

SWIMMING IN A FISH BOWL

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It was a Tuesday morning when I got a call from Ava asking if I would like to come over for dinner that night. It had been several months since my friend was committed to the psychiatric ward and I hadn't talked to her in that time. I wasn't around when it happened, but I heard from other friends that she had been committed to the hospital by her boyfriend for suicidal depression and mood swings. I had known her since high school and I knew that she suffered from depression, but this was something else entirely.

At five o'clock I locked up my tool box, tried my best to scrub the grease out of my fingernails, and clocked out. It was a thirty-minute drive to her place from the shop. I spent that time thinking about different scenarios, and different topics to avoid. I wondered if she would be in a fit of rage or as depressed as a French movie. As I pulled into the driveway I saw her silhouetted in the kitchen window. She turned and looked out and went quickly to the window and shut the blinds. When I knocked on the door it took her several minutes to answer. When she finally opened the door I was struck by the awkwardness of not knowing quite what to say.

"Hey Ava! Long time no see!" was what I finally said.

"Hi Josh, no kidding," she said, smiling awkwardly.

She invited me in and I took off my greasy work boots by the door before walking into the kitchen. She told me that she hadn't started cooking yet since she wasn't sure when I would get there. I looked around her small house. It had an air of being occupied by someone consumed with lethargy. On the couch there were several blankets that resembled a freshly opened cocoon. In the sink there were dirty dishes, and crumbs had seemingly been scattered on all the counters. I could see empty glasses scattered around. They reminded me of way points marking her movements through the house.

"What's new with you?" she asked.

“Not much. I’ve just been busy with work. Things have picked up lately so I’ve managed to get a fair bit of overtime this month.”

She shuffled to the fridge to pull out dinner. I knew that her boyfriend, Jim, had left her recently. I guessed that he was either unwilling, or unable, to deal with Ava’s mental illness. I wasn’t sure how much I should, or shouldn’t ask. Yet, we had known each other for a long time, even dated for a while. In that time we had always been very open and honest with each other, which is one reason I felt Ava to be one of my closest friends.

“How have you been?” I asked, hoping this vague question would help guide our conversation in a safe direction.

“I’m doing better. I’m glad to not be in the hospital anymore. That place felt like a prison. The food was terrible and for long parts of the day they keep you locked in your room alone. The atmosphere in there felt so barren and cold. It was fucking miserable,” she said, trailing off quietly as she rinsed asparagus in the sink.

I tried to imagine the scene that she described. It seemed contrary to what one might expect in a facility meant to help people. I had never seen the inside of a mental hospital and so my only basis for what it might be like came from what I had seen in movies. I thought about *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and decided that maybe her description of the place wasn’t that skewed after all.

I watched as she moved slowly around the kitchen to gather the things she would need. There was something of the specter in the paleness of her skin and roundness of her wide staring eyes. I couldn’t guess the last time she had been out in the sun. I felt an uneasiness just sitting there watching her since all her movements seemed to be slowed down as if she were under water.

“I’m glad to hear that you’re doing better. Would you like some help with dinner?”

“Sure, could you take care of the pasta and asparagus? And I’ll do the salmon.”

It was a very simple dinner to prepare. I watched the asparagus steam and the pasta boil. Ava worked on baking the salmon.

“Do you remember Ms. Hoffman, the dance instructor from school? She came in the shop a few weeks ago.”

Ava’s face brightened at the mention of her old instructor.

“Yeah, I remember Ms. Hoffman. She was my favorite. If it

wasn't for her I never would have made it as far as I did in ballet. How was she when you saw her?"

"She was really good. She's still full of energy. I guess she re-tired last year though."

"I'm sure everyone at the school misses her. She really was wonderful."

"Do you ever think about getting back into dancing?" I asked. "You really were great, you know."

"Sometimes I miss it. But it takes a lot of work and I've been out of it for so long now that I doubt I could get back to where I once was."

"I suppose. But I still think you should get back into it, just as a hobby if nothing else."

When dinner had been served we sat at her cluttered table to eat. I noticed the amber prescription bottles lined up on the corner opposite me. In the interval there was a mass of opened and unopened mail, pens, pencils, an empty napkin holder, and a few other oddities strewn about.

"Do you remember the conversations we used to have, Josh?"

"Which ones are you referring to? We've had lots of conversations."

"The really deep ones, the ones we used to have when we were in high school and were trying to decide what to do with our lives. The ones we had when our paths in life felt infinitely wide."

"Yes, of course I remember."

"I've been thinking about them a lot lately. We used to talk about how we wanted our lives to mean something and I've been feeling like mine is..." Ava trailed off without finishing her thought. "Are you happy with where you are in life?"

"Yes, I suppose I am, for the most part."

I stared at my hands, at the black grease embedded in the edges of my finger nails, at the scars from years of busted knuckles. I was about half way through my plate. Ava had hardly touched hers.

"May I ask why you have been thinking about those talks we used to have?"

"I've just felt... so empty lately. I mean, I haven't been able to work in months and being supported by my parents again just makes me feel like a leech. Also, everything in life just seems so dull and mut-

ed. I think it might be the mood stabilizers that I've been put on. They keep me from having manic episodes, but ever since I've been taking them it seems like I don't feel emotions anymore."

"Have you talked to anyone about this, your doctor or psychologist? That really doesn't seem right."

