

Karen T. Hartline

Under Dead

Miranda Lowell tried to kill herself in seventh grade. This has nothing to do with my own story, but I don't really know where to begin. So I'll begin there. There is good. I've never talked about Miranda Lowell and her depression before, but that's because it's never really affected me in any direct way and I've never really cared on any deep level. I do remember thinking it was cool that I knew someone who took life that seriously. But I wasn't even deep enough to know I was shallow. I bring Miranda up for no reason at all, except that she's the first thing to come to my mind as I sit here and begin to write my first novel. It's about time I write it and it's about time I let it out that I knew that Miranda Lowell tried to commit suicide when we were in the seventh grade. It's about time because I think I might be dead in a couple of days. The threats are always around. And sometimes they're around more than other times. Like now. Now I feel like I might die on Wednesday or Thursday because Susan Marcus told me she heard from a friend whose wife has a cousin whose husband works in the State Department (of the United States, I assumed) and he said that we should all get out of the city tomorrow (Monday) because an attack is coming on Wednesday or Thursday. That's why I'm writing my first novel. It's now or never.

Miranda Lowell was a girl I knew at sleep away camp, Camp Minnowlake, in Rowland, New York, run by Dave and Henrietta. I don't remember their last names right now, but I need to get through this novel in a couple of days, so I'll let you know when I think of it. I loved camp, but I won't go on and on. I was jealous of Miranda. I was jealous mostly of her hair, but also I was jealous of her depression. I didn't know it at the time, but you must trust me when I tell you that, looking back, I know I was jealous. She was pretty in a very mature way. She was my age, but appeared tired and worn, and that made her all-knowing in some way. She spoke like she didn't care, but she did. I know, because she tried to kill herself. Eloise Stark told me so at Jessica's Bat Mitzvah. She didn't tell Jessica. Jessica was so pissed at that. But Eloise did tell me. I said I felt badly for Jessica for being out of the loop. But really I didn't care, because I was in the loop. I was in the loop with Eloise and Miranda and depression and life in all seriousness.

If I die on Wednesday or Thursday, I wonder how I'll let people know. Will people know that I was in the exact place at the exact time at which whatever is going to happen happened? Who will figure it out, or will it take days? I have a boyfriend who loves me very much and calls me often, so I guess he'll assume I'm dead if he doesn't hear back from me. I imagine no one will know for sure and they'll look for me and not give up hope. I wonder if I should let people know that if they don't hear from me within 24 hours that they should assume that I'm dead and should not look for me. They should just mourn the loss and go on with their lives. I wonder if I should let someone know that I've written my first novel and I'm keeping it under "Dead" in Word in the "novels" file. I don't know what to do in a case like this.

No one knows anything for sure anymore. We're supposed to be living in a color-coated, no a color-coded society and modify our degree of vigilance. But really, come on. I'll be dead on Wednesday or Thursday maybe.

Miranda Lowell was very tan because her family took a trip to the Caribbean every year before she left for Minnowlake. She was very dark-skinned and tanned easily. I would look at her skin and tell her how lucky she was that she was so dark. I'm Sicilian and could probably have gotten just as dark, but my family never went to the Caribbean and definitely didn't advocate sun. Sun was poison. My family never did anything to make me want to kill myself either. Not really. I would tell Miranda Lowell how lucky she was to have such a nice tan and she would tell me that she wasn't lucky because look at how gross it was. Then she would point to her dry peeling legs. And they were really dry and peeling and I would think about how I wanted to be really dark and peel like that someday.

I wonder if it'll be a bomb or a poison of some kind. Maybe it'll be a plane again. But could that really happen again? Maybe they'll come up with something that no one ever imagined, just like it was when the planes hit the first time and no one could believe it. Will I be on the bus to or from work, or will I be at work? Will the ground rumble or will someone just come into my classroom and whisper it into my ear? Will I have to fake a smile for the rest of the day so none of the kids worry? Maybe they'll want to hit schools, because they'll want to get the most innocent people, the children.

I have to leave work early on Wednesday. I wonder if that will put me in the wrong place at the wrong time and end my life.

