

Fifty-Four Minutes

By Ashley Cowger

***WHY WE LIKE IT:** To say we were reminded of Sylvia Plath takes nothing away from the integrity and strength of this magnificently written story about a young girl coming to terms with her twin sister's suicide. Kylie's psychological post-mortem of their symbiotic relationship is a harrowing (and sometimes galling) plunge into the twilight id that deeply enlists our interest and empathy. Eloquent, unobtrusive prose mirrors a colloquial voice poignantly mature beyond its years. The ending is a butterfly that closes like a freight train and all five of us were thinking about 'Fifty-Four Minutes' long after we finished reading it.*

My sister Kayla's suicide note took the form of a Tweet. Someone, I can't remember who, took it as a joke—well, because how else are you supposed to take something like that?—and commented: “The way you choose to kill yourself says more about you than just about anything.” Kayla used a kitchen knife, which she cleaned, for some reason, with bleach, before she ran it down her wrists several times. Despite the antiseptic smell that mingled with her blood, it was a messier death than I would have expected of Kayla, who was always the neat twin, the polite one.

Anyway, that was really how it all began: the compulsion, if you want to call it that. I like to call it my OCD shining through, because everybody you've ever met claims to be “a little” OCD, so I don't see why I shouldn't, too. It started as a result of Kayla's death, or anyway, a

result of the time I got to spend reflecting on life and death—especially the self-inflicted kind—as I lay awake in our shared childhood room. It gave me time to think. About all those things you tell yourself you’ll think about when you have time, which is pretty much never when you’re a sophomore in college and your English professor thinks you should write twelve drafts of every paper, and your Psychology professor seems to think that his is the only class you’re taking. I thought about blood, and how it looks different on the outside of your body than the in. And about life, how short it really is when you stop and add it all up, how quickly everything goes by. It feels like just yesterday Kayla and I were eight years old, swinging on the swing set in the backyard—Kayla going higher and higher, me screaming, “No, Kayla. You’ll fall!”—and then just like that I’m nineteen, and she’s gone.

And I thought about death, of course, about how it can come on so unexpected like that, and yet in Kayla’s case we were warned. We were all warned. Because I saw that Tweet when I was pretending to do research at the library. For some reason, she’d tagged me in it:

@KylieTrubright. I saw it and put off coming home for two more hours. But what really got me, what really kept clanging around inside my head as I stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars Kayla had arranged as the constellations on our ceiling, was that Kayla had given *herself* fair warning too. We all die, sooner or later, and only the most delusional of us try to pretend that away, but Kayla got to say when and how. Kayla took the guesswork out of the whole thing.

I don’t want you to think that I’m some kind of apathetic bitch. She was my sister, after all, my twin, and I loved her. I thought about the other things, too. The regular things. Wondered why she did it and how long she’d been feeling this way. If there was anything I could have done. But there was no way I could ever know the answers to those questions, philosophical questions, if you think about it, and not fit for the mind of a journalism major like myself. Kayla

had been the one with the mind for abstract thought. I was more interested in the facts: the who, what, when, where, why, and how of it all. And the first fact was that we all die. The second fact was that if we don't choose when and how, some force outside of ourselves—fate, if you want to call it that—chooses for us.

And the third fact was that Kayla had chosen for herself.

When I finally fell asleep that night, I dreamt of swiping a rag across the ground of our apartment where I had found Kayla earlier that day, then wringing it out into our big blue popcorn bowl.

When we were little, Kayla and I used to trick people by pretending to be each other. It worked on almost everybody—our Sunday School teachers, our friends, even our aunts and uncles. When Aunt Cara picked us up at the bus stop sometimes, she used to say out loud what color shirt each of us was wearing: Kayla, red; Kylie, purple. Then, we'd switch shirts in her bathroom, and she'd call me Kayla and Kayla, me. She'd ask me questions about Math club, and Kayla would try not to laugh as I made up fake lingo and fake equations. Our mom was the only one who could always tell the difference. She said we had distinct facial expressions and that Kayla's voice was gentler, her eyes always opened a little bit wider.

