a meeting was basically free, though they suggested a two-dollar donation. For the cost of a Diet Coke I could spend sixty minutes acknowledging my eating disorder and listening to other people’s pain and triumphs around food.

I speared a chunk of tomato and considered interesting topics I could raise with Marnie—the execution of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh or whatever Colin Powell was up to. I felt the urge to impress her with my knowledge of current events and display some togetherness of my own. But I was curious about her therapy group. I feigned nonchalance as I asked what it was like.

“It’s all women. Mary’s going deaf, and Zenia’s about to lose her medical license because of alleged Medicare fraud. Emily’s father is a drug addict—he harasses her with hate mail from his one-bedroom apartment in Wichita.” Marnie lifted her arm and pointed at the soft, fleshy underside of her forearm. “Our new girl is a cutter. Always wears long sleeves. We don’t know her story yet, but for sure, it’s dark as hell.”

“Sounds intense.” Not what I’d pictured. “Are you allowed to tell me all this?”

She nodded. “The therapist’s theory is that keeping secrets is a toxic process, so we—the group members—can talk about whatever we want, wherever we want. The therapist is bound by doctor-patient confidentiality, but we’re not.”

No confidentiality? I sat back and shook my head. I twisted the napkin around my wrist under the table. No way could I do that. I once hinted to my high school social justice teacher Ms. Gray that my eating was screwed up. When Ms. Gray called my parents to suggest counseling, my mom was furious. I was polishing off a plate of biscuits and watching Oprah interview Will Smith when my mom stormed into the living room, madder than a one-winged hornet. “Why would you tell people your business? You *must* protect yourself!” My mom is a proper Southern woman raised in Baton Rouge during the 1950s. Telling other people your business was tacky and could have adverse social consequences. She was convinced I’d be ostracized if other people knew I had mental problems, and she wanted to protect me. When I started going to 12-step meetings in college, it took all the courage I had to trust that the other people would take the anonymity part of the program as seriously as I did.

“How does anyone get better?” Marnie was clearly doing better than I was. If we were a tampon commercial, I’d be the one scowling about odors and leakage; she’d be doing a jeté in white jeans on her heavy flow day.

She shrugged. “You could check it out.”

I’d had other therapy. In high school, there was a short stint with a woman who looked like Paula Dean and wore pastel pantsuits. My parents sent me to Paula D. after Ms. Gray called about my eating, but I was so busy obeying the command to protect myself that I never said anything about how I felt. Instead, we chitchatted about whether I should get a mall job over the summer. Express or Gap? Once, she sent me home with a five-hundred-question psychological test. Hope coursed through my fingers as I filled in each answer bubble; these questions would finally reveal why I couldn’t stop eating, why I felt like a misfit everywhere I went, and why none of the boys were interested in me when all the other girls were French-kissing and getting felt up.

Paula D. read the results in her perfectly modulated therapist voice: “Christie is perfectionistic and afraid of snakes. An ideal occupation for Christie would be

watch repairperson or surgeon.” She smiled and cocked her head. “Snakes are pretty scary, huh?”

It never occurred to me to show her my tears and panic. To open up, I needed a therapist who could hear the echoes of pain in my silences and see the shirrtail of truth under my denials. Paula D. didn’t. After that session, I sat my parents down and told them that I’d graduated from therapy. All better now. My parents beamed with pride, and my mom shared her life philosophy: “You just make up your mind to be happy. Focus on the positive; don’t put any energy into negative thoughts.” I nodded. Great idea. On the way down the hall to my bedroom, I stopped in the bathroom and threw up my dinner, a habit I developed after reading a book about a gymnast who threw up her food. I loved the feeling of emptying myself of food and the rush of adrenaline from having a secret. At age sixteen, I thought bulimia was a genius way to control my ruthless appetite, which led me to binge on crackers, bread, and pasta. Not until I got into recovery did I understand that my bulimia was a way to control the unending swells of anxiety, loneliness, anger, and grief that I had no idea how to release.

Marnie dragged another fry through the smear of ketchup. “Dr. Rosen would see you—”

“Rosen? Jonathan Rosen?”

I *definitely* couldn’t call Dr. Rosen. Blake saw Dr. Rosen. Blake was a guy I’d met at a party the summer before law school. He took a seat next to me and said, “What kind of eating disorder do you have?” He pointed at the carrot sticks on my plate and said, “Don’t look at me like that. I’ve dated an anorexic and two bulimics who wished they were anorexic. I know your type.” He was in AA, between jobs, and offered to take me sailing. We rode bikes to the lakefront to watch Fourth of July fireworks. We lay on the deck of his boat, shoulder to shoulder, staring at the Chicago skyline and talking about recovery. We sampled the vegan food at Chicago Diner and went to the movies on Saturday afternoons before his AA meeting. When I asked if he was my boyfriend, he didn’t answer. Sometimes, he’d disappear for a few days to listen to Johnny Cash albums in his darkened apartment. Even if I could see the same therapist as Marnie, I could *not* see the same therapist as my ex-whatever-Blake-was. What, was I going to call up