I don't really have the time to read this over because I only have two days and I don't want to take the time obsessing. And I still don't know what Miranda Lowell has to do with all this.

Miranda Lowell was never my friend. I may have mentioned that, but as I said, I'm not rereading. She was never my friend, but I was good friends with Eloise

and Eloise was good friends with Miranda. I was friends with Eloise but I never took for granted that if it came down to choosing between us, that I was the one Eloise would pick.

One day, Miranda Lowell had to leave for the afternoon with her family. They picked her up in a big car that looked expensive, but I couldn't tell from expensive cars when I was in seventh grade, so I just assumed. I asked Eloise where Miranda was going. I made sure not to act like I cared or to act like I didn't care. That's what keeps you in the loop in seventh grade.

What if a bomb goes off in the middle of the night and I never know about it. I wonder if anyone famous will die. Like a movie star or a politician.

Eloise told me that Miranda Lowell was going to family therapy because they were having some problems. I might not have mentioned this, so I'll say now that this was before she tried to kill herself. Miranda Lowell. There was trouble, not that I could see, but there was some. So they picked her up and took her with them to therapy. I couldn't imagine what could possibly be wrong with her. I'd never seen anyone with as nice a tan.

Diary of a Vigilante—Day 1, 6:59am

So far today, I've spotted 4 white unmarked trucks go by my apartment building while I was waiting for the bus. There was a Pakistani—or Arabic—or Dominican-looking man sitting on the back of the bus with a backpack on his lap. He was holding the backpack really tightly.

I spent the night sleeping and now I'm wondering if that was the best use of my time. I only have one day left, maybe two. Other than finishing my novel, I have to go to work, then I have to tutor, then I have to teach an adult education class, then I have to do my daily workout. I also have 4 or 5 other unfinished stories or novels or plays I'd like to get to before my life ends.

Miranda Lowell was always quiet, so it didn't seem like she was trying to hide anything when she got back from the therapist's office with her family. Eloise told me she told Miranda that I knew about the therapist. She said Miranda didn't mind. The key for me was to act like it was no big deal. Why shouldn't I be informed?

I wonder if Miranda Lowell knew she was going to try and kill herself long before she did it. Even a day must be an excessive amount of time if what you're anticipating is trying to kill yourself. I don't know. I know the anticipation of death by whatever will hit tomorrow or the next day is overwhelming, even when I've spent half the time I've known about it wastefully sleeping.

Miranda Lowell never talked about what she wanted to be when she grew up and maybe that should have tipped us off right there. She never discussed the desire to have a baby or to own property when she was older. Then over the winter

she tried to kill herself. I can't imagine that she could have waited that long. But she must have.

Diary of a Vigilante—Day 1, 7:07am

So far, since I've last reported, a man has eaten an egg sandwich and has left the bag, unattended, on the seat. I don't hear anything, but I am keeping my ears open.

I took a picture of Miranda Lowell's hair, front and back, so that my hairdresser would know what to do when I asked her to cut it. I had a picture of the back of her head, bent down to show the short layers beginning at the nape of her neck. The layers were cut really close at the bottom and then got longer, as if she had a bowl on top of a buzz. She had pin straight brown hair that perfectly matched her tanned skin. It was very smooth. When she moved it around it would just go back to its original place.

Will I be trapped in a building or under some rubble or just beyond flames or in a place where everyone is dead? Will I be able to breathe or will I suffocate to death? Will I be thrown by a blast or will I be run into the ground? Will I fall before I die or will I be standing at the barrel of a gun?

Miranda Lowell must have had some notion of what death was like. Not factual information, because no one has that. But she must have come to some decision about what death was like. Why else would she decide that suicide was the better alternative to living? I wonder what she thought would happen to her once she did it.

When Eloise told me, I didn't think of anything like the severity of the depression, Camp Minnowlake without her, attending her funeral. I just thought about how I knew someone who tried to kill herself. I knew someone in the mental hospital. (Did I mention that they put her in the mental hospital?) I thought of the romance of the severity of the insanity of the depressed—on a seventh grade unawares level.

