

Staff: "I'm sorry to hear that. Mine was around 40 pounds, a beautiful husky. Killed me to put her down too."

Patient: "... could we not talk about dead dogs please...?" Staff: "She'd just gotten so old and she could barely get out of bed without me helping her."

Patient: "Could we not talk about dead dogs in front of the depressed girl?"

Staff: "Her last few days she just curled up with her sister, a little spaniel who loved her. I thought maybe she would be all right when she looked up at me with those big, beautiful eyes."

Patient: "COULD WE NOT TALK ABOUT DEAD DOGS IN FRONT OF THE SUICIDAL GIRL?"

Staff: "But then she ended up having another seizure. It broke my heart but she had fallen out of bed and her legs were all bent out of shape and..."

IN TREATMENT

by Kayla “Pica” Williams

Part 1: Sign in Sheet

Picture being committed to a psych ward. The first time. Nurses stare in horror. Wheeled into the ward without color or real chairs. Nothing dangerous can happen to anyone.

Except, that's not how it is. Instead, there's an interview process, talking to one nurse then another, signing paper after paper.

No one stares when discussing the urge to bash your skull into pavement. This may be comforting. It may not.

Eventually there's a hospital bed. Not the psych ward yet, not even the same building as the psych ward. There's a security guard named Blaze assigned to watch. After all the belongings have been taken away, after being placed in a corner away from all the needles, they still need to be sure there's no chance of self-harm.

Picture anxiety increasing. Realize there are still ways to self-harm. Breathing labors. Take deep calming breaths. Count the people as they go by.

1. Tori

It wasn't really different from any other time that I had gone into the hospital. I knew the process as a vet¹. Hopefully this time I could get into a residency program. Not have to deal with the same process. Go to the ER, tell them about your plans, show them your wrist – the scars, and the new ones – begin the hours and hours of waiting until you get assigned to an inpatient unit. The process was more familiar to me at this point than being back in my hometown was. Living with my parents and my brother had not been easy after I told them about Damon and they still hadn't believed me.

The one thing that bothered me about the hospital part was the strip down. You had to take off all your clothes and put them in a bag where they would be kept by security. Gone were my long sleeve sweaters, even though I would be allowed to wear them in the psych ward. Here, I got a thin cotton gown that barely covered my backside let alone my wrists. I felt as though everyone was staring at me. Sure I couldn't keep anything that could hurt me – keys, laces, etc. – but couldn't they at least give me a sweater?

¹ Veteran. Each time the hospital doors close around you, each time they read the same list of the belongings you're not allowed to have, all you can think is the same thing: *Again.*

Please, I would do anything to be able to cover up my chest and keep those eyes away.

2. Daniel

I didn't need to be here. Why was I here? I wasn't crazy, I didn't need to go to a psych ward. I had to go to school in a couple of days, I was already falling behind in class as it was. I enjoyed my science fiction class but I hadn't done all my assigned readings. Then the math class... I hated math. I should've dropped it. I was going to drop it. But to do that I had to get out of here. My parents are probably freaking out already as it is. I shouldn't have come here; I knew I shouldn't have. The nurse pulled out the straps for Christ's sake! I mean obviously I'm not going to need to be strapped down. Why would they even do that? They set it down like a bowling bag – this giant medical bag filled with Velcro straps and this big broad male nurse who I couldn't take in a million years holding onto it. I don't belong here. Maybe I can tell them that and they'll let me go home. It'll be fine, I won't take any more pills. I promise.

3. Autumn

“You’re all right sweetie, you’re safe now.”

I spent most of my night trying to reassure the guy on the other side of the curtain that things were going to be okay. I couldn’t see him from the other side of our divider but he was obviously pacing about in the three feet of space provided. I heard the bed move repeatedly as he sat down then back up. I heard him press button after button until the nurses yelled at him to stop. I knew he was trying to distract himself so I thought I could help. My husband would’ve definitely scolded me, he always said one of my problems was I looked out for others and not for myself, but the guy didn’t seem to have anyone. So I talked to him while the guard watched us, told him how it would be okay, even though it was my first time going to a psych ward myself.

Eventually we drifted in and out of sleep until the ambulance came around 6am to take me to my unit. They made this whole fuss out of the thing, moving me to a gurney like I couldn’t walk, securing me so I’d be safe for the ride. Never mind that my husband was more than happy to drive me, nooo. Of course we ended up in LA instead of staying in San Diego – why that happened I still have no idea – so probably best my husband didn’t

drive. I felt terrible for the ambulance drivers, though apparently they were at the end of their shift too. Not much you can do about it.

4. Carol

Eighth time. Not exactly what you want to tell your parents not more than two months after moving across the country for grad school. Though I think I'd done quite well, all things considered. I had been in California for only two months and I'd had to make new housing arrangements, had to deal with maggots, found out my grad program was twice its expected size, and I even felt like all of the other grad students hated me. But I hadn't taken anything. Instead I'd come here. No, that's not good, but it's not bad either. This time I'll share, too. I'll tell them what's going on and I'll participate in groups and I'll get better. It's not my fault. Change had always been a huge trigger for me.

I told myself I could be proud of what I had accomplished, even as they slapped a blue wristband with a barcode on me.

For some stupid reason, you had braced yourself for fanfare. You had pictured your best friend being called, your mother crying in the background. You wondered about how your father would react to the news. It was some grand affair that would have a grand beginning. But it was not. At seven in the morning, there was barely even a proper introduction.

But still – they had believed you. A part of you had been convinced they would simply call you crazy and tell you to hit the road. No one would care if you were gone anyway, it made sense that they wouldn't try to stop you. At least they had let you stay.

Still, as the nurse pulls out a scanner like the one used at grocery stores, you feel your throat tighten. A thin red line falls across your skin and hovers around your wrist until it finds the barcode. There is a small beep and the nurse looks at the screen, reads your name slightly unsteadily once, then repeats herself with a nod for certainty.

“Welcome to Adult Unit 2.”

BHC Alhambra Hospital

“Acute inpatient hospitalization is the most intensive and structured level of care offered, and only occurs with a physician’s order. Patients are housed in a safe, nurturing and therapeutic environment, while receiving customized treatment and care that is designed to stabilize unsafe behaviors and aggressively manage symptoms in a quick and efficient manner. A highly qualified team of physician-led mental health professionals provide 24-hour observation and care, intervention and oversight, coordinated treatment and therapy, and discharge planning services.”

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- Intensive physician involvement
- Multi-disciplinary mental health treatment team
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- Daily individual and group therapeutic programming
- Up to 10 hours of daily programming

Big Fiction Magazine

- 7 day a week programming
- Partial Hospitalization/Outpatient programs
- Partial Hospitalization Program

Part 2: First Day

The first thing that Autumn noticed about Adult Unit 2, the low functioning ward, was the ants. Not in the cafeteria, where you would at least expect ants to be, but by the nurse's station.

The nurses station was always the center of everything. It was where they kept the meds, the folders they stuffed everyone's paperwork into, the meds, the valuable belongings placed into several zip locks then thrown into the vault, the meds, the one bathroom which staff used that had the only scale, the meds.

The counter was covered in ants making a clean straight line from the floor to where staff was making calls on the only phones. If they had been a part of her unit – Autumn had worked crime scenes as part of the detective unit for a while – they would've gotten yelled at immediately. But instead the nurses continued as if nothing were in disarray.

Autumn worried about the young man who had been freaking out in the hospital. How would he react if he saw this?

Tori arrived in Adult Unit 2 as a man was screaming.

“Please don’t make me leave.” His voice was reaching a point of hysteria that Tori was sure could be heard throughout the entire unit. It was almost unbearable when you were sitting in a chair less than five feet away from him. Her head already aching, Tori resisted the urge to cover her ears. She listened.

“You’ve been here three days and you haven’t made an effort. We’re calling you a taxi.” One of the younger nurses. She had long blonde hair, a bright pink shirt, and a no-nonsense attitude.

“You’re killing me! If you make me leave you are killing me!”

“Stop making a scene. You should’ve thought of that before you didn’t participate in groups.”

“Please don’t make me leave!”

He screamed, running down the hallway.

“Call that damn taxi, I will drag him out there if I have to.” The nurse stalked after him.

Someone had to listen to him.

“Can I have breakfast please?” Carol asked. The last thing she’d eaten had been over twelve hours ago. Her legs were shaky and she felt faint. Carol maintained the awkward dance of pressing as closely as she could to the counter to keep away from the tall man in hospital pants pressing up against her back, while also trying not to touch the ants.

