

Love and Belonging

She tells me the addiction was her ex-boyfriend's fault. She was a care-aide and had her life together, until she went through a string of abusive relationships. This one used her as a mule to transport drugs. She was less likely to be searched, could lie better, flirt with police, undo a button. When they got pulled over, he said, "*Don't say a word you stupid bitch,*" but there were scales and baggies in the trunk, so the unmarked bottle of blue-green pills in her cleavage didn't matter. Nor did the shards of meth in the console, they only brought those so she could drive all night. The charge was upped from simple possession to trafficking, a supreme court offence with a mandatory minimum. Can't talk your way out of that, even as the accomplice, especially today with all the Fent out there killing the young people. Someone's got to take the fall, appease the media. She did her time and now she reports to me on probation.

By the time female offenders get here, they're high risk. They fly under the radar because the courts take pity, and they don't get sentenced as often, or as harshly. Once they're on probation though, they're long gone. Professional criminals, sabotaging my cognitive behavioural interview attempts, by blocking any real talk with their tears and all their belongings, their actual baggage strewn out upon my desk. Kaitlyn is a hot mess today. She shows me a "lucky" troll doll she keeps with her, a pink jewel in its belly button, felt pen scribbled across its torso from the kid whose never been in her care. Pieces of Kaitlyn's wayward hair extensions stick out the sides of her head and her fake eye lashes are half falling off like spiders crawling down her face. She asks to use the bathroom- as a shower. In there for twenty, interview over in ten. It's a defense mechanism I've come to know, delaying the conversation by crying and unpacking. I mean, why confront anything when survival is at stake? I try to teach her Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. *Food, shelter, connection*. Hard to believe she was ever a fully functioning member of society. Her face is caked with the wrong foundation, flaky scabs bump through her cheeks like a dirt road. Her drug deals are fueling the opiate crisis and there's no help for her now. She's nodding off on my desk. I sanitize my pens while she starts snoring, eyelids fluttering, twitching at intervals. I lean back in

Love and Belonging

my chair and take in her bag-lady mess, the puff ball baby-blue key chain with the keys that open no doors. She wants to get back into treatment.

I don't know when I lost my compassion for these people. I guess when they started taking over the streets like an infestation, rumbling their carts around the city like roaches, rental fencing unable to contain them. They are the walking wounded and all the courts do is catch and release. Catch and release, cops take the heat. Its like Gotham or Mad Max in their eyes and us, the regular tax paying people, we're the ones who suffer, we're the victims of crime. Why should the cops put their lives on the line? They'll be back out stealing our bikes and strollers and front porch packages in no time. I'm supposed to talk to her about how our thinking leads to change. I kick my boot heel against the desk. She jolts upright.

"Kaitlyn, wake up!" Her head pulls back aghast, a cell phone falls from her pocket on to the floor.

"Sorry, was I nodding off again? I'm so tired. We've just kept moving the last few nights, its safer. I can't have my shit stolen again." She grabs the phone and puts it in her disorganized purse.

"Who are you running with right now Katie?"

"Pete, the guy with the dogs. You know him?"

"Of him," I say.

"Right, I mean it's not like you could be friends with him."

"Look Kaitlyn, this is no life. You missed group the other night, you're falling off again. I don't want to have to breach you."

"I know, I know. It's hard to get here. Please don't. I'll make next week. She takes out a book and starts to write down the dates, using my clean pen.

Love and Belonging

“You’ve got nothing but time girl. You need make it next Tuesday. It’s the chapter on Love and Belonging. I think you’ll really like it. You get to make vision boards.”

“Like a collage?” Kaitlyn smirks. Her voice is raspy.

“Yeah, well if you can dream it, you can do it.” I sound fake, but I don’t even know what to say anymore. My heart use to pour out for them, especially the women, but they don’t hear you when you say you care, no ones ever told them that. You should see their faces light up when you tell them you’re proud they made their appointment- 3 days and 3 hours late, but hey, you might know what day it is *today* and that’s a cookie for you. Gutter people don’t live in our world. She was abused by every hand meant to love her and never stood a chance, but I’m tired of trying to get them well, tired of seeing people die. Tired of the filth it brings.

Kaitlyn gathers her crap, and her tilted frame begins bustling out the door. She has shopping bags at her sides and her wet Ugg boots scutter across the carpet of my office, leaving marks. They squeak through the waiting room until she stops to talk to a guy in the foyer. I stick my head out,

“Katie, wait, you forgot your appointment slip.”

