

Blood trickled from my wrist and dissipated in the bath water, turning it pink. I took another sip of my glass of whiskey sitting on the bath ledge next to me and sank low into the steaming water. I held the glass in my hand. Was I drinking too much? Maybe it was time for another break. Maybe. The blood was coagulating now. The long vertical cuts along my wrist were raised, and the skin around it inflamed. The other cuts along my arm were starting to heal. Still, I was running out of room. I stared at the cuts, and a lump formed in my throat. It didn't feel right. It didn't look right. Maybe another...no. I raised myself out of the tub and drained the water, wrapping myself in a towel after wringing out my hair. My eyes drifted to the cuts up my left arm in the mirror. I traced the ridges and bumps gently with my right hand. My stomach tightened, and the fresh blood marks stained my eyes, leaving an imprint when I closed them. My heart skipped a beat as my phone on the bathroom vanity vibrated.

*Wifey.*

"Hey, hun. How was your first day?" I tried to sound enthusiastic. I was overannouncing my words to try to hide the fact that I was drunk.

"It was really good." Her voice was like honey dripping in my ears. When she spoke, I could feel her words surrounding my brain with dopamine like a warm hug. "Everyone is so nice there. They're letting me decorate my office any way I want."

"That's so nice! You'll have to send me pictures." I paused as a tear trickled down my cheek. I inhaled as quietly as I could and continued. "Did they say when you'd start seeing clients?"

She chuckled. "Yeah. I've got an intake next week. It shouldn't take too long to build up my case load. Chicago has a lot of people, so there's always a demand for therapists. They said I'm going to be working with kids and adolescents. Not ideal, but I'll make it work."

“Yeah, you’re gonna be great, hun.”

“I miss you.” Her voice was quivering. “Any news on the job hunt? How’d that interview go today?”

“It went well. They’re going to get back with me.” I’d missed the interview. It’s not that I didn’t want to move or anything. But, if I had to work another dead-end job making not enough money, I was going to expedite my plan to exit my own existence.

“What are you doing right now? Are you doing okay?” She asked.

“I just got out of the shower, and I’m about to make dinner.” The bath did have a shower, so it wasn’t technically a lie.

“Ooo, what are you making?

“Ramen.”

“I miss you,” She repeated. I paused, maybe for too long.

“I know. I miss you too.”

My stomach was throbbing as the muscles constricted around my intestines. Maybe I was just hungry.

Two minutes left in the microwave as I took a drag of my blunt, filling my lungs with pungent smoke. The microwave light flickered as the bowl of Ramen circled on the microwave dish. Already, the smell of spicy Buldak filled my nostrils as I exhaled a puff of weed smoke. Fuck the drug test. Weed was legal in Chicago anyway. Did I even want to move anymore? My fingers instinctively traced the cuts again. A small whisper echoed in my ear. Not audible, but subtly present. And from the reflection of the microwave mirror, I thought I caught a glimpse of something. A figure? No, it was gone now. Must be the weed. There was so much to do. I needed to start packing the guest bed, buy a new car, fuck...I needed to find a job.

The microwave timer beeped louder than I thought it would. My stomach growled as I opened the door and took out the steaming bowl of noodles. I took a picture, sent it to *Wifey*, and tossed the contents of the bowl into the sink disposal. The discarded meal steamed in the kitchen sink. My stomach churned as I turned on the disposal.

She texted back, “Omg it looks so good! I’m jealous.”

My stomach growled again.

She texted again. “Are you actually going to eat it?”

My stomach tightened. Shit.

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My leg was bouncing up and down as I traced the cuts on my arm through my long-sleeve shirt. An analog clock ticked on the wall. Children’s decorations and inspirational messages littered the walls. A record player in the corner of the room played soothing classical music.

“Can I see them?” Sitting opposite me in a squeaky leather chair, a woman holding a notepad lowered her glasses and leaned forward. On the desk next to her sat a small laptop, a framed photo of a woman, her partner maybe, and a pride pin attached to the frame. A small name plaque read, Jesse Walters.

“What?” I leaned back on my chair.

“The cuts on your arm you keep tracing.”

I put my hand to my side. She slid her glasses back on and leaned back in her chair, writing a few sentences in her notebook. “I’ve been doing this for a while, hun. Tell me why you’re here.”

“I feel like I’m going crazy.” Jesse didn’t say anything. She put her hand on her notebook, leaning slightly in to what I was saying.”

“I’m anxious about everything and nothing,” Why was I telling her all this? “I convince myself that things aren’t going to get better and that everyone would be better off without me. I’m constantly surrounded by people who love me, yet I feel completely alone. I feel like I can’t do anything right and sometimes...”

I paused, my chest becoming tight. “...sometimes I need to hurt myself to punish myself, to calm myself down. I don’t know.”