“What did you need?” the head nurse asked.

“I need to eat. I haven’t eaten in 12 hours. I’m hypoglycemic,” Carol explained. Her voice barely broke through the barrier of ants. Carol needed to eat food every 2-3 hours or else she could pass out. It took all her control not to fall over right then and there.

“Why?” the head nurse asked.

“What?” Carol had never been asked why she was hypoglycemic her entire life. It was a medical condition, wouldn’t a nurse understand that?

“Why are you hypoglycemic?” the head nurse asked.

“Because I’m hypoglycemic...” Carol didn’t have anything else to say. “Please. I haven’t eaten in 12 hours.”

“I said we’ll get to you when we can.”

Daniel was escorted to the lovely chateau that was to be his hell on earth for the next few days via ambulance. Where he was strapped down. It wasn't a comfortable ride. He'd had an itch on his back for most of the ride and he had slept on his side. They hadn't really needed to strap him but apparently it was 'procedure'. It meant he couldn't flip on his stomach and his wrists hurt every time he accidentally attempted to move around.

Never mind the fact that they STILL refused to give him his clothes back. Getting to Adult Unit 1 ended up being a big relief – even if it was at 6 freaking am. He was just excited to be able to put on his clothes. He'd barely gotten there, but all he wanted was to leave. He didn't belong here.

"Hey man," he asked, "Where's my belt and my shoes?"

"Laces and belts are prohibited on unit." One of the male nurses, nametag said Nick "We can give you your shoes with rubber bands to tie across the lace holes if you want."

Zach, one of the many nurses, watched Carol from the side as she transferred as many of the items as she could from her suitcase to the pillowcase that would operate as her bag. Carol pulled out her bras and underwear and stuffed them into the bottom of the thin, white pillow case. He made the occasional comment – you won't need that many shirts, you can always come back for them, conditioner belongs in your cubby – but only one did she question.

“No shorts?” she asked. It was LA, she was from Michigan, it was around 80 degrees here every day. Why wouldn't they allow shorts?

“Yeah some of the guys here can be real creeps.” He did not explain further.

Remembering the way the taller man had hovered around her backside, Carol shut her suitcase with the shorts still inside.

You were not entirely surprised when you flipped over the pillowcase that had been holding your belongings to find several ants crawling along the bottom. You had been moved to Adult Unit 1, the high functioning ward, so at least it wouldn't be a problem anymore. You figured your belongings were packed too closely for any ants to make it down to where you had tightly packed your sweaters, but you shook out all your belongings just the same.

The few live ants you found crawled desperately on the pillowcase, falling back down into the corner where they jumbled over and on top of each other. The dead ones were already piled in that corner and just became mixed in.

You should tell a nurse about it. Demand a new pillowcase, that your clothes be washed right away, that someone come into your room and clean.

You throw the ants down the toilet. Then flip through your book to be sure no ants have crawled between the pages.

Tori decided to explore – which mostly consisted of walking up and down the same hallway. The nurse's table was the center the hallways flowed through. Next to it was the sliding glass door that led to the cafeteria.

She had finally gotten her sweaters back and she'd bundled them closely over her chest. That way, when people stared, at least there would be less to see.

Tori stopped at the edge of the eating disorder unit, staring down at the hallway with curiosity. There had been a 50% chance of her ending up on that side – what with her history of purging, anorexia, etc. – and she wondered what was different between the two halves. Cutters versus purgers is what it came down to. Tori liked her side though. The depressives, cutters, screamers – also a part of her history.

Bedrooms line each side of the hallway. Their doors have handles that push instead of turn. No place for a lock. At the end of Tori's hallway is the group room. Since it's the high functioning ward, not everything is nailed down. Tables, chairs, and couches are able to move along the floor.

They even have books and coloring utensils. The burns you can make from an eraser are pink and take a lot of rubbing.

Autumn was familiarizing herself with the room when the male nurse walked in without knocking.

There were three beds to each room, all with thin sheets and even thinner pillows. There were two nightstands and drawers under the bed. The showers were dials, timed. The overall bathroom was a stall without a main door. Shits would be awkward with the other two roommates.

The biggest feature of the room was the giant window. It took up most of the fourth wall, opening up to the courtyard that separated the adult ward from the children's ward. The children's ward was blocked off but the walkway between the cafeteria to the adult ward was open. Nurses walked by just at

that moment.

Autumn understood how it felt to be a fish.

She contemplated what expression to give the people walking by when one of the nurses opened the door, took one look at her, jotted something down on his clipboard, then left.

Well... hello to you, too.

6am.

He had arrived at 6am.

Therefore, Daniel slept through most of the first few sessions of whatever the nurses were telling him to do. They came and knocked on the door, telling him group was starting, but he slept through it.

The pillow was too flat to elevate his head at all. Even if he could get more than two. The blanket was too thin to keep off any of the chill that the running AC caused. The mattress felt like a \$25 dorm plastic container, audible crinkling every time he adjusted so much as an inch. The blinds could not keep out the sunlight from the giant ass window. The nurses kept turning on the lights every time they came in.

Still – it was his first day and he had come in at 6am. He managed to sleep. Barely.

He was knocked out until someone finally called him for lunch.

Tori lined up with the rest like a bunch of elementary school kids and was given a small paper sheet. Her dietary restrictions were written on it – vegetarian, being monitored², etc. She sees one girl with brown hair the nurses called Carol who has a novel written on hers.

Tori waits besides two people she doesn't know, one a large man who she smoothly inches herself away from. The other is a plumper woman who just friendly enough to introduce herself as Amber and smile a lot. Tori wants to say something to her, hi maybe.

² You have been designated to be watched. Before you start eating you show a nurse your tray. When you are finished you show them what is left before throwing the paper bowls and spork away. They give you a percentage. 80. 60. 30. You tell them when you're going back for seconds and explain how it's not that you didn't eat it's just that the food was disgusting. 20 percent. If you're lucky that will be it. If you're not then you'll be watched for an hour afterwards to be sure you don't purge.

She holds her small piece of paper and waits for the nurse to open the sliding doors.

Carol is reminded of high school in the psych ward cafeteria. If she had gone to high school in slippers that is.

Also, if it had been covered by insurance.

The food was worse than her graduate school's though, which was saying something. Barely any choices, lots of carbs, and so many things that she wasn't supposed to eat according to the multiple doctors she'd been to about her stomach problems.

"What are you having?" the cafeteria lady said. When Carol handed over her card, the woman's eyes widened.

"Yeah this is gonna take a second..." Carol began.

Tori pushes around the green pasta on the plate. It doesn't look too bad for cafeteria food. A form of pesto with garlic bread and a bunch of vegetables on the side. One sniff and she already knows it will taste pretty good. So she tells herself to eat it.

"Can I have some of that?"

She passes over most of her pasta without even looking to see who asked.

A while later she goes up to one of the nurses, presents her half empty plate.

"You one of the ones on intake?"² a male nurse whose nametag read Nick said.

Tori nodded.

"Only ate about half of it today?" he asked. "I just wasn't hungry." Tori said.

As she walked away from him her stomach growled.

Autumn headed to bed after lunch. They had a few free hours before group, but she didn't really have anything to do. She still had the goals paper to fill out, but she didn't know what she was supposed to say to that.

She pulled the curtain over the giant window which ended up blocking out a decent amount of light. Instead of sleeping, though, Autumn spent the next good ten minutes staring at the ceiling. The beds were uncomfortable and as much as she wanted to say she was fine, the minute there was nothing to do, her thoughts began to race.

What was going to happen when she went back to work? She had been up for a promotion before, but would that go away if they found out about her breakdown? Would they find out?

She'd have to wear long sleeves for a while. When was she going to be able to see her husband again? What about that boy who came to the hospital at the same time as her? What about all the other people here? There were so many young faces she had seen, and it wasn't even the children's ward.

Would they be okay? Could she help them somehow? She could do something, right? She had to be able to do something for at least one...

The noise flooding in from the hallway jolted her from the soft sleep she had barely managed to stumble into. A man looked at her, jotted something down on a clipboard, then shut the door as he left.

Daniel ended up leaving group halfway through. Normally he wouldn't mind participating in crafts but today he really wasn't in the mood. He wandered back to the empty room. His roommate wasn't there, he wasn't even sure who his roommate was yet. He just made himself at home on the bed.

He wasn't tired anymore, but he didn't really have anything else to do other than go back to group. His parents said they'd bring him some clothes and books but that would take a little while. What was he supposed to do until then?

