

The Suicide Lie

by Nathaniel Tower

My life is a sham. You've heard of people living a lie before, but mine has to take the cake. I'm a suicide prevention counselor for teens. Most of the time I answer phones and tell kids not to kill themselves over their boyfriends and girlfriends and drugs and rock 'n' roll, etc. I'm not even sure what the number is—1-800-DONT-DIE or something like that. To date, I figure I've "prevented" a few hundred teens from killing themselves, but there is no way of knowing for sure. We don't take names, so it's not like we can go check the obits later in the week. There is really nothing to keep us accountable. The boss can't come up and say, "Tommy, you killed another one. It looks like I'm gonna have to fire you." In reality, I could just tell all the kids to shoot themselves.

The whole idea of suicide fascinates me. To be quite honest, I'm glad it exists. Without it, I don't know what I would do for a living. In fact, I've come to love suicide so much that I am going to kill myself today.

I thought about talking myself out of it, but I know there's no point. I understand fully, did from the beginning, that everything I say is just a load of crap. I'm only allowed to give pre-written responses to the kids. I have a manual of about 1000 pages outlining every possible situation any teenager could ever think of. Whoever wrote the manual must have either had a lot of suicidal thoughts or known a lot of people who wanted to kill themselves.

The manual is a mix of compelling questions that show we care and a list of responses that offer potential hope for the betterment of their lives. *There are lots of people who love you. The world is a better place with you. Sometimes it takes awhile to find who we really are. Everything works out for the best in the end. Your life is worth living.* That's just some of the crap I have to say to these kids. I hardly believe anything I say anymore. I could have a kid tell me that he wants to slit his wrists because his parents just got divorced, he is failing all his classes, his girlfriend dumped him, his

favorite band broke up, his dog just died, everyone forgot his birthday, his car was totaled, he was fired from his job at the local frozen custard stand, and he was voted ugliest kid as his school, and I still have to tell him "There are lots of people who love you." Sometimes I just laugh to myself.

One of my favorite questions to ask the kids is "Have you planned how you are going to do it?" It's a question we're supposed to ask to see how serious they are, or if this is one of those fake cries for attention. I've heard all kinds of things. Of course there's the standard stuff like hanging, wrist slitting, shooting yourself in the mouth, running the car with the garage door closed, and drinking bleach or another household poison. Whenever I hear a kid say one of those things, I yawn to myself. Now I know why you're killing yourself, I think. You don't even have any creative energy. Be a little original. Do something that's gonna make people remember you, I say. Actually, it's what I think, although I did slip up once.

"Have you planned how you are going to do it?" I asked while looking at page 104 of the manual under the section titled "How to Gauge the Seriousness of the Threat".

"No," he told me through heaving sobs (the manual says that sobbing is usually a sign that they are just seeking attention. The truly depressed, those that really want to off themselves, never cry. They hold it all in until the final act).

"Well, then it's not too late," I said into the phone in my best you-can-do-it voice.

"Not too late for what?" he sobbed.

The manual didn't expect that question. No one was supposed to respond to the generic pick-me-up attempt. I flipped through the pages quickly, remembering the rule that I wasn't supposed to have more than five seconds of silence at any time while the "client" (as if he were using a paid service) was on the phone.

"Well, it's not too late to do something that will make the world remember you."

"Thanks," he told me as he hung up rather abruptly.

I didn't think anything of it until the next day when I read about the naked boy who hanged himself with a thick chain from an interstate overpass holding a sign that read "Now You'll Remember Me". I can't say with certainty that he was the youth I had spoken with, but I've always suspected it. That was just too coincidental to be a coincidence.

Sometimes I just want to tell these kids to stop whining about it and do it. Have some guts, I want to say. Quit thinking about it and just do it. You obviously aren't that serious or you wouldn't have called me. But, by rule, I usually stick to the manual.

Most of them don't have much of a plan. They haven't really been thinking about it for long. Me personally, I've been planning mine for awhile. Suicide is one of those things that really takes a lot of thought. You don't just walk up to a knife and say, "Hmmm, I think I'll kill myself right now." You sit there and stew over it for days and weeks and months and years. You let all of the terrible things about your life just soak up until you're so full that the only release is self-inflicted death.