I never thought we looked exactly alike either. My hair was frizzier than Kayla's, for one thing, so even when we'd style it the same, hers looked smoother. Her chin was set slightly higher than mine, too, more upturned. I used to look at her and try to see myself. We came from one egg that had split into two. That separation marks you for life. They say twins have a sort of metaphysical connection, that they can feel each other's pain. When we were eleven, I pricked my index finger to see if Kayla could feel it. I blindfolded her, so she wouldn't know when the

pin entered my skin, and asked her to tell me the moment she felt the sting. I pressed the pin in slowly, watching as my skin ballooned around it before giving into the pressure. Kayla said, “Ouch,” but I couldn’t tell if she had really felt it or not. When we reversed the roles—Kayla pressing the pin into her forearm this time, so my already sore finger wouldn’t invalidate the experiment—I lied and said I could feel it.

I didn’t sleep at all my first night back at the apartment after Kayla’s death, after the funeral and the procession of well-meaning but distant relatives and family friends who patted me on the back or squeezed my shoulders and told me how sorry they were, or how much I reminded them of Kayla, or what a beautiful soul she’d had. I went to bed and closed my eyes and then just lay there, watching suicide on parade. Kayla was acting out all the different ways there are to kill yourself. I knew it was fucked up, imagining my sister, my best friend in the whole world, killing herself in any and every crazy way I could think of, but I couldn’t stop the images from coming: Kayla mixing drain cleaner with her morning coffee. Kayla slowly taking the stairs to the top floor of the library and then going through that door in the back corner—the one with the sign that says Emergency Exit, even though it couldn’t possibly be, why would they put an Emergency Exit that leads out onto the roof?—and jumping. Her long, brown curls slithering like little snakes through the air. The crunching sound when her body hit the cement.

I opened my eyes and rolled over, but that didn’t really help. The nightmare images of Kayla killing herself stopped, but then my mind just started thumbing through the different ways there are to kill yourself—overdosing on Tylenol, drinking poison, choking myself with a jump rope—like I was trying to commit a grocery list to memory. If Kayla were alive, I would have

gone into her room and woken her up, told her we should make some popcorn and watch a movie, or I would just ask her to make me laugh. She could always make me laugh on cue.

The next morning was when the compulsion really got going. I remember it well because it was the first. I climbed out of bed and went to the bathroom to brush my teeth, and when I stuck the toothbrush in my mouth, I had this impulse to push it all the way down my throat, just jam it down there and watch myself in the mirror as my eyes widened and bulged. I pulled the toothbrush out again and stared down at it, my hand shaking. Even holding the toothbrush at sink level, I could still see it all clearly in my mind—me pushing the toothbrush so far down I couldn't pull it back out again, watching my own face turn red, then blue.

The impulses just kept coming. I'd be at work and imagine plunging my face into the fryalator. I'd see an empty nail sticking out of a wall and think about banging my forehead against it repeatedly, until the nail tore through my skull and pressed into my brain. It was weird, because it wasn't like I actually wanted to kill myself. I wasn't really depressed. I mean, I missed Kayla, yeah, of course I missed Kayla. She was the only one who knew all of my secrets—or most of them, anyway—and I'm pretty sure I knew most of hers. You don't lose someone that close to you and not feel it, you know, hard. But depression, to me, seems like a deep, low down kind of feeling. Like you cry a lot and feel a lot of pain. I didn't feel like that. I felt more, I don't know, tired.

Anyway, in spite of the fact that I kept having those violent impulses, I kept on doing all the things a person in my position was supposed to do. I emailed all my teachers and explained the situation to them, I guess expecting a little leeway, even though I hadn't really been a star student before my "emotional distress." I even went to talk to the school counselor, at the request of both my Anatomy professor and my mom. The counselor asked me all kinds of inane

questions about whether I felt angry at Kayla and whether I blamed myself. I answered honestly—yes, I guessed I felt a little angry; no, I didn't really blame myself. When she asked me if I ever thought about killing myself, I quickly told her no.

I only went to the counselor a couple of times, and I stopped going to my classes altogether, but I kept going to work. The knives made me nervous, but otherwise it seemed like the safest place for me to be. Sometimes I'd get so busy, I didn't really have time to think about the urges. I didn't have time to think about anything, and that suited me just fine. I told my boss I would probably be dropping out of school, so if he needed me for extra hours, that would be fine. He said he'd keep me in mind for when people called in sick or whatever. It wasn't really what I was hoping he'd say, because sitting around the apartment by myself was starting to get to me.