He absentmindedly began flipping through the paper the wards had given him. Nothing distracting, mostly just a lot of "these are your rights" papers that wouldn't really help him get out of there – he knew, he'd checked.

Then there were the copies of all the forms he had signed. There must have been at least a dozen pink and yellow sheets ripped off from their original copies. His mom said to keep everything, otherwise he would've just tossed it. Last thing he needed staring back up at him was a repetition of the events leading up to being there 15 bajillion times. Even though it was his first visit to a hospital, he'd probably had to tell a dozen different people the 'what brings me here' story in five different ways a piece.

Only other thing worthwhile was the journal. Everyone was given one, along with a dinky pencil. No erasers. No pens. He'd seen half a dozen people using them in the middle of group when they were supposed to be paying attention.

... what even did they put in there?

Carol was halfway through outlining her homework when group finally ended. Groups were effective, sure, but the crafts weren't really top priority when she had three books to read, twenty pages to write, and three stories to edit. Sharing could wait.

She knew the therapists would try to convince her to take a break, but what good would that do? Her stays were always 5- 8 days, that meant missing four different classes. Coming back, she'd be two weeks behind if she didn't do her homework in here. No better time than the present.

Even in a psych ward.

You are reading a book outside the nurse's lounge to get away from your roommates after dinner. They passed out quickly but you couldn't get your mind to calm down. So you came out to sit on one of the couches where there was still light. Not that you were really reading, merely rereading the same paragraph over and over.

"Sarah you switched to night shifts?" one of the nurses asks another.

"Yeah, just for a couple of weeks, though."

"Good luck, I can't imagine being stuck in here overnight."

Staff: "What was your name?"

Staff: "What was that again?"

Staff: "Just let me see your wristband."

Part 3: The Rules

"The worst part was I felt like we could not be trusted with anything," Autumn explained. "Though I understand it is a precaution, it still stings. If you are a smoker, the staff member has to light your cigarette. No laces, no strings of any sort. No contact with the outside world unless the staff dials the phone. No calls unless it's during certain times. Every aspect of your life is controlled. With myself, because I have high blood pressure, I was on a required low sodium diet, so I was not even allowed to choose my own food."

Daniel was sitting by the nurses station in Adult Unit 1 when a woman with long brown hair came up to him.

“Hey, I’m Carol,” she said. “You new?”

“Yeah, I just got here,” he said.

“Thought so – you need clothes?” she asked. “What?” he asked.

“I mean you’ve probably just come in from the ER, right? You need something to wear? I’ve got plenty of extra t-shirts,” Carol said.

“What?” he asked for a different reason this time.

“I’ll be right back,” and two minutes later she returned with a *London Pub Crawl* t-shirt that he hadn’t had the chance to tell her he didn’t need. Still – he smiled.

“You’re not allowed to share clothes,” nurse Brandon said.

Autumn once again saw a man surveying them and jotting things down again on a clipboard.

“What is he doing?” she asked quietly, only half conscious it was out loud.

“Head count,” Tori explained without looking up from the drawing she was creating in her notebook “They have to check where you are every 15 minutes.”

“What?” Autumn asked.

“Every 15 minutes, all day, all night, whether you’re in the shower or in the bathroom.” Tori said, adding another layer of circles to her dream catcher “If they say “head count” then you have to show them your face.”

“Morning group is for if you guys have any questions, or need anything clarified. This is where you get those answers,” the day’s head nurse, Lauraine, explained. “But of course you can feel free to ask other patients. I’m sure they’d all be happy to help.”

The room was half empty, most of the patients having gone to bed straight after breakfast. The other half weren’t really paying attention as far as Tori could tell. Either coloring or writing in the mandated journals. Tori turned towards her own journal and began to sketch.

All her designs – mostly nonsensical shapes - were symmetrical.

“So – who can explain what a 51/50 is?”

“That if you are deemed a hazard to yourself, to others, or psychologically disabled to the point you can’t care for yourself, the hospital can hold you for three days.” Carol stated, monotone.

“That’s right - and who can tell me what a 52/50 is?”

“After your 51/50 is up if the doctor still feels the need to keep you they can do so for another two weeks.”

“Correct,” said Lauraine, “whether you came in willingly or not.”

Staff member Brandon scanned Daniel's wrist before wrapping the pressure cuff around his upper arm.

"Any physical pain today?" he asked.

"No," Daniel said. He placed a monitor over his finger.

"How'd you sleep?" Brandon asked.

"All right," Daniel said.

"When was your last bowel movement?" Brandon asked

"Uh... what?" Daniel said.

"Bowel movement means poop," Brandon explained.

"I know what it means! Just really – do you have to know?"

"Yup."

"Uh... last night I guess."

Brandon stuck a thermometer in Daniel's mouth and waited for the beep.

"Can you rate your depression on a scale from one to ten? Your hopelessness? Your helplessness?" Brandon asked.

With nothing much else to do, Autumn decided to take a shower³. She had showered yesterday without soap just to alleviate the boredom, now she needed to actually clean herself.

“Shower? Sure yeah we’ve got stuff for you.” nurse Katelyn rolled her chair out of sight for a moment, returning on foot. She carried with her two thin towels, a washcloth, and a mini paper cup.

“What’s this?” Autumn took the cup, there was a blue liquid inside that just covered the bottom of the cup.

“That’s your shampoo ration.”

“That’s it?” Autumn touched her ponytail. It went down to her waist. “Can I have more?”

“Sorry no, you’re only allowed to have a bit at a time.” “Shit, really?”

³ Skin scrubbed with sub-par soap to the point where you feel just a little less sticky. Hair sopping wet and tangled, frizzing out more than normal because there’s no conditioner. The bottoms of your feet will never be fully scrubbed just simply covered with a little less dirt. Once finished, you put on the same clothes you’ve been wearing while you sleep and eat for three days in a row. It’s all you’ve got.

“Yup. If you have a hairbrush or anything like that you can ask another nurse to get you into the lockup.”

“The what?”

“Can I get into the lockup?” Carol asked. She had just finished one of her school books. In it, a man had run over a cat. She wanted to read something to get that out of her head as soon as possible.

“Sure, just give me a second.” said nurse Nick.

Carol spent the first ten minutes waiting outside the lock-up. Then she realized Nick wasn’t doing anything productive – simply chatting with Doug, one of the other patients. She spent the next ten minutes following Nick around at a respectable seven foot distance. When he grew sick of that he finally let her in.

The room was a closet consisting of shelves full of pink vomit buckets. Her vomit bucket was on the top shelf. It had all the things she was allowed to keep out of her suitcase but not allowed to have in her room. Hairbrush, extra hair ties, books, papers. She went to pull out one of the paper packets.

“That have staples in it?” Nick asked. “Yeah,” Carol said.

“You’ll have to take those out in front of me.” Nick said.

“Smoke break!” staff member Nick’s voice barreled down the hallway but there was little need to even raise it. Everyone who would be going outside was gathered at the door, cigarettes in hand. Five of them had bummed off of Autumn.

Outside they have a bird cage made for people. The sides come up and round off the top, coming to a large point overhead.

There’s enough room for a basketball hoop to live happily underneath, along with several picnic tables, and a long dividing line to separate smokers from non-smokers. As though the smoke would stop right at the yellow tape. It’s all cement.

Once outside, everyone gathered in a circle around the head nurse, who held the only lighter. They all stood on the right side of the yellow line signifying the smoke free zone, not that any non-smokers were outside.

“Where’s Carol at?” Daniel asked.

“She’s got a breathing disorder,” Autumn told him.

“So she can’t come outside?” Daniel asked. “But these are the only outdoor breaks we get.”

“Head count,” one of the nurses knocked on the door. “Let me see your face.”

Tori opened the door with the toothbrush still in her mouth. She didn’t have one of her sweaters and uncomfortably covered her chest with her arms.

The nurse jotted something down on his clipboard, closing the door to the room behind him without saying anything else.

“It’s not that I don’t want to take my meds. I want to take my meds, trust me, they help.” Carol attempted to explain for the fourth time. “Like I said - I’m hypoglycemic. I have to eat every two to three hours or else I could puke or pass out. Because my body goes through food faster, my stomach is now empty and if I take medication on an empty stomach then I will puke.”

“You can’t have hypoglycemia,” Luis said. “Excuse me?” Carol asked.

“You can be hypoglycemic in the moment but it’s not a disease.” Luis said.

