

Short story

Trapped people

The hospital smelled the way all hospitals smell. A combination of old furniture and cheap disinfectant. The cover of the padded bench we were sitting on was peeling off and a halogen light, a single source of light in the waiting room, was buzzing above our heads.

"This is a bad idea." she says.

"You haven't slept in 3 days. You are shaking. Someone needs to take a look at you."

"You don't get it. If they diagnose me, I am done. It will be in my health records forever. I will never work again. Any moment an old classmate could walk by and recognize me."

"You wanna leave? We can leave. Before the lady comes back. Find a private clinic or something, no classmates." I said, half-serious.

"It doesn't matter. It's all fucked anyway."

"It's going to be okay."

My performative optimism was not convincing. It stopped being convincing weeks ago when her life really started falling apart. Taking time off didn't help. Alcohol didn't help. Therapy didn't help. The downward spiral had started and seemingly nothing could stop it. My girlfriend's mental health was disintegrating in front of me like a poorly built Jenga tower.

"What do I tell them?" she asked.

"Try telling the truth."

"That I am a trained psychologist that's crazy? That I am a walking definition of irony who just came here to pick up some pills?"

"You are not crazy."

The lady nurse came back and announced with inappropriate cheerfulness:

"Miss? You can come in."

"I guess we will find out." the girlfriend said, seemingly to no one, and started walking to the psychiatrist's office door with the enthusiasm of a captured partisan being told to dig his own grave.

I was left in the empty waiting room with my thoughts.

It started almost a year ago, the way most love stories start. There was a party. Drinks. Conversation. A smile. A smile back. A step forward. A matching step forward. Kiss. Fireworks. A bad date in a restaurant. A good date in a park. Awkward sex on the kitchen floor to avoid roommates. Searching for a common apartment, nicknamed “the nest”. Moving in. Painting the walls. Coming home from work to someone close. Netflix and chill. Pancakes on a Sunday morning. The lottery winning luck of finding someone both smarter and better looking than you, who for some reason, likes you anyway. I was the reacher; she was the settler. Life was good.

There were small cracks at first. Misunderstandings blown out of proportion. Mismatched expectations. Small fights that dragged on. Unprompted jealousy outbursts. Talks of a break-up, periodically revisited but going nowhere. She changed jobs, then changed jobs again. Ended long friendships, started new destructive ones. Nothing was good enough. The crushing weight of high expectations. Not knowing what to do with your life. Comparing yourself to Instagram versions of your friends. Hedonic adaptation. Excessive introspection. Choice paralysis. Stress. Depression. Anxiety. Sleepless nights. Little food. Self-destruction.

At some point, it was clear we were over. It was never going to work. But there is no right moment to abandon someone who is already in trouble. We were friends first, and friends don’t do that. And she didn’t have that many friends left. So I stayed, waiting for things to get more stable. But the spiral only went down.

Until here I was, sitting alone in a waiting room of a psychiatric clinic.

The door opened, and she came back holding a piece of paper.

“How did it go?” I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders, the way a sad child does when their mom asks them about school.

“As expected. Depression, anxiety, probably more. Got a pills prescription. They said I should stay, but I refused. I may not have a choice at some point. You can’t really diagnose someone in a single session, but their best guess is a combination of narcissistic and regressive borderline personality disorder.”

“How bad is that?”

“It has a 10% suicide mortality rate.”

“That won’t happen to you.”

“It feels like 100% for me.”

I shook my head and hugged her. She hugged me back, defeatedly.

“I am quitting my job. They are on the verge of firing me anyway. And I should move out to my parents...”

What did she expect me to say to that?

'No, stay, I will take care of you!' like in the movies? 'I am with you till the end of the line, in sickness or health'? I wanted to say it. I wanted to be a hero, a knight saving the day.

But I was tired, and I was no knight. I haven't had a happy day in a long time. I was trapped. There is only so much sadness and depression you can absorb from other people before it settles in you as well. And I could feel I was approaching my own cliff.

How much responsibility does one have over the health of their partner? How long do you stick around and take care? In marriage, forever, I guess. Even if your one night stand sprained her ankle in your kitchen, you would go with her to the hospital for a day. Is there a formula for relationships? Like 25% of the relationship timespan or something? Am I off the hook after three months? Where is the line? I didn't feel off the hook, yet felt I had to draw the line somewhere. A trapped coyote will chew off its leg to break free. What do trapped people do?

Maybe the price of freedom is the self-delusion of being a good person.
Maybe the price of freedom is accepting your own selfishness.
Maybe the price of freedom is accepting a 10% chance of total disaster.

She was still looking at my face, expecting a response.

"Yeah... maybe that's a good idea." I finally said. We drove home in silence and started packing boxes.