See, even though I didn't like it, I'd started to think of the compulsion as kind of a game. I realized that however you kill yourself is really like your last chance to speak before people put words in your mouth for the rest of eternity. However you do it, that's the first thing that will come to everybody's mind whenever they think of you. Kayla Trubright? Oh, she's that girl who slit her wrists. Her blood made purple pools on the wood floor. I think of that before I think of her laugh, or how she used to tug on her lower lip when she was nervous, or the millions of other memories I have of her. And so the compulsion seemed like kind of a test run. If I *were* to do it, how would I go about it? What message would I want to send?

Without even meaning to, I'd begun a running list of the various ways of committing suicide I'd thought about so far and how each way might be perceived. Downing a cup of broken glass would be like saying, "Hey, world, fuck you." Whereas something less painful, say overdosing on sleeping pills, would be more like saying, "I'm sorry. I just can't take it anymore." Kind of wimpy, if you ask me. I mean, if you're going to do it, *do* it, you know what I mean?

What slitting your wrists meant, I couldn't decide. Had Kayla been trying to tell us she was sorry, or was she flipping off the entire world? It seemed like a painful death, but a quiet sort of painful, and she did, after all, do it in the privacy of our own apartment. I couldn't quite put my finger on what she'd been trying to say, and for some reason, that really bothered me. It felt important, her final message. Felt like, after what she'd put herself through to send it, we should all try our best to decode it and listen.

A few weeks after Kayla's death, I got a phone call from Student Services. "Every single one of your professors," he told me, "has filled out an academic intervention form for you."

I told him about Kayla and how the school counselor had told me I shouldn't push myself too hard with school right now if I didn't feel I could handle it, which was true.

He said that was alright, but I should know that it was too late to drop my classes, and if I didn't work something out with my professors so I could get deferrals and finish the classes out later, I would end up with a bunch of F's on my transcripts, and that would mean I'd be on academic probation. His voice was brusque, and he seemed like he was in a rush, as if I was the one who had called to bother him.

"Thanks for letting me know," I told him and hung up before he had a chance to say anything—you're welcome, probably, because he surely didn't even know I was being sarcastic.

I thought about calling my mom and telling her I was dropping out, but she was helping out with Kayla's half of the rent. Plus she was sending me supplemental money on the side to help cover the holes my part-time salary left behind. If I dropped out of school, she would cut me off, emotional distress or no, so instead, I went in to talk to my professors and asked them about getting a deferral. My Spanish professor said he would have been happy to help me if I hadn't

already missed so many classes prior to “the incident,” as he called it, but everyone else said we could work something out. My English professor even said if I still completed the final paper, an investigative report, I might pass the class with a C, depending on how well I did.

I didn’t really feel like writing an investigative report, but I didn’t want to end up on the streets because I couldn’t make rent, either, so I told her I would do the best I could. The question was, what the fuck was I going to investigate? Professor Tilden gave me a bunch of possible topics: issues relating to the local economy, politics, and things like that. Nothing that sounded really worth investigating to me. I heard myself ask her if I could do something a bit more personal, like suicide rates in our area.

“That could work,” she said. “Only, I don’t want you to take on a topic that’s going to be,” she paused, “overtly . . . stressful. For you.”

“It’ll be fine,” I said. “I was just thinking I’d interview someone at the suicide hotline or something.” I’d seen this big, hand written, poster board sign for the suicide hotline nailed to the oak tree outside the Liberal Arts building. “Feeling lost? We can HELP,” it said.

“That sounds like a great place to start,” Professor Tilden told me.

The place where they answered the phones was cramped and stuffy, just one long room with cubicle walls partitioning one desk off from the next. Brent, who was the Managing Volunteer, showed me around before I interviewed him. It was depressing, actually seeing the volunteers—my age, most of them, or not much older—sitting around at these cubicles talking earnestly on the phone, taking notes. “We keep detailed records of each phone call,” Brent told me. He had those big, circular glasses that nerds always wear on TV, the kind you expect no real person to buy. On top of that, he was overweight, not obese or anything, but his face was circular and soft, and I wondered if he ever got made fun of at school and if he had many friends.

“And over here,” he told me, pointing to a bulletin board with letters and printed emails tacked to it, “is where we post letters we receive from past callers, thanking us for helping them.

I glanced over the pages pinned to the board. “There aren’t that many.”

“Well, for every hundred people we save, probably only one writes to say thank you. If that many.”

“So how do you know you saved all one hundred then?” I asked.

“They called, didn’t they? They reached out for help. People who reach out for help almost never end up killing themselves in the end.”