Carol just stared. The disease that she’d had her entire life, the one numerous doctors had told her she had, was once again being slammed down and labeled “faking it.”

“Fine. I’ll just tell the doctor you weren’t willing to take your medications and you’ll be bumped down to level 1,” Luis said.

“I want to take my medications, but I want to take them when I won’t puke.”

“You either take them now or not at all, which one is it going to be?” Luis asked.

You want to call someone. You're only allowed fifteen minutes and you can't dial the phone number on your own. Instead, you give the nurse your number and they direct you to one of the two phones on the unit.

It's an old-fashioned phone, with rounded knobs for the listening and talking sides. The chord is thick and metal, not twisted and loose like the one you grew up with. You realize how close the handle is to the base of the phone when you pick it up.

They must have shortened it.

Would it be long enough to reach fully around your neck?
Could you manage to try without the nurse's seeing?

"Hello?"

“Hello Tori, I’m Dr. Neil, I’m your psychiatrist.” He was a tall man with long hair and glasses. When he walked he stood straight but the moment they got to his desk he bent over slightly, focused on the papers in front of him.

That explained it. Doctors visits were the only times anyone was allowed out of group.

“Great, I’ve been wanting to talk to you,” Tori said.

“I’ve heard that you were asking about a residency program?” Dr. Neil said.

“Yes, I’m hoping to get into one after here.”

“That might be difficult. But we’ll see what we can do.” Dr. Neil said. “Now, lets talk about your meds.”

Tori wanted to explain. She’d been in residency before, it was one of the few things that really helped. You stayed for nearly a month in intensive programming. One week would not be enough for her. She had to make sure he knew that.

Tori opened her mouth, nothing came out.

Daniel learned about Level 1 versus Level 2 when he tried to go to the cafeteria for lunch on his second day.

“You’ve been bumped down to level 1.” Nick told him.

“What’s that?” Daniel asked but Nick had already walked away. “There’s level 1 and 2. Level 2 means you’ve gone to all the groups, taken all your meds, complied with the rules. You get perks like going to the cafeteria for lunch and it means you’re on your way out,” Autumn explained. “Level 1 means you haven’t done everything you’re supposed to, you’re not complying. No cafeteria and – more importantly – not on your way out.”

“So I skip one group and I can no longer leave?” Daniel asked.

“Pretty much, yeah,” Autumn said.

Carol enjoys the little outside time she had been given by throwing around a ball. It bounces off the backboard of the hoop, jumping to slam along the fence.

A part of her wonders if the nurses would be fast enough to catch her if she tried to climb it. Or even better – just leave out the door. Every time a nurse came in that entrance, all the patients had to stand on the other side of their birdcage.

Would they be able to stop her if she started running?

She shook her head. No good could come from escaping. She'd be tracked down by cops, wouldn't even make it home, then she'd have to stay there longer. Besides – she'd left her homework in her room.

You were given a sheet of paper when you first arrived. Something you were supposed to fill out the first day and give to your nurse. They were bothering you about it now.

The questions were common enough at first – a bit about your history, a bit about your ID, etc.

The second part is what has you stuck.

What do you want to get out of your time at BHC Alhambra?

You think about it all. The days you left work because you couldn't be awake without crying. The times you couldn't get out of bed most of the day because... who the fuck even knows?

When was the last time you really smiled?

The thin lines across your wrist from the scissors. The razor pock marks you have on your stomach. The knife you held to your throat when your roommates were out at work. The pills you swallowed and vomited up in the hospital.

You write down: *To be okay.*⁴

⁴ You are not okay. If you were okay you would be back home. If you were okay you would feel full and have slept well. You would have checked your phone and not thought about telling them how you want to die. You wouldn't have those marks on your arm, your thighs, your face. Still when the doctors ask, you think about getting back to real food, to your family and friends, and you tell them. "Yeah, I'm okay."

Staff: "Group time."

Jingles keys like how one would for dogs.

Part 4: Them

"The worst part was the fact that nobody seemed to understand how I could get out," Daniel explained. "No one seemed to realize I had a life outside of this place and I have to eventually get back to it. Nobody seemed to care about that, about getting me out, that was the weirdest thing. That was the big thing of my personal experience. I heard from Autumn and Tori that the night watch was talking about us just totally like we weren't human. 'What if your mother was put in here?' 'I would totally fight that like so hard - she's not like one of these people.'"

The attendant returned too quickly for it to be another head count. Tori was absolutely certain. It was mid group and one of the few clocks in the facility was staring her directly in the face. Still, he looked at each face in turn, reviewed his clipboard, then slammed the door as he left. Two minutes later and he returned for the third time. Later, Jamie would clear it up.

“They lost me,” Jaime had shared on his first day in group. He had intensive anxiety, was homeless, his father was abusive, and he called his best friend’s baby his daughter.

“I was sleeping in my bed but apparently they couldn’t find me for thirty minutes,” He laughed heavily. “They were really freaking out.”

“Head count, let me see your face.”

Tori held her head just to the side of the shower curtain, keeping the plastic pressed tightly over her body.

Yet another reason why she wanted to go to residential.

Thomas was the one who taught the group what he called a self-acupuncture technique. It involved tapping your body, becoming in tune with yourself, and using that as a way to calm down. He'd stood up in the middle of group and smiled at everyone while showing them where to tap. Heart, hand, collarbone, hip. Carol had just met Thomas and now he was leaving.

"You doing all right?" Carol asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay." Thomas' smile dropped. "I'm scared."

"You'll be fine." Carol wanted to mean it. "You want a hug? I'm a hugger."

"Not allowed to touch," he said.

"What about a hand hug?" Carol pictured their thumbs intertwining.

"Sure," Thomas said. He grabbed her hand as though to greet her but instead he gripped tightly, not letting go.

Autumn was seated in the group next to a person with short, dyed hair and colorful anime tattoos. They were significantly younger than her, likely in their early twenties. They had crayons and unicorn coloring books out. Seeing Autumn looking in their direction, they held one out.

“Would you like to color?” they asked.

“Yes, sweetie, I really would.” Autumn said.

Carol returned from breakfast with coffee in a Styrofoam cup to find Reyna, her roommate, still in bed. It was a common routine: Reyna woke up to be sure that Carol was awake and got to breakfast for her hypoglycemia, then she went back to bed.

Reyna's symptoms were physical. When the doctors could not pinpoint a cause, they blamed her depression and placed her inpatient. When Carol found out Reyna enjoyed coffee, she started to bring her cups after each meal. Today, Reyna was crying.

"It hurts," she said. "It hurts so bad."

Carol placed the coffee on the side table, sat next to where Reyna was curled in a ball and wrapped her arms around her. Group could wait. Sharing could wait.

"I know,"⁵ Carol said. "I'm sorry."

⁵ If you hear "it will be okay" one more time you are going to scream. You're not okay. You haven't been okay for a long time. It's been years and you have not been okay. You've been to the hospital again and again and it is still not okay. You will *never* be okay.

“Hey guys, where is Jamie?” Daniel asked. “He left,” Autumn said.

“But he just got here!” Daniel said.

“That was three days ago,” Autumn said.

“What’s your name?” Daniel asked.

She didn’t say anything. He was only half expecting a response, she hadn’t spoken much since she’d been there. She was quiet but sweet: sharing her coloring books, saving seats for people in the lunch room. The thing that stood out most about her though, was the hair.

It was long, reaching past her elbows, completely straight. But most prominently it was silver. A beautiful color that shone against her dark face, highlighting it even more.

“That’s Katerina,” Autumn said.

Katerina raised her hand to him in a small wave.

Staff member Brandon scanned Autumn's wrist before wrapping the pressure cuff around her upper arm.

"Any physical pain today?" he asked.

"My wrists are really starting to itch." Autumn covered the fresh marks with her hands, wondering how he would react to that.

"We'll get you some bandages," Brandon said. "How'd you sleep?"

"All right, all things considered," Autumn said.

"When was your last bowel movement?" Brandon asked.

"Do I really got to tell you that?" Autumn asked.

He stuck a thermometer in Autumn's mouth and waited for the beep.

"Can you rate your depression on a scale from one to ten? Your hopelessness? Your helplessness?" Brandon asked.

Autumn answered all his questions. She then waited for the bandages. Reminding him. Twice.

“So today we’re going to be using dreamcatchers!” The therapist excitedly held up 2-D drawings of identical dream catchers with three feathers and nothing inside them. She held the drawings upside down. “Someone please pass these around.”

