

She stared mindlessly out the window. What was she supposed to do now?

“Med rounds!” a shrill voice pierced the veil of distraction.

The nurse was a short, pudgy, pink-cheeked woman who made up for her homeliness with an uncomfortably cheerful disposition. She was the type of woman we have all known at some point in our lives. A mostly unnoticed coworker quietly eating her feelings between incoming calls, dreaming of the day she will finally be invited to the office happy hour at the local bar as she fishes another stashed chocolate bar out of her desk drawer.

“Everett! Michelle Everett!” the nurse squawked.

The nurse called Michelle’s name in a way that made her want to change it...immediately. Michelle hated everything about her – her cheery disposition, her lumbering, waddling walk, her scrubs with little puppies and kittens on them. She seemed to have a pair in every color. Michelle had no doubt it was her way of fishing for conversation that would ultimately lead to an uncomfortably long discussion surrounding the cute and cuddly world of Nurse puppykitten. Michelle knew her secret, though. Behind the false, if not passive-aggressive, kindness, the nurse was severely depressed. That vast “fur family” Nurse puppykitten had amassed was certainly going to feast on her when she inevitably perished alone, leaving nothing but a pile of bones and bloody scrubs with puppies and kittens on them.

And they thought *she* was crazy.

“I’m here.” Michelle said.

All she had to do was take the fucking pills, say all the right things and she would be out in no more than a year. Sure, they had sentenced her to an indefinite stay here at the central Medford Mental Institution (cMMI), but she knew how this worked. Michelle was a renowned and published psychotherapist before the...incident. She didn’t like thinking about it and though she knew she would have to soon, she refused to hurry into discussing the sequence of events that led to her humbling fall from grace. This group of half-wits that made up the staff at cMMI could barely write up an assessment, even with all of them collaborating on it. It was a sad excuse for a mental health facility. Shit, they might even deem her mentally fit in six months just to make room for patients with more serious illnesses. She supposed that was better than the alternative – getting lost in this system, destined to grow old locked up with the type of patients she used to treat. Now *that* would be irony.

Michelle took her pills, masked her disdain with a pained smile, and then opened her mouth and moved her tongue in a circle to indicate to Nurse puppykitten that she had indeed swallowed them. The nurse smiled her sickeningly sweet smile at Michelle and called out again, “Meds!!” Michelle swore she called it so soon on

purpose as she was barely one step away. 'Just breathe, Michelle,' she told herself, 'it will be ok soon enough.' Once the nurse was a safe distance away, Michelle pulled the pills from her front pocket, where she had stashed them the instant the nurse wasn't looking. Her father's ridiculous obsession with magic tricks had come in handy after all. The only part of his routine that had ever interested Michelle or her younger sister Mae were the sleight of hand tricks. Their father could never resist their pleas for him to "show us how its done, daddy!" He always did, reminding them all the time that he was "breaking very serious magician codes by showing them." It was the only magic he ever had for his daughters. He never could hold a job or support them, and they were thrust into foster care before Michelle was 10 after he overdosed on heroin. A story for another time.

She examined the pills in her hand – Xanax, and...holy shit...haloperidol. Putting aside the potential interaction of these meds together, did they really think *she* was schizophrenic? The incompetence upset her more than the thought that a medical "professional" if she dared use the word, diagnosed her so. So, she had a momentary lapse in inhibition and judgment. Did she deserve this, though?

Jaunty whistling skittered down the hall from the day room, breaking Michelle's train of thought. It was Joe, the orderly. Michelle actually liked Joe and enjoyed his annoying whistling. It was a reminder that there was a real world out there.

"You get laid last night or something, Joe?" Michelle said by way of a greeting.

"Not this time, Michelle, but my time is coming, I can feel it!" he responded with good humor. He knew Michelle was rough around the edges and he embraced it. He tried to find the good in all the patients on the ward. And he felt for her. She rarely even remembered that she had murdered her ex-husband's lover, and when she did, she would steal away in the night to her old house to try to find him. No one knew whether it was to kill him and finish the task, or if she wanted to apologize. Either way, despite her false hope of early release, she was lucid and sharp witted most days. He took her callous ways with grace and never looked at her with the pity he saw in her ex-husband and her attending psychiatrist. They were both utter tools in Joe's mind anyway.

"You take your pills today, Michelle, or did you pull another Lisa Rowe?" He asked with a crooked smile and a wink.

"Gulped them down my aorta!" she said, returning his wink.