If the people who end up calling are not the ones who end up killing themselves, what good was the suicide hotline doing anyone, I wanted to ask. Kayla would never have called a suicide hotline, I was sure of it. She never so much as mentioned to *me*, her closest friend in the whole world, that she was feeling a little down. Who were these people who called suicide hotlines, I wondered, and why did they do it? What did they hope to gain?

Brent led me into his tiny square of an office and motioned for me to sit in the stiff, foldout chair across from his desk. I pulled out my portable audio recorder and placed it on the desk between us, then pressed the red button. My mom had given me the recorder when I graduated from high school; she said all journalists need something like this, but I hardly ever used it. Why would I need to? I had a phone.

I told Brent again what I was writing about and asked him why he thought suicide rates were so high in our area.

Brent told me, “College towns invariably have a lot of potential suicides, or just people who need to reach out to someone who will listen.”

“Why do you think that is?” I asked.

“Stress. From school, from romantic relationships, from trouble with their parents, from being on their own for the first time. It’s a hard time in any kid’s life.”

I pursed my lips, wondering how old he was that he was referring to me and Kayla and people like us as “kids,” but I let it drop. “Can I ask,” I said, “have you ever thought about suicide? Or is that too personal?”

“I think most people have thought about it to some extent or other, don’t you?”

“But seriously, though. Like where you’re planning out how you might go about it,” I said.

“No,” he said—too quickly, I thought. “I’ve never seriously thought about it.”

I glanced down at my notebook, where I’d scribbled some half-formed questions a few minutes before the interview. “Can you walk me through a typical call? What do the callers usually say, and how do the operators respond?”

Brent leaned back in his seat. “Well, of course every call is unique, just like every caller.”

“Do they ever, like, tell you how they’re planning on doing it or anything like that?”

He shrugged. “Most of them haven’t gotten that far in the planning process. Like I said, most of them aren’t really going to do it. Their calling us is a cry for help.”

I looked down at my questions, which all seemed pointless now that I knew that most of the people calling weren’t the real suicidal people anyway. This whole interview seemed like it was going to be a bust unless I thought of some way to salvage it. I tapped my pen against my notebook. “Let’s say,” I said, looking up at the ceiling. “Let’s say someone calls and tells you she can’t stop thinking about killing herself. She doesn’t *want* to kill herself, but she thinks about it, like, constantly. What would you tell her? How would you answer that cry for help?”

He folded his arms and looked up at the ceiling too. “Well,” he said, “I’d probably start by telling her she did the right thing by calling. It’s important to encourage them,” he said, now looking at me. “Let them know that they *are* taking the right steps, that there *is* something we can do to help.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “Okay, but like, then what would you say? How are you going to keep her from actually going through with it?”

“It doesn’t sound like she wants to go through with it, which is a great place to start. I’d probably talk to her about the feelings she’s been having, ask her when they come on and how she handles them, if she’s ever attempted to act on them, that sort of thing.”

“Let’s say she tells you they come on randomly, several times a day. She’s never tried to act on them, but when they hit her, she feels like she has to hold herself back or she might do it. Let’s say she tells you she’s afraid she might actually do it one of these days, even though she doesn’t want to.”

“I’d ask her to tell me a little about herself. What’s her life like? Is everything going okay at school? Is she in a romantic relationship, and if so, is it a happy one? Has she been having problems with her friends or with her parents? That kind of thing. Usually, it doesn’t take long to get at the heart of the problem. Usually there’s some stimulus, something that’s bothering the person and making them feel hopeless.”

“What if there isn’t?”

“There usually is.”

“But let’s say this time, there isn’t. Everything’s fine. Nothing’s going wrong. She just wonders, sometimes, you know,” but I stopped. Suddenly, my mouth felt full of saliva, and I didn’t want to but I had to swallow before I could say anything more. “Like, what’s the point?”

He stared at me for a few long seconds, then sucked in his breath. “To be honest,” he told me, “I’d probably recommend she seek professional help.”

I headed straight home after the interview with my portable audio recorder propped up in my lap so I could listen to the muffled recording. As I drove, I listened closely to my voice. It sounded different than how it had sounded in my head. It was hesitant, kind of unsure of itself, maybe even pleading. I’d thought I’d been poised, sort of stern during the interview. I thought I’d had a wry, cynical undertone. This person on the recording sounded like someone other than me.