The therapist, Dana, drew a dreamcatcher up on the white board with black eraser marker. She drew it upside down.

“You know that’s upside down?” Tori asked. Dana simply kept drawing. Tori wasn’t sure if Dana had heard her and was simply ignoring her or if she hadn’t heard her at all. Likely she had heard her. Dana was less than three feet away. Of course she’d heard her. She just wasn’t listening because Tori’s opinion wasn’t important.

“Isn’t that upside down?” Carol leaned over and asked Tori. Tori nodded.

“You know that’s upside down?” Carol asked Dana, louder.

“No, it’s not,” Dana said.

“No, I’m pretty sure it’s upside down,” said Tori.

“It is not upside down,” Dana said. “Now what we’re going to do is write the positives on the outside and the negatives on the inside. For example if you...”

“Yeah I used to be on Xanax – till they realized I would snort it all the time.” Doug laughed. Doug was one of the younger patients, closer to twenty than to thirty, and one of the ones who insisted he had no anger issues while having frequent outbursts.

Daniel wasn’t sure what to say to that. Snorting Xanax did absolutely nothing.

“Hey Nick!” Doug walked away, Daniel gratefully noticed, cutting in front of a line of patients to talk to the nurse Nick. Despite the protests of the patients, Nick let him.

“I heard he’s getting kicked out,” Autumn said. “Who you hear that from?”

“Some of the nurses were talking.” Autumn said “He’s been disrupting too many groups. He’s going to adult unit 2.”

When Doug was removed, Daniel watched two men carry him by the arms, kicking and screaming as he went.

This therapist's name was Madeline and she was handing out pieces of paper with bent cans on them. As though someone had opened up a soup can by banging it's side on the counter instead of using an opener.

"What you're going to do is write the bad things on the inside of the can and the good things on the outside of the can." Madeline said.

"We just did this," Carol said.

"What?" Madeline asked.

"We literally just did this exercise, but with dream catchers." Tori said.

"No this is different." Madeline said.

"No, it's literally the exact same thing," Autumn agreed.

"Well then, I guess you're going to do it twice."

“Head count, let me see your face.”

Daniel – mid shit – wasn’t entirely sure what to do.

Autumn was not having a good day, and it was only breakfast. She was woken up by Raymond in the hallway, screaming that he was being kidnapped.

When Raymond had first arrived, he had been shaking so much he could not stand. He still would suddenly start quivering, so much so that he often fell over. He was just starting to talk again.

Raymond was having a bad day.

Autumn just didn't want to have anything to do with anything, but she dragged her ass out of bed to head to breakfast. Yippie for her.

Tori was a vet. Meaning when coming to the hospital she'd had the time to pack a bag. Shoes without laces, plenty of underwear, pants without ties, and sweaters.

Lots of sweaters.

Mostly blacks, but also deep purples and blues. Long and thin. Coming down to her knees. When she pulled the sides together and crossed her arms it covered her whole body.

Only way to feel as though no one was staring at her.

Read the bible was number 51 on the list of “99 coping skills.”
Pray was 49.

Carol had never really been religious.

She was technically raised Catholic, went to church every Sunday with her mother and older sister. She had gone through the motions for her mother but she had never truly believed. Still, she had lined up with twelve other little girls, including her cousin, in mini white dresses to drink wine that she hated at her first communion. Even took the classes to get confirmed.

Then she was hospitalized for the first time. Met a boy who had tried to strangle himself when he was five years old. It was his fourth time in the hospital. He was eight. She stopped even pretending to believe after that.

So when Tanya told her God would bless her, and pointed out number 49 and 51 on the list, Carol said nothing.

You are waiting for a visitor. They are late.

You feel as though you are back in preschool – wondering if your mother is really going to come pick you up at the end of the day. Your stomach tightens, your hands feel clammy, your legs start shaking. You see other people talking with their visitors and you feel as though you could vomit.

They're not coming.

Of course they wouldn't come. Who would come to see someone who was suicidal?

You're not an important part of their life. They only deal with you because they're related. She only deals with you because she's your sister. She wouldn't be your friend. You don't have any friends.

You're stupid. You're worthless. You're really pathetic. You're just –

“Hey there, I brought you dinner.” She comes through the glass doors, holding Korean takeout.

Tori was woken up at 3am by her roommate. The woman had turned on the light and was moving papers around on her bed.

“Excuse me,” Tori said. “Could you please turn out the light?”

“Honey I have things to do.” The woman kept flipping the same paper over and over from one pile to the other

“It’s the middle of the night,” Tori said. “Can’t it wait?”

“No it can’t, I have things I need to get done,” the woman said. Tori wanted to point out that she was in a psych ward. That she didn’t have any real clothes. That whatever it was she “needed to get done” could wait until tomorrow.

Tori ended up telling one of the nurses. They told her roommate to go back to sleep. Five minutes later, she was awake and flipping over papers again. As head count came around, the man said nothing, merely checked his clipboard and walked away.

Tori closed her eyes and covered her face with the blanket to try to block out the blinding hospital lights. Hoping she would get into residential soon.

Carol woke to Reyna screaming.

“Get out!”

Carol saw one of the male nurses quickly slamming the door to the room. She turned around to see Reyna covering up her naked body with a towel.

“Didn’t even knock,” Reyna said. “I mean seriously – what is that?”

Autumn saw the flashlight for head count passing over her roommate's face and slammed her eyes shut. The black of her closed lids shone white for a moment and then she heard the door being pulled closed. She opened her eyes, and continued staring at the ceiling, trying not to cry.

Reyna and Carol only had this third roommate for one night. She came in late and the attendant woke them both up to show her to her bed. When the attendant left, the new roommate began to cry. Loudly. The sun was beginning to peek through the curtain by the time Carol finally surrendered and asked:

“Are you all right?”

Then the woman sat up, hair disheveled, body collapsing inward.

“I don’t want to be here. I miss my wife. I don’t belong here. I don’t belong here.”

She repeated this until breakfast was called.

Night time was the worst. Autumn could hear a few of the other patients wandering up and down the hallways. They were likely having a rougher time. Martha was one of them, talking to the nurses about the rich man she was married to who they all knew wasn't real. It was hard to listen to sometimes. Autumn just wanted to give her a hug and tell the nurses to fuck off when they made Martha go to bed. So what if the old woman liked to wander? She wasn't hurting anyone.

Staff member Brandon scanned Carol's wrist before wrapping the pressure cuff around her upper arm. "Any physical pain today?" he asked. "No," Carol said.

"When was your last bowel movement?" Brandon asked. "Two pm yesterday," Carol said.

He stuck a thermometer in Carol's mouth and waited for the beep.

"Can you rate your depression on a scale from one to ten? Your hopelessness? Your helplessness?" Brandon asked.

"I'd say about a 7 on my depression. 8 on the hopelessness. 6 on helplessness," Carol said.

"Have you talked about it in group?" Brandon asked.

"Yes," Carol lied.

From what the other patients knew of Daniel's family, it was his mother, his father, and his brother. His mother had similar issues to Daniel, was taking it hard that her son was going through something so similar to her own experiences. His brother was the opposite of Daniel. Even though he was younger, Daniel's brother was much sportier and already a foot taller than Daniel with twice as many muscles.

The patients likely would've heard more, but when he was describing his younger brother a quiet girl tapped out⁶ of the conversation. Daniel stopped talking immediately.

⁶ Place your hand over something. A desk, a chair, your leg, place it there and hit. Twice. *Tap out.* Please stop, I feel I'm being triggered. *Tap out.* Please stop, I'm scared. *Tap out.* Please stop, I don't want to go back there.

“You ready honey?” Autumn asked. Jasmine said nothing, letting the tears continue to drip down her face.

Jasmine was the youngest of the adults. If not for the fact that it was an adult ward, Carol would have placed her at sixteen. She had told the other patients on the first day that her mother had killed herself and that she was also tottering on that edge. She carried her favorite stuffed animal with her – a large brown teddy bear – along with a colorful blanket.

“You know it will make you feel better. Come on. You ready?” Autumn asked. This time Jasmine nodded. Even though she was down the hallway, Carol put her book down to listen.

*Cause you are beautiful. In every single way
Words can't bring you down.
So don't you bring me down today.*

Autumn's voice was lovely. A deep alto and a belter.

Comparatively, Jasmine's voice was weaker, less smooth. Still, when she was singing – she was smiling.

“Autumn thinks she’s such a good singer but she’s not,” said one of the nurses. Carol closed her book and walked away.

