

Simpler Disasters

by Angi Becker Stevens

In the afternoon, there was a certain time when the sunlight spilled through the windows in the common room and made everything look all bright and fresh and optimistic. If you ignored the patients and doctors milling about and just focused on the quality of the light, you could believe you really were in a resort, the type of place where “getting some R&R” wasn't just a euphemism. Sometimes Ryan would lean back in his chair, fold his arms behind his head, look around with a sort of smug expression, as if he owned the place. I could never decide what made me more nervous: when he acted like it was a prison, or when he acted like he would be content to stay for good.

Usually, we would go for walks on the grounds in the evening. Ryan would chain smoke, his eyes constantly darting around, never staying focused on me for long. He looked too thin and too nervous. “They're trying Lithium again,” he told me.

“I thought it didn't work out for you last time,” I said.

“It worked okay until I stopped taking it.”

“That's always the catch.” After almost fifteen years, I had a vocabulary like a physician's desk reference: the antipsychotics, the antidepressants, the mood stabilizers, lithium, haldol, thorazine, clozaril. Ryan had run the gamut. I was the one who stayed up looking at web pages until my eyes burned, studying dosages, side effects, long term efficacy. “You should have become a psychiatrist,” he always told me, and I never told him that the human mind and all its weaknesses and vulnerabilities, the multitude of ways it could go all wrong, had ceased to fascinate me a long time ago.

When he first told me he was going into the hospital for a while, I thought of Cuckoo's Nest, electro-shock and patients sedated into near coma. “It's like rehab for people who aren't addicted to anything,” he told me. “It's like having two years' worth of therapy in a month, like boot camp for functioning-in-the-real-world.” He made it sound light and casual, like one of those themed health-spas

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where people cleanse their colons and eat raw foods and call it a vacation. I swung wildly between thinking he was doing the responsible thing and thinking he would be better off if he just stopped taking himself so seriously, stopped giving himself labels and permission to check out of reality.

I stood in front of my bathroom mirror and tried on different phrases: "My best friend is in a psychiatric hospital. My best friend is a mental institution," spoken with the gravity used to refer to someone with cancer, moved into hospice, all hope gone. "My best friend is in the loony bin," casual laugh, dismissive wave of my hand. "My best friend is crazy. My best friend is sick. My best friend is a fucking mess. My best friend is like a black hole that sucks in everything around him."

In the end, I just avoided mentioning it to most people. Really, when I went straight to the hospital every day after work, there was no one left to wonder where I was, anyway. Ryan didn't leave enough room for anyone else.

On a park bench, out near the edge of the hospital's sprawling lawn, Ryan put his arm around me, and I leaned my head on his shoulder. It was the irony of our bodies; physically, he looked like the one who would have protected me.

"I'm starting to feel like I should just stay here," he said. "I'm starting to feel like this is the only place everything makes sense." I thought: Oh, fine, just roll over and give up on life. I thought: Good. Become someone else's responsibility, not mine. I said neither, looked down, poked my fingertip into a hole on the sleeve of my sweater.

In high school, I used to tell him his mind was amazing, beautiful, that I wished I could see inside of it. Fifteen years. Fifteen years of prescribed medication and self-medication, of desperate or ecstatic late night phone calls, of sloppy failed attempts at suicide and at college. Eventually, you realize you can't remember what it was that ever seemed beautiful.

And yet, you stay.

You stay because of loyalty, because of devotion, because you've been friends forever, he's like a part of you. He's like the most corrupt part of you: the bad knee, the weak heart that betrays you.

You stay because you have no choice. Because what if he didn't botch it next time? How would you feel then?

I managed to escape once, for two years, to California, where it was always sunny, where earthquakes and wildfires and mudslides seemed like simpler natural disasters. I put time zones between us, and when he would call me, manic at 3 am in the midwest, it was only midnight where I was. It seemed more benign that way.

When I went back home, I told him I had missed the seasons most of all, the wild ups and downs. I missed the way I hated winter, missed the relief of the melting snow.

You stay because you realize you never really leave, no matter where you go.

At the end of August, the air was already starting to turn. Evening came on earlier, painting different patterns of light on the linoleum. By the time we went for our walks, it was nearly dark. Ryan was jittery, excitable. He sat up on the back of the park bench, his feet down on the seat next to me, the whole thing threatening to tip. "Did you hear about that hadron collider they're going to fire up?" he asked me. "Out in Switzerland, somewhere underground. They don't know what's going to happen." He stood up on the bench. I didn't look up at him. He jumped off, landed in front of me. "It could make a black hole. A man made black hole. It could devour everything."

I wondered why they didn't filter the news there. I wondered if he was taking his meds. I wondered if it would really be so bad if I drove straight home after work the next day, ate dinner alone.

You stay because the only thing you know for sure is that sooner or later there will be a phone call. You always picture it coming at night. The description of the pills swallowed, the veins opened, the

rope tied, the trigger pulled, whatever. The result will be the same. You imagine how you will lie in bed and stare at the ceiling thinking: at least I did everything I possibly could have done for him. At least I have that.

I didn't even have food to make a proper meal with in my apartment. When was the last time I had eaten dinner there? I ordered myself a pizza, ate at the kitchen table by myself. Ryan's cat, Catherine, left in my care, lay on the counter and eyed me suspiciously, asking me what I was doing home.

