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LIVING TO TELL THE TALE

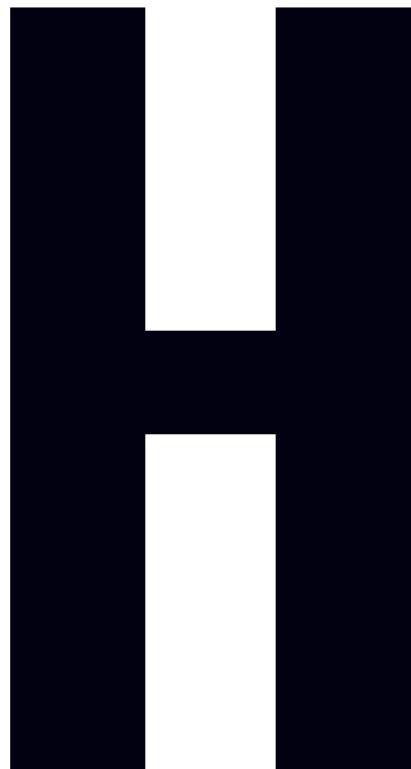


Female suicide rates are the highest
in a decade. These three women share
their stories of surviving the darkness ›

Words JULIE McCAFFREY

Photographs ANTONIO PETRONZIO

COSMOPOLITAN • 123



eather Wells looks relaxed and happy as she sits in a corner of the bar, chatting with a group of friends. As she throws her head back to laugh, her hair falls away to expose a beautiful butterfly tattoo on the left side of her neck. Look closely among the blue swirls of the butterfly's wings and there, at its centre, is a tiny black semi-colon. Across the world there are thousands of men and women with this punctuation mark permanently written on their bodies. Some, like Heather's, are woven into other designs, while others are etched simply on a wrist or shoulder blade. The narrative behind each inking is different, yet they all share the same message: "I could have ended my story here, but I chose not to."

It has been a few months since Heather's last suicide attempt (the second over a period of three months last year). After graduating with a Masters in zoology, Heather found herself back living with her parents in her small Scottish hometown, and working full-time in a pet shop. Her days were spent scraping algae from the sides of fish tanks, wiping out gerbil cages and advising pedantic pet owners on the best food for their dogs. It was not how the 25-year-old had pictured her life panning out.

"After so much hard work, I was going nowhere," she says. "My close university friends now lived hundreds of miles away and seemed to have it all figured out. They had successful careers and were beginning to start families. I felt very alone."

The tell-tale signs of the depression she'd suffered from throughout university returned: insomnia plagued her and, come morning, she would just lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, finding it physically impossible to move. Then, one evening while messaging friends, she discovered her boyfriend of almost two years had cheated on her with multiple women.

"I didn't try to kill myself over a guy," she explains. "It's just that my ex was the minor thing that gave me a final push over the edge."

In the dead of night in September 2016, Heather said a simple "see you later" to her parents and walked to a local bridge. Well known to locals as a suicide spot, Samaritans plaques nailed across the grey brick stressed that they could help, but Heather ignored them as she continued towards the highest point of the bridge.

Once there, she placed her hands firmly on the barriers, freezing wind cutting across her body, as she looked at the black water below.

Dressed just in a hoodie and jeans, the cold should have bothered her, but it didn't.

She concentrated on what she had set out to do, tears blurring her vision as she began to climb up and over. "I knew that jumping would be scary," she says. "But once I hit the water it would be over in seconds."

Then she heard a voice behind her. "Are you alright, love? Do you want

a lift home?" It was two bridge maintenance workmen. From the corner of her eye she could see their fluoro-orange bibs shining in the darkness. "I'm fine, just up here for a walk," she insisted, but they refused to leave her. "We're not going anywhere," they reasoned. "Not until you walk safely off this bridge."

For 10 minutes she stood, staring at the water, the men's steady

presence behind her. Eventually she realised there was no way she was going to jump, so she turned around and began to walk home – as they followed slowly in their van behind her all the way.

But a month later, at home, Heather overdosed. Her mum returned from work just in time to find her only daughter slumped against the bath, vomiting.

Paramedics saved her by pumping her stomach, and Heather was given an urgent referral for a psychological evaluation. When asked if she would try to hurt herself again, Heather answered honestly, "I don't know what my future will hold."