“The worst part for me was the absolute lack of concern from the staff there,” Tori explained. “They could not get my meds right at all, didn’t seem very concerned or interested in what we were doing ever. They would show up smelling like weed or would form inappropriate relationships with other patients like Nick did with Doug. And generally just being awful. I remember when they wouldn’t run community meeting and tried to ask Autumn to do it, because they were too fucking lazy to do it themselves even though it’s very basic and it’s their job. There was also that awful, mean nurse lady who bullied us into getting flu shots. I think that telling us if we didn’t get a flu shot we’d be killing people was beyond inappropriate. And trying to force people who are already not in a good mental state to do something that they don’t want to do...”

“I was gang raped.” Katerina spoke up in group. “It was one day not too long after – “

“Katerina, the doctor needs to speak with you.” One of the nurses opened the door to the group room.

“What am I supposed to do?” Tori asked.

“You fill out the *Scattegories* list and then Daniel makes up a story using all of the answers,” Autumn explained.

Tori looked at the lists. Letters: Q, P, A.

Some of the questions: What can you make? What can kill you?
List an animal.

Some of the answers: Quilt, quicksand, penis pump, alligator.

So Daniel began, “Peter Pan 2, Return of the Queers.”

Autumn wore blue jeans and a blue short sleeve shirt. Her shoes had the laces taken out of them and replaced with cut rubber bands. Her hair was waist length, but she often wore it up in braids to keep it out of her way. In her two weeks there, she did not change her outfit once.

“My husband is too far away. Bringing clothes for me would just be too big of a hassle for him,” Autumn said.

Reyna and Carol were talking to the head nurse.

“What if I had been a victim of trauma?” Reyna asked. “He just barged in without knocking.”

“Well, you really shouldn’t have been naked in your room in the first place,” nurse Lauraine said.

“What?” Carol asked.

“You know that they check on you every fifteen minutes. This is why we have a bathroom, so you can have some privacy,” Lauraine said.

“They are male nurses and most of the patients here are female victims of trauma – they should knock,” Carol said.

“I’ll mention it to them, but you should be more careful in the future,” Lauraine said.

Carol was not surprised when over the next few hours, with every head count, the male nurses did not knock once.

Tori was falling asleep in the middle of group again.

“Hey Carol, you think we should wake her up? What’s wrong with her?” Autumn asked.

“New meds,”⁷ Carol said.

“Ah,” Autumn said. They returned to their coloring assignment.

“Tori,” Elaine the therapist snapped, “either you stay awake or you’ll be counted as absent and bumped down to level 1.”

⁷ Your head is spinning. You’re exhausted. Your leg keeps vibrating and your hand twitches occasionally. You’re confused as to whether you want to vomit or pee. What time is it? How did you get here? What’s going on?

You have some time outside for once. You get to stand out in the sunlight without smoke and pretend like you're back home.

You see all the cars and think about where yours is. Is it still back at the hospital where you had driven yourself to ER? Has it been towed yet? Maybe you can get your sister to give you a lift to wherever it has been taken. How much would something like that cost? You hadn't exactly been working this last week but maybe you could -

You bump into the fence as you walk. It hurts a little as something scratches you.

You school your features. Try not to show the nurses how excited you are. You feel along the fence slowly, your fingertips tracing over everything carefully.

Where was it? What cut you? If you can find it, you can do it again. You could cut yourself again. Maybe you could even bleed. It's not like you had your scissors in here. But maybe if you found it you could hurt again. That ache in your gut would go away for just one goddamn second. If only you could just –

“Break time is over, back inside for group.”

Daniel was holding a paper cup like the ones normally used for ketchup in fast food restaurants. Inside were three small pills.

“These are not my meds,” he told the nurse.

“What?” she asked.

“This isn’t the right medication.”

“I’m sure it is, just take it,” she said.

“Can’t you check please?” Daniel asked. He wanted to say something else – that this was the second time, that of course he knew what meds he was taking, how it took two seconds to check but could mess him up completely if she were wrong.

But instead he kept his mouth shut. Thought about going home. About his mother.

“Oh, it seems you were right,” the nurse finally said after the fourth time he asked her to check.

Carol was surprised to see Martha with waist-long, silver hair. It was askew, obviously out of place on her head. She smiled brightly and played with the strands.

Carol went in search of Katerina. She remembered her crying just yesterday, leaning into Autumn's shoulder as she told everyone her story.

The young woman was standing tall at the nurse's desk. Black stubble making a small rounding tuft on her head.

"I'm leaving today," Katerina said. "After I shared in group, they said I'd progressed enough to go home."

Carol opened her mouth to congratulate her, to tell her how proud of her she was, to say something encouraging about the future.

Her throat clogged and she coughed.

Carol's family was mostly out of state. There was an older brother who had visited her once. Both brown hair and brown eyes but he had a rounded face with a thin nose while she had an oval face with a rounded nose. They laughed the same way though, used chopsticks the same way. By the end of his visit, anyone who saw them – slumped in the same exact position from exhaustion – would know they were siblings. At the end of the night, Carol's brother drove home to his girlfriend, while Carol curled up in an empty hospital bed.

“Head count, let me see your face.”

Tori uncovered her head from the sheets. Trying to convince herself that she really had been napping.

Nighttime was the worst. Lights went out around ten, which meant Carol had to stop doing her homework. Worse than that though, there was nothing to do except think. About how hungry she was. About how the place was still having difficulty keeping up with her hypoglycemia. About going back home and what that could possibly look like. She didn't really want to go back – classes, errands, doctors, breathing disorders, stomach disorders – it wouldn't suddenly go away because she had been hospitalized for a few days.

Still.

She didn't want to stay in a place where she couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, couldn't even hug anyone. She just had to share at group. That would make everything better. She'd already been there for four days, she'd had plenty of opportunities. Why hadn't she shared? It wasn't that hard. Really. Just share. Think about what you're going to say.

What really set me off this time was the stomach disorder. It just got so hard to keep up with, and the stress and the new school and the new friends who weren't my friends and –

Head count - close eyes, expand breath, pretend that you're not crying.

Tori did not speak much about her family. She had a younger brother who called her often and they would speak on the phone for as long as they were allowed. Still, when family came up in group, what the other patients heard is how her family did not believe her.

“What you got there?” Tanya rolled up in her wheelchair to Carol to see what she was snacking on.

It had taken three of the five days she would be there, but Carol had finally convinced the staff to give her snack; but it was still a hospital.

“That roast beef?” Tanya asked. She was a sweet older woman who cried her first day in session. A whistle-blower and her life had been threatened because she did her job at another company. After the hospital, she would end up in a series of court rooms for doing exactly what she was supposed to – blowing the whistle. While she was in the hospital, she pointed out everyone’s special qualities and prayed for them each night.

“I think so?” Carol was not sure.

“Let me help you out, honey.” Tanya took the Styrofoam box that the roast beef had come in, closed it, then tossed it in the trash.⁸

⁸ Psych units are not allowed to have plastic bags. Paper bags held tissues, cracker containers, and such. You wonder who had dumped all of that on their head and tried to wrap the ends of plastic around their throats for things to be this way. You wonder if it would work.

“There we go, right where it belongs.” Tanya and Carol both laughed.

“Here’s your medications Autumn, remember I have to watch you take them,” said Luis, handing over a small paper cup containing five pills.

“That’s wrong,” Autumn said. “What?” the staff member asked.

“I already took the vitamin Ds today, the pink one I don’t take until dinner,” Autumn explained.

“Are you sure?” Luis asked. He double checked the chart. “Ah, it appears that you are right.”

Staff member Brandon scanned Tori's wrist before wrapping the pressure cuff around her upper arm.

"Any physical pain today?" he asked.

"No," Tori said. He placed a monitor over her finger.

"How'd you sleep?" Brandon asked. "Not the greatest," Tori said.

"When was your last bowel movement?" Brandon asked. "This morning," Tori said.

He stuck a thermometer in Tori's mouth and waited for the beep.

"Can you rate your —"

"Ten" Tori said. "Depression, hopelessness, helplessness. All ten."

When Autumn checked the clock above the nurse's station it said 3am. Just walking down the small hallway, when she checked the clock in the group room, it said 4am.

"Either the staff is fucking with me, which I wouldn't put past them," Autumn thought to herself, "or time is moving even more differently than I imagined in here."

Reminder to Self:

-You need to breathe

-You need to eat

-You need to sleep

-You need to care.

You can't not care.

