

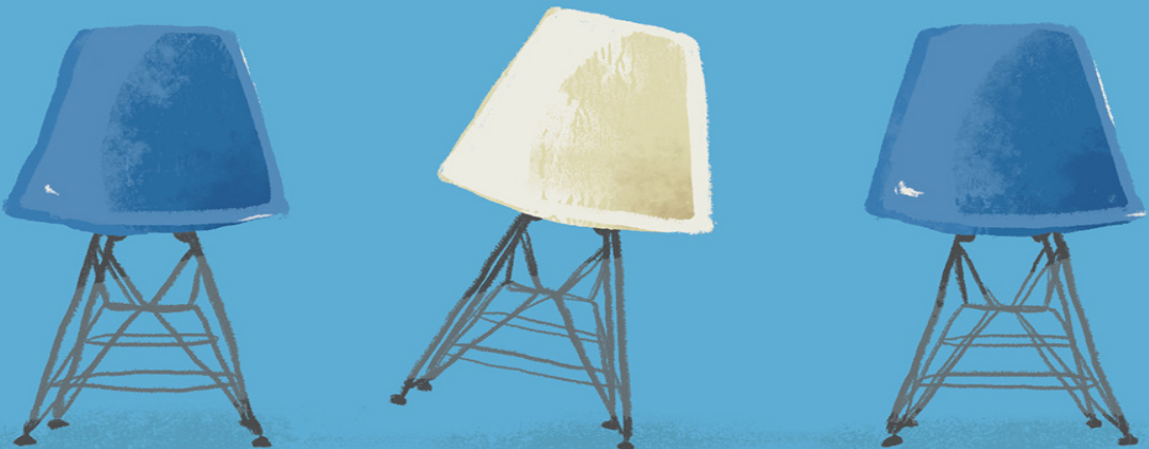
“Heartbreaking and hilarious, surprising and redemptive.”  
—LORI GOTTLIEB, author of *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone*



# 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.

*uu*

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.

*uu*

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.