The interview was a total waste, I decided. I thought about emailing Miss Tilden and backing out, just taking the F and being done with it—who cares? Writing this paper was pointless. Finishing school was pointless, too. If the Hot Dog Shack didn’t have full-time hours to offer me, maybe I’d take a second job somewhere else, or just quit, move even, start over somewhere new. I’d tell my mom to go fuck herself; if she thought a college education was so important, she could get one. I had better things to do.

Except that I didn’t, really. Have better things to do.

The interview ended with me thanking Brent for his time, followed by the sound of me picking the recorder up and turning it off. I reached down to press stop, but before I pressed the button, Kayla’s voice came on, in mid-sentence. At first I thought this was some sort of suicide note. My cheeks flushed. But then my voice came on, and I remembered what it was. I’d forgotten all about this recording. We’d made it not long after I’d gotten the audio recorder. It was just some fake interview I’d done with Kayla, for fun.

“Just wait ‘til school starts,” Kayla’s voice said. I remember the way the light in her eyes had seemed to sort of dance as she’d said it. She was joking, but then, she wasn’t joking at the

same time. We'd made the recording just after freshman orientation. We'd just moved into our new apartment, our parents had furnished the place and filled up our kitchen cupboards, and all we had to do, now, was wait for our lives to begin. "Everything's going to be different," Kayla's voice said. "Just wait," she said. "Just wait."

And then, one of the urges came on. Maybe it was hearing Kayla's voice so unexpectedly like that; maybe it was the realization that I would find no answers here, either. Whatever brought it on, I suddenly saw myself turning the steering wheel sharply, veering into the other lane and colliding, head on, with oncoming traffic. I pulled off into the parking lot for the community park and sat in my car, tears blurring my vision as I listened to the rest of the recording. Kayla's voice, hopeful, excited, talking about the future, about her goals, about how good things would be, soon. It was a different Kayla—one I had completely forgotten about—than the one who had slit her wrists. When had she changed, and how had I not noticed?

When the recording ended, I climbed out of the car and walked to a bench in the small park. I wanted to listen to the recording again, but I knew it would do no good. Kayla was gone. I held the recorder in my lap and stared at the playground: the monkey bars, the sandbox, the swings, rising and falling gently in the breeze. There were two little girls, maybe three or four, climbing up and down the slide from the wrong end. The girls' mothers sat on separate benches, each alternating between tapping away on her phone and glancing up at the girls to call things like, "Corrine, don't put that in your mouth," and, "Megan, play nice." But the girls seemed to be playing nice enough. I watched as one girl, whose hair was long and curly, climbed up the slide while the other, her short, brown hair pulled taut into pigtails, sat at the top of the slide and held out her hands. When the curly-headed girl reached the top, the brunette pushed her back down

the slide and then slid down after her. Both girls giggled as they started climbing back up the slide.

Without really understanding why, I started to giggle too. It felt maniacal and weird, with the tears still drying on my cheeks, but I couldn't help myself. It all just felt so funny, all of it: the recording of Kayla, taped over with the Brent interview; the likelihood that I was about to flunk out of school. I was laughing so hard I started to hiccup, and one of the girls' mothers looked over at me. She didn't say anything, and I didn't either. When I regained control of myself, I restarted the recorder at the beginning and pressed the red button. Then I held it up to the sky like a lightning rod until I heard the click of the recorder reaching the end of its capacity. On the drive home later, I listened to what I had left: fifty-four minutes of birds chirping, wind cascading over the microphone, and the barely audible, faraway laughter of two little girls.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story has been in the works for years and has been through countless drafts. As someone who suffers from severe depression myself, I've always been interested in how a person's depression and/or suicide might affect those around her. In the original draft, though, Kayla and Kylie were not even sisters, let alone twins. Once I had the idea to make them twins, the story came together for me. I'm an avid reader—well, all writers are, right?—and have surely been influenced by any number of authors. Some of my favourite short stories include Curtis Sittenfeld's 'The Prairie Wife' and George Saunders 'Victory Lap'.*

BIO: My first book, a short story collection entitled *Peter Never Came*, was awarded first prize in Autumn House Press's Fiction Contest and was published in January 2011. My short fiction has appeared in several journals including *Jabberwock Review*, *New Ohio Review* and *Pedestal*. I hold an MFA from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and am an assistant teaching professor at Penn State Harrisburg.