

Lucas, me, and Harry Potter:

Depression, suicide, and magic

By AJ Rhyley

Happiness can be found even in the darkest of times if one only remembers to turn on the light.

-Albus Dumbledore

Most people don't believe in magic – and I used to be one of them. A wide-eyed, curious kid turned skeptical teenager, magic was just something fun to read about in books or watch on TV, an escape. When the story ended I was faced with harsh reality where nothing extraordinary ever happened, where nothing could miraculously change my circumstances. It wasn't until I lost the will to live that my brother, Lucas, reminded me of magic. And years later, when Lucas himself had given up on life, magic revealed itself in the most poignant way. Harry Potter helped a lot with that.

For those who have not experienced depression it can be very hard to understand. It rolls over you in waves, threatening to pull you under, to consume you completely. With every swell it erodes you until you are left depleted, a shell of what you once were. By the age of eighteen, this was what I'd become – a shell with no more resistance against the waves. After two close calls with death, I flew back home from where I was living outside Los Angeles. Half of my belongings stood abandoned in my apartment. I didn't say goodbye to anyone – my friends, my girlfriend – I stuffed what I could into my single blue suitcase and took off. I remember holding back tears as the woman at LAX told me I needed to pay a \$25 fee because my bag was overweight and I didn't have the money.

My parents let me move back into my childhood bedroom – a room I hadn't lived in since I was sixteen. I barricaded myself inside. Sleep hid from me and I hid from the world. Confused and at a loss, my parents didn't know what to do. Only my little brother was brave enough to face me. Words were difficult so instead, together, we watched Harry Potter. It was the first time we'd seen the movies, our first encounter with the wizarding world. Lucas was enraptured. His enthusiasm was contagious, his wonder so pure, and perhaps without meaning to, he was able to make me smile and laugh. Two teenagers watching kids movies for the first time – Harry Potter became a lifeboat.

How can I describe the love I have for my little brother? It is something I have too many words for but also that which goes beyond words. As very young children, we were bonded through shared trauma. Before we had lost our baby teeth the world had showed us a fearful side, but we found solace and safety in one another. I always wanted to protect him, for him to be loved and happy. In the end, he saved my life. Because I was too busy treading water, I couldn't see that he was going through something himself. As I started to live again, I would come home to find him on the couch watching *The Goblet of Fire* for the tenth time. He quickly came to know the movies by heart, where he could quote whole scenes. I didn't realize then that Harry Potter was perhaps becoming a lifeboat for him as well – something he could escape with and cling to when the world felt too dangerous.

I spent my twenty-first birthday in Bayridge Hospital and would spend the next four in state prison. I was still a kid when I got there, I had simply been doing what I could to survive for so many years I hadn't yet been able to live, grow, and develop my own identity and strength. The first few months were the hardest and I knew if I wasn't careful, this time I would drown beneath the waves. I reached for the lifeboat Lucas had brought me three years before and read the Harry Potter series for the first time. I discovered how Harry Potter was more than just an exciting story that took me beyond prison walls, it was a story of hope and perseverance and friendship. It wasn't just an escape anymore, it strengthened me.

I think about how Lucas was still just a kid when he came into my dark room to try to save me. He was probably scared, he didn't know how to deal with depression but I was his sister, we had weathered the storm of life together, he wouldn't abandon me there. I think about how young he still was when I was arrested, he was still trying to navigate and discover his own identity. He should have been enjoying the best years of his life but instead he waited anxiously in court rooms and spent his weekends driving hours to sit in a bleak prison visiting room.

In the prison visiting room there are no distractions – you sit across from your visitor in a room that is either full of other people or so empty that your voice carries to the desk where the guards are watching you. Sometimes, for Lucas and I, life was too heavy to talk about so we started playing Harry Potter trivia. Gradually, I heard about and watched as the waters of anxiety and depression lapped closer to my brother, the tide rising as he stood stranded on the shore. He had been there for me and now when he was struggling, we were separated by locked doors. Nothing was more difficult to bear than the guilt and helplessness I felt, that I couldn't be there for my brother as the waves closed over him.

The following is a passage from a journal entry I wrote on April 27, 2019:
I saw Lucas tonight...He was so hurt and frustrated and I was so scared and sad and both of us were heartbroken. I felt so afraid that I would say the wrong thing. It was cold in the visiting room and he looked so exhausted like the weight of the world was crushing him. He kept saying that he couldn't talk about certain things, that it was too much for him and he'd scrunch his eyes and sort of curl forward into himself like he wanted to disappear. I apologized for all the burdens that I'd put on him at such a young age over the years. He said he was tired...That when I'd come back from California, Mom and Dad would vent to him and he'd heard things he shouldn't have had to. He felt small and sort of unseen a lot of the time. I told him I was so sorry...I tried to comfort him, offer some help or insight. He put his head in his hands, he said he always listens to me. I didn't mean to cry but I told him I've always loved him more than anyone and I just want what's best for him.

He kept saying he couldn't talk about things... He wanted to play Harry Potter trivia so we did. He laughed loudly once or twice, trying to release some of the tension and stress he feels. It's some of it my fault. I want to keep him safe but can't. I want him to know how much I love and believe in him.

In September, Lucas was admitted to Bayridge Hospital for his anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. He would go back two more times between then and December 17th when he attempted to kill himself. He had been treading water for so long, he was exhausted. I thought over my years of incarceration that I had grown strong, that I was resilient, but the news of Lucas's suicide attempt broke me.

I wrote in my journal that I had failed him: *How could I live without him? It would be a half life. People say we're twins because we look alike and are so similar but we are more – we've been there for each other, protected and encouraged one another since we were small children. All he ever wanted was to follow me, to play whatever game I played, be included, be loved. I feel so angry – angry at everyone who ever hurt him or took his joy. Angry at myself for everything I put him through. Angry at him for trying to leave me alone.*

Lucas lived because our friend discovered his suicide note and was able to get to him in time. As he recovered the week of Christmas in the ICU, a woman at the hospital asked what she could get him that might make him happy. He told her he'd always wanted to read Harry Potter. The next morning she brought him the entire set. Slowly he read and from his hospital bed rediscovered the magic of Harry Potter and gained some strength from him, as I had years before in my prison cell.

The real magic of Harry Potter was not in the spells or mythical creatures but in the trauma and hardships that Harry was able to overcome. Harry had to persevere when he felt like giving up, he had to deal with loss and grief. He was able to bear it because of love. Harry Potter is a story of the importance of friendship and loyalty, of a small light still burning through vast darkness. For Lucas and I, Harry said what we could not and reminded us that there was beauty in the world. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for my brother – he is my best friend, he inspires me, he helps me to keep going because I want to be better for him. We understand one another. We both have nearly drowned beneath the waves but magic pulled us out and our friendship keeps us afloat.