He smiled and rolled the patient he was assisting right next to her to look out the window. She rolled her eyes at him but did not complain. Michelle hated Sylvia, though she could never remember why. Had they been sneaking meds into her food? Had they discovered she was not taking her pills? She felt so foggy and lost half the time – she wouldn't put it past these fuckers.

“Group session is at noon, ladies, don’t forget to tip your waitress!” He said playfully as he left to gather another patient.

“Don’t know why they bother letting you even go to group.” Sylvia said, through gritted teeth, side-eying Michelle.

“I don’t know why you give a fuck, Sylvia. You’re a fucking nutcase.” Michelle retorted.

“At least I can be honest about why I am in here and not blame it on my ex being a homo.” Sylvia said with a wry smile on her face.

“Fuck you, Sylvia. You’ll be in here long after I get back to my life.” God, Michelle hated this psycho. She knew she shouldn’t, given her prior profession, but being in here for ... wait, how long had she been in here? She couldn’t remember now. She tried to remember – why couldn’t she remember?

She had no idea how much time had elapsed, but it must have been significant because she heard Joe coming back in to gather them for group.

“Did you even hear what I said? And you call me the nutcase? You got drool on your chin – wipe it off, its disgusting.” Sylvia said as Joe wheeled her away for group, leaving Michelle staring confusedly out the window.

At group, Michelle told her story, despite Sylvia’s eye rolls.

Michelle had been married to a wonderful man and would never consider hurting him. Her husband was sweet, caring, and considerate, but suffered terrible bouts of depression that rendered him a useless lump, preferring to spend his time sitting on the couch watching mindless television than give her the time of day.

It was shortly after finishing her degree that she met Trevor. He was exhilarating, adventurous, brilliant, and had the worst timing. Trevor was trouble. He reminded her of her husband before they got married. Trevor was a blonde, fit, and handsome man with an ambition and drive that her husband used to have. Trevor was the guy she should have met first. There was an attraction between them immediately that they both tried to ignore. Neither was available, but they were drawn to one another like neither had ever felt. They would find reasons to see each other, but could never do more than flirt heavily.

Michelle was a very attractive woman. She had always known this, to an extent. Everyone has insecurities, but she felt good about herself, especially after losing the weight. She was smart, funny, and sexy, and men (and women) often threw themselves at her. She had every reason to believe Trevor wanted her. He

restrained, but barely. The last time they met ended with them at Trevor's house, sharing wine and stories about their last relationships and why they had failed. They had laughed, cried, and bonded in a way neither had expected. They nearly made love that night. His body and his substantial cock was hard against her with unbridled desire and she couldn't help but react to it. He had her up against the wall as they kissed, and her leg was moving up his calf without her even recognizing it was happening. His breath was ragged and warm against her neck as he pressed himself against her. She wanted him with everything in her, but she couldn't do that to her husband, who was at home waiting for her while she moved her hips rhythmically against this man who wasn't him. She told Trevor she couldn't and pushed him away, reluctantly. They looked at each other intensely for what felt like an eternity. She touched his lips, red with passion, and quickly retreated out his front door to her car. She sat there for a few minutes to catch her breath and headed home to her kind, loving, caring husband, who likely had dinner waiting for her.

There were many more encounters like this between Michelle and Trevor, passion to the brink of cheating, but she was never able to jump off the precipice into the abyss of ecstasy they were both aching for. It became more than she could handle and finally she made the decision to leave her husband. If she was feeling this strongly for another, it was the only decent thing to do. At the rate she was going, she would cheat on him soon and better to hurt him as minimally as possible, right? She drove home the long way that day, taking bending back roads. She thought about the life they built together. Could she really do this to him, to them? How would she do it? How could she do it? But she did. She told him they were growing apart. She told him that she had met someone who understood her better now than he ever had or ever would. With that, she packed a small bag and left their home for the last time, not even really registering his lack of tears.

Dense, heavy clouds hung low over the vast fields, brown with the drought. A thought of 'oh, we could use a rain' ran through her head as she flew down the freeway on that hot summer day in east Texas. She was on her way to Trevor's house just outside the city. She waited in the hotel for three days, as they planned. He had someone to break it off with too, so a few days gave him a chance to do it easy. Now she was finally going to be with him. She had been craving him for so long and she had finally found the courage to leave her husband. Trevor was all she could think of, and it was making her ache even more for him. Now the waiting was over, and she was finally going to be with him.

