

Catch & Release: Dog Person Depression

by Jennifer Donnell

Diabetes, fatty liver, amnesia, epilepsy, rheumatoid arthritis, gout, I chant under my breath, as I gaze out the small slat of the front window. The sun slips past our blue wooden house and behind a sturdy oak tree, holding out for his arrival.

Earlier in the day, before I knew he was coming over, the hairdresser tamed my reddish ginger curls straight. Though I want to fold from the nerves of seeing him, my strands wait like obedient puppies in training, framing my face. If nothing else, their stylish bravado holds me up. I apply an extra coat of red lipstick and smooth my black dress with the low, low neckline. I switch from beige slippers to matching black high heels. Maybe if I look poised enough on the outside, I'll feel that way within.

It was earlier this week that I groaned, "I feel as if I'm always waiting." which made him look at me like I might wait forever if I ever complain again. He doesn't have hair, but damn if his scalp doesn't shine at me like terrified electric cats when he's angry. And when he's worried or triggered, it's as if Freud reincarnate whispers in his ear about castration anxiety and he just wants to get away from me and everyone he knows.

Eczema, psoriasis, familial tremor. I see him drive his burgundy SUV toward the curb. He purposefully parks in the red zone so he can't stay long. He rubs his lips together and pulls out his phone. I watch him text someone from the driver's seat and then my phone jingles with his message: *Meet me outside.*

I open the door and motion to him, welcomingly. With tepid steps he walks over from his car and we both try to smile big as we used to. I want to tell him that I've been doing okay and terrible at the same time. That I try not to miss him but when I do I miss him so bad. I want to tell him that my dogs want his cats to play another game of chase, catch, release. I want to reassure him that my dog might pretend to bite, but has mostly learned to play dead. He twitches his tail at me as he approaches, or would, if he had one.

Ehlers—Danlos syndrome, Sjogren's, thyroiditis are just some of the diseases I sometimes wish he had instead of the one that tells him he doesn't matter or that we don't matter, that he'll only matter if he makes it big, which makes him feel so small. Worse, the disease which takes over during the weeks when he begins to hate me for something I did two years ago, or last week, or might do, whenever it is that he can't forgive.

Neuropathy, mononucleosis, dyspepsia, irritable bowel. People would forgive him for all of those.

Diphtheria, gonorrhoea, they'd tell me to love him unconditionally and help nurture him to health. (On second thought, maybe not the Gonorrhoea.)

Instead, I get things like,

“Why can't you find a nice man with cancer or a bum leg?”

Or,

“Why don't you hit yourself in the head with your fist, wouldn't that be less painful?”

“I think I'm going to leave.” he threatens, when I ask about him something he isn't in the mood for. My puppy whines as his cat hisses. I slap both animals out of the way, fed up.

I tell him he matters and he tells me I don't. I tell him I love him and he pauses for a moment to decide if he loves himself. I tell him to talk and he goes quiet, but I see it in his eyes, the hint of an apology he just can't bring his tongue to say. A glint of someone more vulnerable and feeling, whose heart isn't black the way it seems to be based on appearance alone.

He stays a few minutes longer and, in the silence, I try to will my neurons to fire some silent messages to his,

I love you. I need you. Everything will be okay. You're okay. You're better than okay. Let go but hold on.