She wrote something in her notebook.

“How often is ‘sometimes’?” What did she write in that notebook?

I looked down, my leg still bouncing.

“Several times a week.” I glanced up at her. Her face was neutral but kind.

“Do you feel relief after you do?”

“Yeah. But not long enough.”

“Do you think you deserve to hurt yourself?” Her eyes were inquisitive but understanding.

I swallowed hard, and my eyes became glassy. “Maybe. A little. Sometimes it’s that, and other times it’s because I need to.”

“Are there other things you feel you need to do?”

I paused. *Need* was such a strong word.

“Do you ever feel anxious when you’re alone with your thoughts?” Jess continued. “Do you ever have those feelings in your relationship?”

I paused.

“Sit with that feeling if you can. I know it’s uncomfortable.”

“Maybe.” I hesitated.

She removed her glasses and leaned back in her chair. “Can you think of an example?”

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“I love you,” I said, looking at her.

“I love you too, hun!” Her eyes were kind, and her voice was soothing. We were watching a TV show, I think. I glanced over at her. Did her facial expression change? Had I done something wrong? Maybe it was the way I said, “I love you.” Too sweet? No. Too harsh? No. Maybe she thought I was being selfish with my love. I love our dogs too. A lot. Do I love them more than her? Do I not love her enough? Shit.

“Are you mad at me?”

“What? Girl, I literally just said I love you?” Her tone was more confused than upset or angry. Could I tell the difference, though? I moved away from her slightly, sinking into the couch.

“I know.” She was definitely mad at me now. “I’m sorry.”

I reached for my phone to check my email, refreshing the page.

“How many more times are you going to check that?”

I refreshed the page again. “What do you mean?”

“Hun, that’s the fourth time you’ve checked your email in five minutes. Do you really think something important is going to come in?”

“I’m just checking for job updates. I’m also waiting on those schools I applied to to get back with me.”

“When did you apply to those schools?”

I refreshed again. “Last week.”

“Oh, hun.” She smiled and reached over, pulling me into her. She ran her fingers through my hair. I’d annoyed her.

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“What goes through your mind when your fiancée says she loves you? Do you believe her?”

I don’t know. Did I? “I think so. My problem is that I feel like I need to be perfect in order to be a good partner or to be worthy of love. I feel like the smallest thing can reverse her love for me or make her mad.”

“And are these anxious thoughts relieved when you check with her or seek reassurance?”

“Yeah, for a while.”

“But not for long?”

“No. Not for long.”

She wrote in her notebook.

“What are you writing in there? You think I’m crazy, right?”

She chuckled and looked up from her notes. “No. I don’t believe anyone is crazy. These responses make sense to you, and are real to you. You feel like the slightest tonal shift means your partner is upset with you. You believe that any passage of time you haven’t checked your email might mean you miss something crucial. That’s real for you and extremely debilitating, from how it sounds. But, no, you’re not crazy.”

“Sometimes, I feel crazy.”

“That’s understandable and valid. It’s just not true.”

*Yes, it is.* A low voice, tantalizing and quiet, reverberated from deep within my chest. I didn’t respond to Jesse.

*It’s true.* The voice repeated. An image flashed behind my eyes. A figure, almost humanoid but not quite. It was dark, almost negative. All over the dark figure were lines of crimson, almost like cuts, dripping with blood. It was both clear while also being completely incomprehensible. As quickly as it appeared, it was gone. My chest and the muscles around my stomach tightened.

Jesse interrupted. “Do you feel like it is true?”

I hesitated. The image flashed again. My stomach tightened more. “I-I don’t know. Sometimes I feel like maybe it is. I don’t always know what’s worth being anxious about and what’s all in my head.”

“When you feel the need to seek reassurance from your partner, do you ever pause and sit with that discomfort?”

There it was again. The crimson lines flashed for a moment after the figure had gone, burning into my eyes.

“Sometimes. When I do, it feels like my head is going to explode.”

She nodded and jotted something down in her notebook. “Until we meet again next week, try to sit with those feelings of discomfort for longer and more frequently. You won’t be able to do it for long, and that’s okay. We’re trying to get used to those feelings. Is that something you think you can do?”

My heart screamed no. My head screamed no. “Yes.”

Shit. Could I?

*No, you can’t.* No, I can’t.

“It’s okay if you can’t. It doesn’t mean you failed or that you’re doing something wrong. Throughout our time together, is there something you’d like from me to help you with in our sessions?”

“I just want to learn how to sit with this...I don’t know...shit.”

She smiled warmly. “Of course. I think that’s a great goal. Learning to cope with negative thoughts, no matter what form they come in, is going to be challenging. But I believe in you. You can do this.”

It flashed again.