Diary of a Vigilante—Day 2, 6:48am

There's a man sitting next to me who looks very nervous. Like he's anxious to get somewhere or waiting for something to go down. He has a backpack.

I wonder if I'll make it to school. Today is the first official day of the two official days that death may fall upon me. I bought an extra 2 gallons of water (I already have one whole gallon in the fridge.) I also bought 5 cans of tuna fish (Chicken of the Sea White Albacore—\$.99 on sale). I have eggs, Brussels sprouts and mushrooms in my fridge. I have half a box of spaghetti, a box and a half of Cheerios (the milk expires today however), one can of escarole soup and a jar of sweet peppers. In the freezer there are 3 steaks and 2 filets of Talapia (maybe one).

I don't know what happens when you die. I'm like everyone else, I guess, except maybe I care more. Everyone else is walking around minding their business like

they don't have a care. I don't see them looking around for suspicious goings on or people with large backpacks. I feel alone. Like I'm the only one looking.

Diary of a Vigilante—Day 2, 3:28pm

I heard a plane fly overhead at what sounded like a very low altitude. It was cloudy out, so I couldn't see it. But I listened and made sure it flew away.

I wonder if Miranda Lowell would look around for characters or if she would just go about her business. She tried to kill herself and might not care whether anyone else was going to do the job for her. Maybe she would look for the characters and then sit next to the most suspicious person with the largest backpack.

There are three things I have to do today after work in addition to completing my novel. I have to purchase a gift certificate for my parents' anniversary, then I have to pick up my contact lenses, then I have to attend a violence prevention seminar. The seminar is required for my job in case someone should get into a heated scuffle with someone else in the workplace. I don't believe the workshop is supposed to touch on terrorism, but maybe what they tell us will be of some use.

Last night I had a dream that we were given warning that the planes were going to crash into the elementary school where I work. I had to get the kids out and I told this one mother that there was nothing to worry about. That everything was under control. I was lying and I knew it. I didn't feel safe and I didn't feel like any of us were safe. Then, in the next scene, I was washing my boyfriend's hair in the kitchen sink. I don't know what any of it means.

Miranda Lowell was from Connecticut. She was from a wealthy family, or so it seemed. Any girl whose family took her to places where she could get a dark tan was assumed to be from money. I wonder if she's still alive. Maybe she's been living off her parents, too depressed to have ever gone to college. Or maybe she went on Prozac and now leads a healthy, normal life. Maybe she regrets ever having tried to kill herself and thanks God (or whoever) that she didn't. Maybe she was doing fine and now the threats have gotten her so upset that she's depressed again. Maybe she's just a little calmer than the rest of us because she already decided a long time ago what death is and isn't so afraid to face it, no matter how it may happen.

My violence prevention seminar is not supposed to be about what happens if the violence ends in death or results in life-ending violence. Like, for instance, what if the disgruntled worker brings in nerve gas to a staff meeting? The seminar should cover that. Because, if I'm just sitting at a conference table with a colleague and a fight erupts, who cares? That's nothing but a bunch of yelling. What we're all really thinking about is how we're going to be attacked soon or maybe even today. I think it would be helpful if they at least touched on the nerve gas issue. What's a little yelling nowadays anyway?

I'm really getting annoyed with all these people sitting around not doing anything. I can see as plain as day, they're sitting on busses, talking on cell phones, reading magazines, staring out the window at nothing in particular. We're supposed to be looking out. We're supposed to be watching. We could all die from gas or an explosion any minute and no one is looking out. I wonder if anyone cares. Does anyone care?

I wonder if Miranda Lowell cares what happens to you? I mean, if she's still alive, is she worried? Does she regret that she tried to kill herself when really life was pretty good at Camp Minnowlake? If I could talk to her, I would be very straight with her. Are you sorry? Do you look back and say what the hell was I doing? Maybe she's still struggling to live. Maybe she feels if it happens so be it. It's too hard watching and waiting while there are so many other things to be done. Like my novel. But I'll do my part.

Diary of a Vigilante—Day 3, 8:07am

Never mind. It was a squirrel.

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