

# Like An Alligator Eyeing A Small Fish

*Danila Botha*



No one ever really intends to end it all. I mean, sure, people flirt with death. People entertain the possibility if they're feeling shitty. Maybe they imagine their own life without someone, people's reactions, their deep regrets or total indifference.

I'd thought about all of these things of course. Anyone who uses does.

It doesn't matter how you do it, if you pop a pill or five to get through the day, or if you keep a syringe in your Uggs for the perfect moment—a delicious thrill running through you as you contemplate the ideal instant.

But after you beat the odds a certain number of times, you start feeling superhuman. Built for relaxation and destruction. That's what I believed on the day it happened. I was at this guy Craig's house, sitting on his lap then collapsing into his blue beanbag chair. There was laughter and talking around me, some hip hop playing, and it all melted into the background. I closed my eyes and heard that song that my older sister played when I was little, the one where the guy sings, "I am

for reeeeeeeal" and that I insisted was "I am for eels" just to drive Ali nuts. I heard Outkast, and I thought of her and I opened my eyes and I tried to get up but I couldn't. My nails looked blue, just like Ali's used to when she painted them navy to piss our mom off. I tried to tell someone, but no words came out. I was suddenly cold and tired, and my last thought was about being lucky that this was now, not like when it happened to Al and there were no drugs to bring you back. I wondered if I'd see her again soon and then: nothing.

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I woke up feeling impossibly light, and weirdly excited, like a little kid about to gorge myself on candy. There was no one around me, and the apartment was quiet and eerily dark. I walked out into the hallway, and when I got into the elevator, a short woman in a baby blue cardigan twinset and fitted khakis smiled at me.

"You must be Jamie."

The cloudy-headed, cotton candy-mouthed feeling from earlier in the night had faded. It was easier to talk.

"Sorry, have we met before?"

She laughed. "No. I'm Shelly. I'll be your guide, at least for the next little while."

"My...?"

"You'll see."

I feel my heart pounding and as we get out of the elevator, she hands me something.

It's a folded-over note written on a tiny scrap of lined paper, like a half a page in those little notebooks Ali had. Inside is her unmistakably messy writing. *Hi James*, it says, *hope you're behaving and keeping an open mind*. On the back, in her tiny scrawl, it reads, *I love you*.

I swallow hard and stare ahead of me. The lobby looks less like Craig's and more like the lobby of my grandparents' old apartment building. I half-expect it to smell like cholent or herring, or to be full of old Orthodox Jews who use the Shabbat elevator every day of the week. It isn't.

Shelley steers me by the elbow past a front desk with two attendants.

"We don't have to sign you in, yet, I'm just going to give you a tour."

She points things out—the gym, the pool—and I want to slow down, look at the groups of people, ask who they are. But instead she leads me to another elevator. This one is round and made of blue glass.

“I was going to show you where people live, if they *choose* to live here...although there are other options. It’s just...there was a special request from someone here to see you, and I thought we could do that first.”

I felt my heart race. “My sister?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m sorry, Jamie. That’s not scheduled to happen just yet.”

“Then who? My grandfather?”

She shook her head again, her shiny, brown bob bouncing from side to side.

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“We understand that you’re a writer.”

I snorted. “If by ‘a writer,’ you mean the worst creative writing student in my program, sure. One of my professors grabbed one of my poems off my desk, read the first few lines out loud, slammed it down and said, ‘This is shit.’ But yeah, sure, I’m a writer.” I took a breath. “You know I took this year off because school has been fucking impossible? I don’t have a Plan B. It’s not like I could still go to medical school if this writing thing doesn’t pan out.”

“Jamie,” she said gently, “this happens to a lot of people. The person who wants to meet you had no formal writing training, but she became one of the most famous writers in history.”

I looked at her incredulously. “And she wants to meet me? Why?”

She gave me a tight smile. “She’s very critical of her own work, too. She had a feeling you’d have certain things in common. We were, of course, happy to oblige.”

“Who is she?”

“She prefers that I not tell you. She’ll introduce herself when you get there.”

I followed her out of the elevator and into a bright, wide hallway. Soon enough, we were outside a heavy white door.

“She lives in the penthouse,” Shelley explained, as we walked into the unnamed writer’s foyer.

Her living room was full of floor-to-ceiling books, like the library in *Beauty and the Beast*.

She was sitting on a blue leather couch, reading, sinking into the cushions, when she looked up and noticed us. She had intense brown eyes, full brows and delicate features. Her hair was wavy and gray. Her cheeks were lightly dusted with blush.