"Yeah, I've talked to them about it. They told me that it is a normal side effect, but that it should lessen as I adjust to being on them. You know, they told me I would have to be on them for the rest of my life. The thought of having to take all those pills everyday for the rest of my life sickens me. I haven't told anyone else this, but I've been thinking about killing myself."

I felt frozen as I absorbed the gravity of what she had just said. I realized that my mouth was still open in anticipation of food. I quickly closed it and set my fork down gently on the plate. I looked over at her and saw that she had her head bent down staring into her lap. Both of her hands were beneath the table fidgeting with the edge of the table cloth. I had no idea what to say. I was afraid of saying or doing anything for fear of it being the wrong thing. I felt as though I stood at the edge of a precipice in complete darkness. Yet I had to move. I wanted to help my friend.

"Do you have a plan, Ava?" I asked, trying to gauge how close to the action she might be.

"No. Not really."

I wasn't wholly convinced by this statement, but I didn't feel as though I should pursue the issue.

"I'm sorry Josh. I know you probably don't know what to say. You don't have to say anything. I don't know. I just feel that I will never be able to lead the kind of life that I want. To live the rest of my life on these meds, alone, with no emotions or interests, just seems pointless."

I tried to think about what I would do in her shoes. Her conclusions on life didn't seem terribly irrational to me after all. What would it mean to live as an automaton? What sense of purpose or meaning could be derived from life when it has been reduced to nothing more than a biological process? Still, suicide, for some obscure reason, seemed like an unacceptable answer. I knew I had to say something, but wondered what I could say that she hadn't already heard. She had been to the hospital before for suicidal thoughts, and she had been going to counseling for years. A feeling of helplessness began to

well up inside of me.

“I don’t think things will be like this forever, Ava. I mean life is all about change and nobody knows what lies ahead.”

“That’s what my mom keeps telling me. She just keeps telling me that despite how dark or overwhelming things might feel now they won’t last forever. At this point, though, I feel like I will be coping for the rest of my life and not really living.”

I tried to dig for some kind of philosophical grounding to give a foot hold against the dark abyss that seemed to be forming in her thoughts.

“Do you remember the story of Siddhartha that we read in school? Do you remember how he went on his quest for enlightenment, first joining the ascetics and trying to reach enlightenment by trying to kill his ego, then deciding to embrace the material world until he became consumed by lust, greed, sloth, wrath, gluttony, and many other ills of this world until he wanted to kill himself?”

“Yes, I remember the story. Why?”

“Well, he finally he found his enlightenment by the river when he realized that everything in life is one and everything changes, just as the river is at once at its source and at its delta and forever flowing. So the reason I bring it up is that I wonder if there isn’t much more to life than our emotions, or our jobs, or even our companions.”

“Yes, perhaps. Like what though?”

I was caught off guard by this. The question was simple enough, yet I struggled for an answer. I looked at her plate and saw that the pasta had begun to dry up around the edges.

“I wish I could answer that question, Ava, but the truth is I think that everyone has to create their own meaning. I don’t think anyone can answer that question for anyone else. I know, for me at least, learning new things gives my life a sense of meaning. I harbor the idea that on some level, life is all about learning what life is all about. I guess that’s why I read so much.”

“Yeah, I like reading too, but lately I can’t seem to commit my mind to it.”

After I had said it, the thought struck me that reading was an awful thin thread to hang the meaning of one’s life on. I thought about what it meant to be a mechanic. The thought of fixing people’s cars and giving them a means of mobility seemed to have a fair bit of signif-

icance to it. Yet, when I thought about all of the pollution, the wars over oil, the debate over global warming, I wondered if it was really such a great thing.

A silence fell between us. It didn't seem as though Ava was going to have anymore of her food, and it seemed inappropriate for me to continue eating.

"Would you like me to start a fire?" I asked.

"Yes. That would be great, thank you."

Ava got up and moved to the couch, pushing the blankets into a corner. While I found Tupperware and put her food in it for her to have later, Ava sat in the semi-darkness of the living room, her slender hands folded in her lap. She seemed to be looking at nothing at all, yet her head was directed toward the empty fireplace. I doubted if anything I had said had reached her. I felt my chest tighten with anxiety as I wondered what I should do.

"Would you like me to take you to the hospital?"

"No. No, I'm never going back there if I can help it." Ava said flatly, and continued to stare into the fireplace.

I didn't feel like it would be right to leave her alone, yet when it came time for her to ask me to leave I couldn't very well say otherwise. It seemed to me that, short of strapping someone to a bed or locking them in a padded cell, it really was quite impossible to control someone. I didn't want to see either of those things happen to my friend anyway, so I figured the best thing I could do was to simply spend time with her.

I went over to the fireplace and started tearing up the cardboard boxes that had been stashed in another larger cardboard box for kindling. Before long a healthy fire was crackling above the hearth. I sat on the far end of the couch away from Ava. I watched as the dancing light of the flames played across her emaciated face. The emptiness that had haunted her grey eyes seemed to lift in the glow of the fire.

We sat there watching the fire dance. It seemed to take on a life of its own the longer we watched it. It would grow merry and become subdued as logs were added and logs were burned. I thought about how when we left it for the night it would be reduced to ashes, its life and warmth lost to the universe. That fire that had danced for us that night would burn only once. That was the last time I saw my friend.