She comes back in to sign it, rummaging around trying to arrange a place to put her things, but she begins nodding again, bent over like a half-dead junkie. Her underwear showing, her back bones thin. She finally signs it. Her fingers are swollen and dirty. I give her the yellow carbon copy and she stuffs it in her purse and tries to hand me back the pen.

“You can keep it.” I say. I go to close the secure door behind her and notice a bag of pills on the ground and some burnt matter. It’s tin foil.

“Loyal to the foil.” I say to the guy waiting. He’s eyeing me, sees what I have found and wants it for himself. I glove up in his presence and pick up the paraphernalia. I close the door with my foot and

Love and Belonging

dump the foil and the gloves in the trashcan. I inspect the pills. They're asymmetrical, light yellow, with the number 8 stamped on them. They look like Dillies. I put them in the front pocket of my blazer. I straighten out my suit and head upstairs to log our progress.

When I get home from work Chase is lying on the couch. His weed pen is sitting with a half-eaten pizza pocket and a documentary about intense weather systems with subtitles moves through the screen. He is snoring lightly, wearing the same clothes as yesterday.

"Chase get up."

"You're home early."

"No, I'm not. It's already five. What do you want to do for dinner?"

"I'm not really hungry. I'm gonna go out with the guys later." He sighs and stretches back.

We've been at each others throats lately. When we argue Chase tells I'm too emotional, too sensitive, overreacting. I wanted to pick up some blow tonight, stay awake and do rails in the basement, play darts and fuck the pain away. He's too tired from getting high all day. He'll probably end up at the bar, there's a UFC fight tonight and the guys usually do their thing, and he doesn't come home.

I kick off my boots and leave them tilted by the door. I go directly to the boxed wine I've been tossing back all week. I open a bag of greasy chips and flop down on the couch beside Chase, licking my fingers.

"How was your day?" Chase asks.

"You really care?"

"Course I do."

"Oh, you know, I'm changing the world one criminal at a time."

"When'd you get so cynical?"

Love and Belonging

“Its part of the job description.”

I lean back and pull out my phone. I dial my mom and listen to the repetitive ring. I don't even hold it to my ear. I hang up before her voicemail kicks in.

I get in the shower and let the water run over me, but I don't feel clean. After I rub the fog from the mirror, I line up all the products that give me comfort and begin plucking my eyebrows and putting expensive retinol in the cracks of my forehead between slugs of more cheap wine. I'm due for a Botox injection and a dye job. I wanted to pick up tonight, but Chase always does the deal, so I don't get busted. The stimulation makes me feel like I *can* change the world, like good times don't end, but when they do I get depressed. I reach for my phone to call my sister, but I know she won't answer so I leave it alone. I'm in hot water with her since I forgot my nephew's birthday. When I get out of the bathroom Chase is gone. His food leftovers still sit on the table, the sauce on his plate drying up. I grab the baggie of pills and open it and take two with a gulp of wine. I feel less alone with the pills floating in my stomach. I've been treated like garbage in my relationships. Gaslit until I'm convinced, I'm the issue, maybe I am. I let it happen. Tormented and used until I do the dumping. I'm close to kicking Chase out, all he ever does it get high. My coworkers know I like to “party”, but they believe all the hard stuff is over, that it makes me a better PO. “Life experience” means my bullshit meter is more finely tuned. I build rapport easier; clients see my tattoos and find me relatable. I say “the line” to being on the other side of the desk is thin. They think I'm talking about the edges of the desk. I believe in decriminalizing drugs, they're not going away, and we all need a gear shift out of hell. At least I'm not a street rat. I don't steal. I deserve my down time. I have walls to hide behind. No one knows that most mornings I cry in the shower and my skin hurts, and I vomit bile. Chase knows, but he never says anything.

My screen lights up and its my mom calling. I don't answer. I lost my gumption to talk to her. She has no empathy since we lost my dad. She's gone on a caring strike, living out her days drinking wine with the old folks, because its “part of the culture” where she lives. She posts wine memes on

Love and Belonging

Facebook everyday. *Mom, you're fucking alcoholic*, I want to say. I go fill up my own. We don't confront things in our family, never have, we just avoid.

My feet start feeling heavy, dragging across the hallway carpet. The hydromorphone is kicking in and I can feel the dopamine spiking in my chest in spurts of euphoria. It relaxes me and unnerves me at the same time. My eyes twitch and I begin grinding my teeth. I lean against the wall and slide down to the floor, letting the shallow breathing consume me. My heart rate slows in and out, and up and down, over the little bumps of my throat to a dead still. I finish the last drink of wine and listen to the voicemail that mom left and hang up. Chase will find me in the morning.