I looked down at my ratty jeans and navy blue hoodie, wishing I’d asked if I could change.

She got up and gestured to another room.

“Let’s talk in my office,” she said.

“I’m really sorry, I don’t recognize you,” I started to say.

She smiled like an alligator eyeing a small fish.

“Annalies,” she said, extending a veiny, crêpe papery hand.

“Jamie,” I answered, remaining unsure, realizing that I still had no idea who she was.

A Charlotte Saloman painting with the words, “Leben? Oder Theater?” (“Life? Or Theater?”) stared back at me from the opposite wall. Behind me was what looked like a Matisse.

She sat down at her desk and gestured to a chair in the corner.

“Bring it closer. You most likely know me as Anne.”

“Anne...?”

“Frank, dear.”

I exhaled sharply.

In one of my last assignments for school, we were asked to critically analyze a work of creative nonfiction we found highly overrated. I’d chosen her diary. It was one of the books they made us read in school, that everyone thought I’d love because I was Jewish, but it was boring and, in many ways, Anne was unexceptional. I’d compared it unflatteringly to Elie Wiesel’s *Night*.

I started to sweat.

“It might interest you to know that I quite liked your essay,” Anne remarked.

“You *what?*”

“I agree with you. After all, it wasn’t my idea to publish it. Imagine the only piece of writing you’ve ever published being something you never wanted anyone to read. I was so humiliated when I found out. Can you imagine? I was in my twenties, and after everything I’d seen and felt and experienced, to hear how interested people were in my naïve, girlish statements about a crush on a boy and the goodness of humanity? It was too much. And it only got more popular, translated into more languages, people mourning over the loss of my life like they knew me.”

“Weren’t you being yourself in your diary? Or was it like Instagram, where you only curate your best thoughts?”

She leaned in. “I’ll tell you something. Once you write something down, you’re automatically shaping it, and changing it. It becomes a story, and stories always contain inaccuracies and fictions. And don’t forget, trauma and tragedy change us.”

“Change us how?”

“You can’t unsee hunger and mass deaths. You can’t unsee lice and disease and your sister dying.” She paused. “But then, you know something about that.”

I nodded.

“From what I understand, you can’t unsee the things you saw in the throes of your addiction either.”

I shrugged. Everything I’d lived when I was high had felt unreal and dreamlike.

Anne assured, “It’s fine. It’s all material. The more you’ve lived, the more insight you have...well, hopefully anyway. What I’ve written here is ten times better than anything I ever wrote on Earth, believe me.”

“Can I read something?”

“Of course, of course,” she said, gesturing to a shelf of her books, and a pile of papers on her desk.

“You don’t want to be a writer who is adored for being young and precocious and pure. You want to be admired for being complex and unpredictable. If I could go down to Earth, you know what I’d do? Aside from visiting my father’s grave, I’d go visit all those statues of me. You know, where they make me look like Joan of Arc. Or I’d visit that famous museum they made for me, and I’d tell anyone who would listen that I was just a person. A person who could have done a lot of things, good and bad. A person who never had a chance to get into real

trouble in their world, but maybe I would have.”

“You seem to have a good life here,” I ventured, looking around.

“I do. You know, my mother is here. And my sister. I was married three times, can you imagine? I had two kids. Some people here, all they want is to be eternally seventeen, or twenty-five. My sister doesn’t look a day over forty. Maybe you’ll meet her still. But I couldn’t remain stagnant. I wanted to grow and change. And I think I have.”

She leaned in closely. “A lot of survivors couldn’t stay in this world either. It was too bright, full of too much opportunity. My father was one of them. They wanted darkness. They wanted to rest. They would have done anything to make their thoughts disappear.”

She reached for my arm and grabbed it. I felt her nails dig into my arm as she urged, “Don’t be like that. Try to embrace every opportunity. Write about every strange thing that I never got to experience. Write about your sister.”

I felt her nails pressing deep into my veins. I closed my eyes. My shoulders shook. I felt myself breathing heavily, while she stood over me.

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When I opened my eyes, I was lying down. My arm was hooked up to an IV. It took a few minutes to register that I was in a hospital.

My mom stood beside my bed, pacing and sniffing. I tried to smile at her.

My cousin, Lila, stood beside her, holding some books. “In case you feel well enough to read something,” she offered. At the bottom of the pile was *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

They both looked startled when I started laughing.