"I'm not the one locked up in there," I said out loud to her. "I'm still out here." She meowed at me, came and weaved her body around my ankles, the poor crazy woman, talking to no one in her kitchen, eating a pizza alone.

I called him. I told him I was working late all week.

The next day, I went to the mall. I tried to remember the last time I had done something so insignificant and ordinary. It felt strange and foreign to be surrounded by so much human life, not people in robes, with scars and dull eyes, but regular people, people interested in finding a new pair of jeans or a birthday card instead of finding the right combination of medications to slow their minds down or speed them up. I basked in the suburban, Midwestern sanity of it all. I bought a new pair of shoes, a new skirt. I imagined I had some place to wear them. I didn't think of turning heads in the common room.

By Friday, Catherine seemed bored with having me around, bored and wary. I called some friends I hadn't seen in months, asked them out for drinks. The cat sat on my dresser while I got ready, silently judging me. "You can't blame me for this," I told her. "No one could blame me for this."

On Saturday, I went back. Ryan was mopey, quiet. It was raining, he wanted to stay in his room.

"Are you hung over?" he asked me.

"I went out with some friends after work."

"I think I need to bust out of this place," he said. "I mean it, I'm thinking of checking out." The treatment program he'd committed to had been sixty days, he was almost a month past that. It was a private hospital; he'd checked himself in and he could check himself out, stumble haplessly through the world once again.

"Where would you go?" I asked him "What would you do?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I'm going crazy in here."

"I thought you were going sane in here."

He laughed. "Sometimes I think sane feels like crazy to me."

"So which is it really?" I asked.

"Million dollar question," he said. He lay back on his bed. He closed his eyes. He held my hand. "I hope they do it," he said.

"Do what?" I asked.

"The particle collider. I hope it goes haywire. I hope that's the end of it."

"Why would you want that?"

"Wouldn't it be easier?" He asked.

I squeezed his hand. I stayed until he was asleep.

I didn't go back for three days. I tried to keep busy, to avoid Catherine's accusatory stare. The way she turned and flicked her tail at me spelled out words like "traitor" and "betrayal." I bought her a new catnip mouse, as if to atone.

I was planning to go Wednesday after work. But instead, Ryan's brother called me at my desk.

"Where's my brother?" he asked me, panicked and tired. We were all so tired.

"What do you mean? He's in the hospital..."

"He's not in the hospital. He checked himself out. I called to talk to him today, and he left yesterday." I was planning to go after work. I closed my eyes, leaned my forehead into my hands, pressed against my skull until everything else disappeared.

I was supposed to be the one he would have called. But he didn't call. Didn't turn up at my front door. Where else could he have gone? There was nowhere else. I paced, waited by the phone. Slept lightly

if at all. I called emergency rooms and police stations every few hours. I gave his physical description so many times it felt like a poem I'd memorized: white male, five-foot-ten, thirty years old, black hair, blue eyes, scars on his wrists in both directions, like crucifixes, vertical for the time he meant it and horizontal for the time he didn't. At work, I was a zombie. "I'm having some trouble at home," I apologized to my boss. "My best friend..." the words caught in my throat. There were no words.

You stay because you believe, against all reason, that there is such a thing as getting better. You believe in the glimmer of the person you see underneath. You stay because you're the crazy one: crazy enough to think he can be something different. You're just waiting for the magic treatment, the revolutionary new drug, the doctor who finally strikes the right chord and makes a breakthrough. In the false hope for a cure--like that long shot all-or-nothing bet on the roulette wheel, that fatal gambler's optimism that next time, next time your number will come up--you stay.

Once, fueled by coffee and adrenaline, we drove all night from Michigan to watch the sunrise on the east coast. It was November and the sand was wet and freezing cold, we wore scarves and hats and huddled against each other, warmed each other's hands. When that first spot of pink crested over the horizon, it felt like we were at the edge of the earth, like we were the very first people in the world to see this, like it belonged to us alone. We were young, the future seemed vast and limitless. Things seemed possible. *Life* seemed possible.

Later, in hindsight, most of the moments in my life I had thought were the most vibrant, the most real, were all just a result of the faulty wiring in Ryan's brain. Mania by proxy. The labels diminished everything, turned even the good memories into something tainted.

The phone call didn't come at night like I'd always thought it would. It was mid-afternoon on an ironically sunny Saturday. There

were birds singing, Catherine sat watching them from the windowsill. When she saw me staring numbly at the wall, she came and curled on my lap, and I sank my fingers into her fur, wanted to hold on to something warm and tangible and alive. I tried to calculate the time it takes to realize a thing is true, the time it takes to accept the inevitability of the bullet tearing through your body. If it took an average of two minutes, after waking, to be certain the dreams were not reality, how long would it take to comprehend that this was reality and not a dream?

The only thing you knew for sure turns out to be the thing you were least prepared for.

You stayed because you needed the seasons, the wild ups and downs. You stayed because you were in love with the way it felt when the snow melted, the way the grass would reveal itself, patches of brown and green peeking out through a blanket of white, like a promise of something yet to come. Like hope.

You stayed because you were in love.

The day we put him in the ground, they fired up that hadron collider. It worked, but there was no black hole like he was hoping for. Nothing was annihilated. But there were some minor mishaps, repairs needed, and the whole particle operation was put on hold, to be resumed in April. In the meantime, the world kept turning, just like it did before. But spring eventually would come, bringing new chances for devastation, for the rip in the fabric that could swallow us all.

