



Volume 11  
Issue 1

## Too Much

*Christine Smith (McFarlane)*

I'm sitting on a gurney in the emergency room. I've lost count of how many visits this makes. It could be my tenth or could be my twentieth. A flimsy blue cotton gown is wrapped around me. I feel the chill from the opening in the back and shiver.

The gurney is covered in thin white hospital-issued sheets, the hospital name stamped but faded at the worn corners. My arms are wrapped tightly around myself, and I am rocking back and forth. It is something I do to comfort myself. Tears burn a path down my cheeks as once again a nurse checks my blood pressure and then readies an IV to put in my arm. I feel the TAP ... TAP of her finger against my clammy skin as she checks for an entry site. I do not question her, but flinch as I feel the pin-prick of the needle enter my vein.

The nurse tries to engage me in small talk. "Christine, what could possibly be so bad that you keep on doing this?"

I am silent. I refuse to talk. The nurse doesn't know that keeping silent is what I've been taught. I can feel my sinuses begin to constrict. It gets harder for me to breathe, and I am scared. She

shakes her head as if to say *tsk, tsk*. The IV is put in, and the nurse hands me a cup filled with a black chalky substance.

“Down the hatch, Christine, you know the routine.”

My hands shake as I grab hold of the cup. I briefly look down at the contents of the cup. I don't want to drink this awful concoction, but I know it's in my best interest. When I refused in the past, I was threatened with the use of a nasal tube and/or restraints. I know that I don't want to be strapped to my bed because it brings back memories of when my foster parents would hold me down. I hated the thought of not being able to move of my own free will.

I have long ago learned that the substance I am made to drink is activated charcoal and that it is an emergency measure used when someone swallows a toxic drug or chemical. Activated charcoal is given in the form of a thick, black, liquid suspension, either orally for conscious victims or through a tube and into the stomach for those who are unconscious or unwilling to swallow the liquid.

As I start to ingest the charcoal, I can't help but think of the bottles that I know are left scattered on my bathroom floor and the pills that are floating through my system. I swallowed whatever I could think of—gravol, extra strength Tylenol and my anti-anxiety medication clonazepam. I remember thinking, as I took each pill, *I'm so tired of feeling this despair*.

Depression has been a part of my life for so long now, and by taking the pills I wanted to escape. The nurse gets a bedpan and puts it beside

me on my bed. She stands and watches me from about a foot away, as though standing any closer would make her catch what I have. I know she won't leave until the cup is empty. I drink it as fast as I can, just to get it over with. Again, the nurse tries to get me to speak. When I don't acknowledge her, she says quite crossly, "We don't like giving this stuff. Why do you keep on doing this to yourself?"

I can't tell her why I keep on overdosing, why my thoughts are consumed with darkness and doom. I can't tell her that I feel like I'm drowning and no one can help me. In my head, I'm telling myself, "She won't understand—she'll just think I'm being melodramatic."

The nurse shakes her head in frustration and says, "You know better, Christine. You know this doesn't make things any better." And then she says, "The doctor will be in here soon. Stay right where you are."

She leaves the room. I hear the sounds of the ER around me. I hear patients moaning in pain; the whispered voices of the doctors in consultation with specialists, discussing lines of treatment; and nurses chirpily asking patients, "Are you warm enough, ma'am? Are you warm enough, sir? Would you like me to bring you a blanket?"

This courtesy doesn't extend to me. I get a cursory glance as the nurses pass by, their annoyance palpable. As an overdose patient, I know I am an annoyance to the ER staff. I have been in the emergency room way too many times. The doctors once told me, "You just do this for attention."

As I sit on the gurney in the ER, waiting for the doctor, I'm angry and I'm confused. My thoughts are racing, and I ask myself over and over again, "Why can't I just die? No one cares anyways."

I look around me. I'm tired. I want to sleep. I feel the crust of the charcoal around my lips and clumsily try to wipe my mouth. My eyes begin to droop. I curl up on the gurney, grabbing the sheets and pulling them tightly around me. My knees are drawn as close to me as possible. The last thing I see before I drift off to sleep is the tubing from the IV. I faintly hear the *drip... drip* of the sodium chloride in the IV going into my arm.

Darkness envelops me, but it doesn't last long. I feel someone's hand upon my arm gently shaking me awake. It's the doctor at last. It's a doctor I'm not familiar with, but he seems to know me and says, "Christine, you're here again. What's going on?"

"I don't know," I mumble.

"Well, something is going on, for you to have overdosed," he replied.

"You wouldn't understand," I say.

"Try me, Christine," he says back.

Tears well up as I try to tell him how tired I am of fighting my depression, my anxiety, and life in general. "I just can't do this anymore!" I say.

He stands there listening, and then out of the blue he asks me, "Have you ingested anything other than your medications?"

I look at him quizzically and ask, "What do you mean?"

He says, "Have you drunk anything, you know, anything like antifreeze?"

If I hadn't have been so doped up, I would have yelled at him, but I shake my head no and wonder, *Why would he ask me something like that? Is it because I am First Nations?*

I've encountered racism many times in the ER, and out and about, outside the confines of the hospital, but this is the first time a doctor has come out blatantly and asked me something like this.

*Still, I think, that's no reason to ask me something like that.* Can't he see that I'm in distress? It has nothing to do with ingesting antifreeze, nor would I ever do something like that.

As the doctor starts to turn away to go to see another patient, he tells me, "I have to admit you this time. I hope you realize that."

I shake my head yes and look down at the cold tiled floor of the small, cubicle-like room I'm in. Not long after that, a service attendant comes into the room to get me. There's no warmth in his voice as he says, "Come with me, Christine."

Once more I am admitted to the hospital.

Today I realize more than anything that the hospital served as a safe, albeit punishing, haven. It was a place where I knew I could be saved, however briefly, from the incessant torment going on within my mind. I didn't know then that it was the same me who swallowed those pills who would have to climb up from the darkness of depression and despair and undertake a journey that would help me come out into the light.

This meant adopting a new way of living. Adopting my culture and learning it despite objections from some who were close to me, and know-

ing that by sharing my story with others, I could give hope to others. Today I reflect on those days and know that there are many other youth who have the same struggles as I have had.

Youth often deal with everything from isolation, to identity crises, depression, and substance abuse. I overcame my addictions by learning that not everyone was out to get me, but most of all I had to learn to care about myself and want recovery so that I wouldn't slide down the slippery slope of darkness anymore. In 2012, I won the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health Transforming Lives Award and stood in front of 900 people, saying, "Obstacles can be overcome!"

No one is truly alone. Someone is always walking with us—we just have to believe.

**Christine Smith (McFarlane)** is a Canadian First Nations journalist and writer from Peguis First Nation. She graduated from the University of Toronto in 2011 with an Honours B.A. and is returning to do her M.Ed in Social Justice. Email: [chrissy.mcfarlane@gmail.com](mailto:chrissy.mcfarlane@gmail.com) .