You can't not do your work.

You will regret it.

You will not be the broken one. The hospital is no good.

Telling them is no good.

What are you supposed to do? Eat. Breathe. Sleep. Try. Care. Try to care.

Try to give one damn fuck about yourself. Go eat.

Just try.

“You know,” the therapist interrupted Tori. “I understand what you’re going through. There was a time once, where I was almost raped, but I had my sorority sisters and they had my back. You see – “

Tori wasn’t sure what to do. So she sat, closed her mouth, and listened to the therapist begin to compare years of sexual and physical abuse to one account of being saved.

“Were you done talking, honey?” Autumn interrupted the therapist.

“It’s shit that your family didn’t believe you,” Carol began. “Really, just shit, but the point is that you are taking care of yourself without them. You took yourself out of a situation where you could’ve been in trouble and that is so incredibly strong of you.”

Tori’s arms relaxed, she let go of her chest.

“Have you talked to the police about it, hun?” Autumn asked.

“No,” Tori said. “I was afraid they wouldn’t believe me.”

“You said he was contacting you again, right? Keep all of it. Everything can be turned into evidence, especially if you point out that he followed you across the state,” Autumn said.

“You should talk to your case manager about it,” Daniel said. “Maybe they can get you in touch with the right authorities.”

“That’s what they’re there for,” Autumn said. “They’re meant to keep you safe.”

“There’s so many things you can do,” said Carol. “But just remember Tori – no matter what they say, your family or anyone else. We believe you. We believe you and we will make *them* believe you.”

Sung to the tune of *It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*:

"It's a beautiful day in psych hospital, it's a beautiful day in psych hospital. Won't you be mine. Won't you be mine.

"It's a beautiful day in psych hospital, it's a beautiful day in psych hospital, won't you be mine. Won't you be mine.

"Won't you be my main nurse."

Laughter and applause followed.

Don't do this again.

Not now.

You're getting help.

You get any more and you will be locked up. Who could you tell here?

Just cut.

Cut don't kill.

Then things will be easier.

Just to get you through this. Just to get you over this hump. Just cut.

It's okay to need to every now and again.

Nighttime was the worst. Tori couldn't close her eyes without seeing him - *feeling* him - on top of her. No matter where she was, home or the hospital, it didn't matter. She couldn't get away from him. Ever.

The man walked into Tori's room. Walked up to her bed.

Shined a flashlight on her face. She held her breath.

He left and she cried. Shaking.

It was only head count. It was only head count.

Martha and Reyna were bobbing their hair together when Martha was triggered.⁹

“If you touch my children, I will kill you! I’ll kill you!”

She kept screaming while she cried.

None of them were entirely sure what to do. She was the grandmother whose delusions of grandeur had always been to help people. She would buy a house for the man who was homeless, she would take them all on her private jet to Europe, etc. But whenever anyone cried in group she cried along with them, handing them tissues and then leaving the room so as not to draw attention to herself.

Staff came in and had to subdue her. Telling her to calm down while grabbing her roughly by the arms and dragging her out.

⁹ It starts with loss of vision. Slowly moves down into your body until you’re shaking. Sometimes you just feel like you’re going to vomit. Other times you do. Neither one you really notice until later. All you know is you’re back.

You’re *there*.

And you can’t escape.

“You need a ponytail?” Ronnie asked Tori.

“Yes please.”

Ronnie was the Italian mama of the group. She spoke often of her kids and how much they meant to her. It wasn't that she didn't want to eat, it was just that she... couldn't. Ronnie undid her own ponytail then held the band out to Tori.

“Wait, is this your last one?” Tori asked.

“Don't worry about it, I have more in lockup.” She didn't.

Autumn spoke of two things about her family: her husband and her cat. Her husband, she had just married a year ago. He was willing to drive from San Diego so that his wife wouldn't have to take public transit to make it back from the hospital. He had promised to bring cigarettes so that Autumn could give them to the other patients before she left. He wished he could come visit her more. Autumn missed cuddling with her cat at night, but at least she had her blue long neck dinosaur to keep her company.

Night time was the worst. Nothing to do but stare at the ceiling really, not as if Daniel would be doing much if he were home. Probably reading, playing a video game, something at least a bit more entertaining than listening to his roommate breathe. He couldn't remember the last time he had had a roommate. He'd already been there three days. That was way too long. He had to go home tomorrow, he just had to.

Oh head count – hi there! What's up? Nothing – okay, he'll go back to sleep. At least he'll try anyway.

“I was getting sicker and sicker and sicker. I talked a little bit to a psychiatrist and then a therapist. I didn’t really want to be medicated. Instead of working on stuff for school, I just didn’t. I let it pile up and pile up. Because apparently I’m not self-sabotaging enough without procrastinating literally 24/7. That is really what broke the dam of my stress reservoir. You know what they don’t tell you about depression was that it was stressful. That it was just agonizing. Eventually, I had a breakdown, yelled at my mom, you know how it is. Wailed for a while. I guess it’s scary, scary stuff that I’m just not used to even —”

—Daniel

“Does your family have any history?” the nurse asked.

“No,” said Carol.

“So you’re the unlucky one then? That sucks, you gotta be careful, that passes on,” the nurse says.

Carol is reminded of the fact she’s known since her diagnosis. Any children she had could have it also. Would they blame her? Would they hate her for it? How could she handle them going into hospitals? How could they handle her going into hospitals? Would this ever even end? Would anything get better? Was there any point in –

“So how would you rate your depression?” the nurse asked.

“I’ve been depressed ever since I was 15, so about eight years. There wasn’t really a “reason” for it, it just kind of happened. Since then I’ve been diagnosed with a whole bunch of different medical problems: an eye disorder, two stomach disorders, and a breathing disorder. On top of that I’ve been told I’m depressed, anxious, and I have borderline personality disorder. The first time I tried to kill myself I was 16. Then I got better, then I went to the hospital, then I got better, then I went to the hospital. The thing is – it never stops. Every time I try to be okay it just comes back. It feels like I want to kill myself every day.”

—Carol

What does it matter?

You shouldn't let it get to you. It's no reason to cut yourself. It's no reason to hurt yourself. The scars aren't pretty.

And you don't like to be weak. You don't like to rely on people.

Who wants to be seen as the broken one?

“When I was in college I had an abusive boyfriend my senior year and he would like rape me and lock me in my room and not allow me to go to class or even go to the bathroom unaccompanied. And he was harassing me for a while after I left him and I had blocked his number and deleted all my social media except for a secret tumbler that I kept under a false name. And somehow he managed to find it. He sent me a very long message about how he still wants me in his life and is sorry and has matured allegedly and wants to... I don’t know. But this has been – this was years later and apparently he’d been trying to get in contact with me through my friends for years after we broke up. And I had a meltdown. I freaked out, I tried to hang myself but my parents woke up and saw me setting up the noose and pulled me down and pulled down the noose. And I think a couple days later they wound up taking me to the emergency room because they were concerned that I was going to try again. And when we told the psychiatrist/social worker/person what had happened and that I still wanted to hang myself they put me on a 51/50 and sent me to BHC Alhambra. Going back to the hospital it... sucks, I always hate going to the hospital although I understand that it’s necessary in order to keep me from hurting myself. But I hate it with a –”

—Tori

“Head count.”

Autumn, in the middle of talking to the therapist she had requested and who had taken three days to come, felt her throat closing as she looked at yet another person she had to tell her story to.

“I have abandonment issues with my mother and father. My relationship with my mother is a big problem for me. She never really wanted me and she never cared about me. She told me many times that she wanted to drown me and kill me. I remember I went to live with my mom in Carlsbad with her boyfriend Louie. Louie started out fine. Then he started fighting really badly with my mother. That of course bled over to me.

He would regularly tell me I was worthless, stupid, and comment about my dad not wanting me. Several times he got physically abusive and hit me. He liked to grab me by the hair and drag me wherever her wanted me to be.

When he started, it was making me give him a kiss on the lips when I said goodnight. Then it got longer. It started over the clothes. But, very quickly is escalated to moving under. At some point he made me help him masturbate, he gave me my first orgasm, and photographed me after, putting me in different poses.

When I finally told my mother, she looked me in the face and said “you’re a fucking liar.” I’m tired of feeling like an object that’s being used and abused and then thrown away. I’m a

person with valid thoughts, feelings, and opinions and I deserved to be treated as such.”

—Autumn

People won't just let you be sad and so you have to pretend to be happy.

But you can't care enough to go to classes or work.