Left to right:
Heather, Alex
and Adriana

Heather's story is increasingly common. Suicide is the leading cause of death among 20- to 34-year-olds in the UK*, but while more men commit suicide successfully each year, that gap is closing. Experts believe that growing pressures among this vulnerable age group contribute to the rise – Papyrus, a charity focusing on the prevention of suicide among young people, has found that issues of low self-esteem, as well as physical and emotional abuse, appear frequently among suicidal women.

In 2015, 1,547 women killed themselves – that's an 8% rise on the previous year*. And, while it's almost impossible to find out the exact number of failed suicide attempts, statistics do show that

women are almost twice as likely to try as men**.

THE MOMENT THAT FOLLOWS

With a noose looped around her neck, Adriana Wheatley stood on the edge of the bannister and counted *one, two, three*.

It had been a bad week, a bad month, a bad year even. Psychosis and schizophrenia haunted the 26-year-old. "For months, wherever I went, I thought people wanted me to die – I'd walk past them and imagine them whispering it at me." That day, on the stairwell of her childhood home, she felt death was her only escape.

Across town, Adriana's parents had been in church, but halfway through the sermon, they had turned to each other, with a sudden urge to check on

their daughter. They'd never walked out of their regular service before, but there was something about the way she had seemed that morning. Fifteen minutes later, they walked through the front door and found her limp body hanging from the bannisters, her skin the same pale white as the polka-dot dress she had chosen to wear that day.

It took both parents to free her. Her dad rushed up the cream-carpeted stairs to cut her down, while her mum pulled the noose up and off. The gasp she made when they did so was a tiny but vital sign of life.

All Adriana remembers are the circling voices of paramedics shouting, "Can you hear me?"

Throughout school and university Adriana had been an over-achiever – ▶



Depression led to a suicide attempt for Adriana

she was academic, a real straight-A student, and then, in her twenties, she started her own business. She had a lovely flat and a long-term boyfriend to come home to.

But behind the scenes she was working 15 hours a day, seven days a week, in order to live up to her self-imposed idea of success. Eventually, Adriana cracked.

"I couldn't do it any more," she says. "I sold my side of the business to investors, and then my boyfriend and I broke up. Suddenly my life looked completely different to what it had been only a few weeks before."

Depression loomed. But she was determined not to let it stop her, and moved to London. "I had visions of getting a new job in the fashion industry and having loads of fun with my friends who were there," she says. "The reality was that most of my friends lived over an hour away, and the companies I was applying to couldn't understand why a former director was going for marketing positions. No one wanted to hire me."

In one of the most overcrowded cities on Earth, Adriana felt isolated and alone. Her depression escalated into psychosis and paranoia, leading to that moment on the bannister.

Adriana has no idea how long she was hanging for, and the medics who saw her do not understand why she did not suffer a broken neck, brain damage or sight impairment. They are amazed she survived without even a mark on her throat. But this miracle meant nothing to her, and she spent two-and-a-half months on a suicide ward.

"I was so depressed I couldn't feel a thing – no happiness and no empathy for my family whatsoever," she recalls. "They visited me daily and I just kept saying 'I still want to die.'

For a year after that Sunday in July 2011, only Adriana's family and close friends knew what had happened, as guilt and shame silenced her. This is very common – mental-health charity Time To Change says 60% of people with a mental-health problem waited over a year to tell the people closest to them they had tried to kill themselves.

Yet it's *talking* that prevents it from happening in the first place, or again. "A critical message in suicide prevention is to tell someone," says Elizabeth Scowcroft, research manager at the Samaritans. "Being open about past suicide attempts will help break taboos around the subject and help people get the support they need."

OPENING UP

Over the past few years, there have been a growing number of campaigns and movements encouraging a shared openness around the subject. Heather's tattoo marks her as a supporter of Project Semicolon, which was set up in 2013 by Amy Bleuel from Wisconsin as a tribute to her father who committed suicide. As well as inking their feelings on their body, the online platform also

provides a space for people to tell their stories – which are then read by millions across the globe. A number of celebrities have spoken out, most recently Paris Jackson, who revealed this year she survived multiple suicide attempts as a teenager. Numerous blogs and forums have popped up, providing a much-needed place to find others going through the same emotions.