She pulled up to his house as the sun was setting and was so overcome by the feeling of relief that washed over her and the excitement of seeing Trevor that she barely noticed the extra car in the driveway...or that it should have been familiar to her. She ran across the porch throwing open the screen door. She took the stairs to Trevor's room two by two like a giddy teenager. She only registered that she heard them once she actually saw them. Trevor, fucking, her ... husband? What. The. Fuck. How? When? She didn't care. Trevor heard her scream and looked back at her, shocked. He asked what she was doing there. And she asked what he was doing

there, pointing at her husband. She put it together that this must have been who he was breaking it off with but had not mustered up the balls to do so. She looked at her husband, who was unable to look back at her and then looked at Trevor, who was still inside her husband at this point, and then simply told them both to...well, carry on, anyhow.

She ran, laughing hysterically. Trevor pulled out, pulled on some pants and began to run after her. He called her name but she just kept running away and laughing. She got into her car, shot him the bird out the window and sped away.

After telling her story, Michelle sat quietly, fighting off the tears.

“Why don’t you tell the truth? You really think you are in here because of a minor breakdown after you found out hubby was a bottom?” Sylvia chided.

“Fuck off, psycho.” Retorted Michelle.

“Takes one – ” started Sylvia but was cut off by the group leader, Dr. Platt.

“Ladies, please. Love, respect, and tolerance here only. This is a safe space.” Scolded Dr. Platt.

Dr. Platt was a small man with spectacles that represented his small stature even more. His bald head reflected the fluorescent lights as he looked back and forth between the two women.

“Michelle, thank you for sharing your story. We must dig deeper, though. What else do you remember about leaving Trevor’s house that day?” Dr. Platt prodded.

“That’s it. Then I had my breakdown and...” she trailed off. She really couldn’t remember anything else.

“Michelle? Are you still here with us?” Dr. Platt was talking but Michelle only vaguely heard him. Then she saw it. In her mind. She saw Trevor step in front of her car to stop her that day. Did she? No. She wouldn’t. She wouldn’t. But she did. She had let her foot slip from the brake pedal to the gas and she had done it. She ran him over. Then she slammed it into reverse and ran him over again. She couldn’t even be certain how many times she’d done it. It hadn’t been a breakdown. She’d killed him. Fuck. FUCK!

“There it is – that little light bulb finally light up, princess? You gonna be in here a LONG time, psycho!” Sylvia was asking for it.

“Fuck- Fuck you!” Michelle screamed and whirled on Sylvia, throwing herself on her and wrapping her hands around her neck. Michelle would kill her!

Strong, sure hands pried her away and she felt a pinch in her neck. Then everything was black.

Michelle woke up strapped to a bed in a room with glaring white walls. She looked around, unable to remember exactly how she got there. The last thing she remembered was speeding away from the two worst mistakes of her life. How could she not have seen that coming? A door opened now, and two figures walked in. Her vision was blurry, but she recognized her husband's voice and figured the other must be the doctor.

"How do you keep fucking this up? This is the fourth time she's gotten out this month." Michelle's husband chided.

"I apologize, Mr. Everett. Your wife's—" The doctor started.

"*Ex-wife.*"

"Sorry, your *ex-wife's* condition is complicated, and she continues to refuse her medications. We sedated her after she attacked another patient and she must have escaped overnight. We were certain the sedatives would keep her under, but she has a remarkably fast metabolism and...well...she got out. And I will remind you, Mr. Everett, we are not a maximum-security facility. We do our best, but your *wi—ex-wife* is very resourceful. Have you considered moving? Or moving her to a facility closer to her family?"

"She doesn't have any. Everyone else in her life has turned their back on her. And no, I have not considered moving. Have you considered not being so incompetent?"

Wait, what did he mean 'gotten out'? What was happening? He looked at her with disdain and pity, then looked back at the doctor. She didn't understand. She attempted to speak, but nothing came out but drool and murmurs.

"Mr. Everett, you are welcome to transfer her to another facility."

"I wish I could. But this is the only facility within a three-state radius that I can afford. Just don't let this happen again."

"Yes, Mr. Everett. Of course, we will do our best, as we always do."

"See that you do."

They both looked at her with pity now. She wished she could remember, or at least ask what the hell was going on, but all she could do was allow Joe to put her into a wheelchair and push her down the hall. Was she actually crazy? Had she broken? Joe

asked if she needed anything else and, upon no response, left Michelle in the wheelchair by her favorite spot.

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**Submitted to Reedsy under Prompt # 354 "Center your story around a character who doesn't know how to let go"