You can't care enough to eat.

When that happens they send you to the hospital, force meds down your throat and make you tell them you're okay.

They make you remember all the things you hate about yourself/life and they won't let you go back to the few things that make you happy until you're "okay."

Then if you're sad when you get back, if you don't act like you're okay, they send you back.

You can't live like that.

It's why you'd rather die.

You've been here for the mandated three days that a 51/50 requires. You've gone to the groups, swallowed the meds that they forced on you, answered the same dozen questions to half a dozen different doctors. Three days and that was supposed to be it.

Now it's two weeks.

“The worst part for me was always how dehumanizing the whole thing is. You’re treated more like cattle than like people. They have to count what you eat, what you do, where you are. You have to poke your head out of the shower so they can count you. Then everything is done through the wristbands. It’s like you’re not even a person – you’re just a number.”

When Carol said this, everyone looked down at their own wrists.

04171 824 9 1367

03224 119 8 6519

07468 213 5 3214

00973 310 6 4048

Staff member to judge:

“The doctor is treating the patient for depressive bipolar.”

Said Patient:

“The doctor never told me that.”

Part 5: Doctors

“Can I see a therapist please?” 00973 310 6 4048 asked.

“Has your psychiatrist given the order?” Brandon the staff member asked.

“Yes,” 00973 310 6 4048 said.

“It might take a few days.” Brandon said.

“I’ve been here a week and I haven’t met with a therapist once.” 00973 310 6 4048 said.

Medical doctor: What brings you here today?

Psychiatrist: What events led up to you coming here?

General Nursing Staff: What's someone so young doing here?

General Nursing Staff: What's wrong honey?

General Nursing Staff: What brings you out here?

General Nursing Staff: How come you're here?

General Nursing Staff: Can you tell me what brought you here?

General Nursing Staff: What are you doing here?

General Nursing Staff: What's someone so pretty doing here?

General Nursing Staff: What brings you here?

General Nursing Staff: How come you're here?

General Nursing Staff: Tell me why you're here?

General Nursing Staff: How come you came here?

General Nursing Staff: What are you doing here?

General Nursing Staff: What's someone so smart doing here?

General Nursing Staff: What are you doing here?

Therapist: Can you tell me why you're here?

04171 824 9 1367: I was hoping you could tell me.

“I feel like I’m ready to leave,” 04171 824 9 1367 explained to Dr. McNeel.

“All right, well, I’m okay with that, but the treatment plan still hasn’t been set up yet so they might try to keep you here,” Dr. McNeel explained.

“I know that you’re in charge of my treatment. So I just want to know if you think I’m ready to leave.”

“Everything on my end is all set,” he explained. “But you might have to have a hearing.”

That was fine with 04171 824 9 1367. They’d never had a hearing before, but it seemed to be regulation. So this hospital did things a little different, so what? After their session was finished, 04171 824 9 1367 was approached by another staff member.

“We’re told you’re trying to leave AMA.”

04171 824 9 1367 found themselves before a judge for what reason she couldn’t understand. The doctor had said he was fine with them leaving, they weren’t trying to go against anyone’s orders,

why on earth was the staff saying that they were trying to leave
Against Medical Advice?

“First the staff members will talk on behalf of the doctors, then
you will have your own chance to make your case,” the judge
explained.

What case?

04171 824 9 1367 was crying when they came into the hallway after being pulled out of group for a meeting.

“What happened?” 00973 310 6 4048 asked.

“Apparently I’m fucking bipolar. Not that the doctor told me, I had to find out in the hearing.” Patients are not supposed to hug. 00973 310 6 4048 hugged 04171 824 9 1367 anyway.

“What?” 07468 213 5 3214 heard them and came to sit down.

“I told doctor McNeel I was ready to leave.” 04171 824 9 1367 said, heaving, face red. “Every time I’ve done this before that would just be me opening a dialogue. Just saying I feel ready to leave so we could talk about when and how that would happen. But this time McNeel said my meds were fine and he’d be fine with me leaving but I’d have to have a hearing – it was all just procedure, McNeel told me.”

At this point 04171 824 9 1367 begins to hiccup. 00973 310 6 4048 rubs their back in comfort, 03224 119 8 6519 hears them talking and goes to get them some water. 04171 824 9 1367 drinks and thanks them, then continues.

“So I think, ‘okay they just do things differently here.’ Then they tell me I’m trying to leave AMA - against medical advice - even though he told *me* I was fine to leave. Then when nurse Brandon talked on behalf of the doctor to the judge, he told them I’m bipolar. The last diagnosis I received was Borderline Personality disorder last year.”

“Oh honey, I know how that feels. I didn’t take it well when I was told I was bipolar either.” 07468 213 5 3214 said

“It’s not even that diagnosis. I mean I’ve had a bunch before, so it’s a new one, whatever.” 04171 824 9 1367 said “But McNeel and I talked about that and he even said I wasn’t bipolar. I have *never* had a manic episode. McNeel said if I haven’t had a manic episode then I couldn’t be bipolar.”

All patients tensed visibly.

“So he lied to you?” 03224 119 8 6519 asked.

“Apparently,” 04171 824 9 1367 said “That or I just wasn’t worth getting it right for.”

00973 310 6 4048 hugs 04171 824 9 1367. 03224 119 8 6519 holds 04171
824 9 1367's shoulder. 07468 213 5 3214 rubs 04171 824 9 1367's back.

“No physical contact.” Luis, the charge nurse, yells at them from
behind the desk.

Staff: "This is our house, you all are just visitors here."

Part 6: Release

We were released after staying for 3 days. 4 days. 6 days. 9 days.
10 days.

-We walked the halls and asked for phone numbers from the
other patients.

-We hugged goodbye.

-We were given paperwork and a survey from the staff:

- "How would you rate your stay on a scale from (unhappy face)
to (extremely happy face)?"

-They gathered our belongings in a pillowcase.

-We were allowed to have our shoes back. We pluck at the laces
curiously. Wondering if it could work...

-They cram our diseases into less than fifty pages.

-Folded them three way into an envelope that was too small for
the pages.

-They gave us a pat on the back with numbers for doctors they
were not affiliated with.

They sent us on our way.

We have been released for 8 days. 6 days. 4 days. Today.

The numbers they have given us for therapists and psychiatrists are in the pile of papers they have crammed into an envelope too small for the stack.

We have been told to set up an appointment once we are out.

-They do not mention how hard it will be just to be alive and back outside.

-They do not mention how every breath will feel heavy.

-Your gut will ache like you need to vomit.

-The world will look like a television screen.

-Nothing will feel real.

-They only mention how it is easy to dial a number.

818.555.3825

-We have insurance.

-We talk to professionals who say they know more than us and can help.

-They then tell us they are outside of our insurance.

-That the hospital gave us numbers for therapists we cannot use.

-We ask the professionals what we should do.

We are told to go somewhere else for help.

We have been released for 11 days. 9 days. 7 days. 3 days.

We are still having trouble getting a doctor.

-The hospital only gave us enough medication for ten days.

-Even if we had a doctor, even if we went to the doctor outside of our insurance, it would be 14 days before we could secure an appointment.

We are almost out of medication.

-We need more time.

-What are we supposed to do without our medication?

-We need help.

We call the hospital.

-We ask for help.

-We are told there is nothing they can do.

-We are told to go to the doctor not covered by insurance.

-We are told to make an appointment we cannot afford.

-We are told to go without medication for nearly 3 days.

We are out of medication.

We have been released for 25 days. 23 days. 21 days. 17 days.

We have been doing a lot better.

- We start to have interest in activities again.
- We slowly begin to have feeling in our cheeks.
- It feels good to be able to smile freely.
- We are somewhat happy to be alive.

We have been having some trouble.

- It is still hard.
- The air feels heavy.
- Smiling hurts.
- But we do not want to die.

We are not okay.

-It's too hard.

-It's too fucking hard.

-Just make it stop.

-Please make it stop. Please just let me end this.

If they try to send you back you will fucking kill yourself.

Picture coming out of the hospital.

Picture being told you are fixed.

Picture not feeling better.

Picture wanting to die.

Picture wanting to die.

Picture wanting to die.

“Head count, let me see your face.”



Kayla normally goes by “Pica” and is getting her PhD in English from ISU. She is working on publishing an experimental book about mental health as well as a non-experimental book about abusive relationships. Her dissertation will be a magical realism fictional account of her family’s immigration from Peru. She enjoys long walks with her soulmate—a King Charles named Addie.