For Alex Moss, 19, discovering online that others were experiencing similar feelings was key to her recovery. She had tried speaking to her friends and family when she was diagnosed with anxiety and depression, knowing bottling it up would make things worse. But it felt almost impossible to find the words to convey exactly what was going through her mind: how for the past six years she'd never felt quite 'enough' and that university life – being thrown into a world full of ambitious achievers – only exacerbated these feelings.

After speaking to her doctor, Alex was prescribed medication in February last year. "It made me feel as



After graduating, Heather felt lost

though I was pushing through mud," she says. "I felt like life was supposed to be getting better but it just wasn't."

One night in April, at 2am on the scratched lino floor of the bathroom of her student flat, she swallowed a combination of painkillers.

"I took the pills very, very quickly," she recalls. "Then I went back to my room and saw a picture of me with my brother. It was taken at his 16th, a year before. He'd just been given a selfie stick and we were posing, with big smiles on our faces. I couldn't contemplate never seeing him again."

She ran to the bathroom and stuck her fingers down her throat, but nothing came up. That's when she called her mum. "She and my dad stayed on the phone to me, begging me to try and vomit," she says. "They were in the car driving up to me – and stayed on the phone the whole four hours it took them to reach me." By the time they arrived, Alex had succeeded in throwing up and was in bed with her best friend beside her.

"My parents have said the person I am today is so much stronger," she says, almost a year to the day after her attempt, with a new prescription that really helps. "I've had so many talks with them." She's also started a blog, after finding comfort in others.

For Adriana, staying silent only exacerbated her shame. Until, a year on, a friend let slip that she'd confided in others about what had happened. "I hated the thought of my experience being used as gossip fodder. I was angry, upset and hurt. But I realised I was only feeling this way because I had an issue with the attempt myself – I was ashamed of it."

Over the next few days, this remorse galvanised into something a lot more potent. Just like Heather and her tattoo, Adriana felt a powerful urge to tell the world that you can recover from the lowest of all low points, that it is possible to reset your life and learn to be content. She sat down at her bedroom table and began to write.

"Trying to ignore what happened suddenly made me feel like a fraud," she says. "Gradually I started telling people. Everyone felt so guilty that they hadn't spotted the signs – but I want people to understand that anyone, no matter how good their lives seem, can get to a point of sheer desperation where they truly believe that suicide is the only answer."

Four years later, what began simply as a way to get her thoughts out has turned into a self-published and semi-autobiographical book, *Ana: Her Suicide Story*, which details the last six days in the life of a woman before she tries to kill herself.

"Since my attempt, I am a different person. I realised my job is just a way to pay the bills and I want to do much more to make a difference," she says. "I honestly feel I survived to tell my story in some way to help others."

It was just one month after her attempt that Heather sat down in her tattooist's chair. She knew she could never forget how low she had felt on that bridge, and how much stronger she was growing.

Now on her way to a new life in New Zealand, she sees her tattoo as a lasting reminder of that day. "Whatever happens in my life, my semi-colon reminds me that, despite all the crap I've been through, I'm still here. My story's not over – it's just beginning." ◆

If you've been struggling with any of these issues, call the Samaritans now on 116 123



BEHIND THE SCENES

Julie McCaffrey

"What I noticed in all three women was the fact that their suicide attempts have meant they are now approaching life with new vigour. They're all determined to spread positivity in the world, whether it's via volunteering for charity or letting go of relationships that are damaging to them."

Alex has started a blog about her experience



SPEAKING OUT

Celebrities who have survived...
in their own words



Evan Rachel Wood

"[It] was, weirdly, the best-worst thing that ever happened to me," the *Westworld* star says of her attempt, aged 22.



Paris Jackson

"It was just self-hatred. Low self-esteem, thinking I couldn't do anything right, not thinking I was worthy of living," says the 18-year-old, who revealed she attempted suicide multiple times following her dad's death.



Halle Berry

"I was in my car, and I knew the gas was coming, when I had an image of my mother finding me," says the actress about her attempt following the breakdown of her marriage to baseball player David Justice back in 1997.



Drew Barrymore

"I wanted attention and sympathy. I certainly didn't want to die," she says, of her attempted suicide, aged 14.