My suicide is far better than any I have heard these kids mention. No manual could ever know how to respond to this one. I've concocted the plan, ironically, at work during the past six months, and only now do I think that it is good enough. The way I see it, the worse your life, the better your suicide better be.

Of course my life was bound to be bad when I took on a job that has no evidence of success. No one calls me three years later and says, "Hey, thanks, I haven't killed myself yet even though my life still sucks." And I know their lives do still suck. Things like that don't turn around very quickly. Once you've got a sucky life going, the only thing that can really turn it around is getting a new life. That's why suicide rates have skyrocketed. One of the fastest growing jobs in the country is suicide prevention counselor. That's one thing I have going for me: job security. I know I'll never be fired, not unless one of the kids calls my supervisor and blows out his brains over the phone after doing a little name dropping. But anyone

willing to do that is more vengeful than suicidal, so they would be much more likely to just find me and kill me.

So anyway, today is the big day. I'm going to kill myself. I'm staring at my own plan, tucked in the pages of the manual like a schoolboy hiding his dirty magazine in his book, when the phone rings. It's the twelfth call of the day. Something about Fridays seems to make people want to kill themselves.

"Suicide prevention hotline," I say warmly, "your life is worth saving." That's our slogan. We have to start and end every call with it. Seems so phony. If I called one of these stupid numbers, I would kill myself as soon as I heard the voice say that.

"I'm going to kill myself today," the somber voice on the other end replies.

"Have you planned how you are going to—"

"Yes, I have. I am going to fall down the stairs on to a knife. That way people will wonder if it is an accident. Years later, my parents will find a note when they are finally finished clearing out my stuff."

This is an idea I haven't heard before, and I am intrigued. It's my last day on the job, so I don't really try to stop him. I pull out my own plans and shut the manual.

"What if it doesn't work?"

"Excuse me," the voice says in surprise.

"What if you don't die?"

"Aren't you supposed to try to talk me out of this?"

"Nah, not today. I'm gonna kill myself when I get home," I say proudly, hoping he will ask for my plan.

There is a long pause. More than five seconds pass. Possibly more than ten. I'm pretty certain that he's gone off to kill himself.

"Why? Are you a mastery of irony or something? That's idiotic. Think of all the things you have to live for." The kid sounds very concerned.

"Name one. You don't know anything about me kid."

"I know you care enough to answer the phone when someone who wants to kill himself calls."

Five more seconds pass. "Oh yeah. Well maybe I only answer the phone to tell kids to kill themselves. Maybe this is really the suicide *encouragement* hotline. You're life is worthless. Go ahead and kill yourself. You're gonna be my fourth victim of the day."

"I can see right through your act," the kid immediately retorts, not an ounce of depression in his voice. "You're just crying out for attention. You've hit a rough spot in life, and you're afraid it's going to get worse. Well, if you knew half the shit I'd gone through then you would run through the streets kissing every man, woman and child you saw."

Fifteen seconds pass. This is just unprecedented now. I'm sitting there listening to the silence, waiting for the scream that follows the landing on the knife. I think about asking him what's so bad, but I'm worried that it will only make me realize that my life really *is* okay.

"Hello?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm still here," I respond, not knowing what else to say.

"For the record, I wasn't going to kill myself. But I do have a shitty life. I'm just a lonely loser and I saw your ad on the back of a bus and I thought it would make for a good conversation."

"I figured as much," I manage to spit, my voice cracking.

"Alright, well, I'm gonna go now. Good luck with the suicide. What's it going to be? Gunshot? Drown yourself in the toilet? Impale yourself with the phone?"

"Thanks for calling the suicide prevention hotline. Your life is worth saving," I hear myself say robotically. I don't wait for him to respond. I hang up the phone, pissed that a kid has just shown me how to do a job that took four years of college, three years of graduate studies and a year of training. My life can't possibly get any worse at this point. This is the apex of the pitifulness of my life.

I crumple up the pages in front of me. I decide I'm going to need a new plan.