

## Deep in the Dark

By Sara Laboe

I won't sleep tonight. This is probably my last night here anyway. I can feel the unyielding metal bar on the frame under the thin, twin-size mattress on the tile floor. The hunger is a dull ache in my peach-pit stomach, as distant to my consciousness as my will to stand up and move. I'm shaking for a number of reasons, detoxing not the least of them. 'The DTs,' everyone keeps calling them; a process all the women here seem intimately familiar with. My heart feels heavy, beating too hard and oddly slow. I can see it pounding through my t-shirt. I count using the ticks from the wall clock— 34 beats in one minute. My body is no longer mine; this fact was hammered home at the hospital, the final piece of a puzzle that seemed random until it was completely assembled. The sickening violation of the assault kit—performed by a young male doctor, a series of photographs taken of my injuries, the nurse touching me and moving my limbs like a posable toy, and an ill-fitting set of clothes. Now I understand. (Intruding sounds and images: his unyielding fists, his vile words.)

Most of my roommates at the Sojourn Women's Shelter leave me be, but one woman keeps trying gently to get me to eat something. She has her little girl with her, still babydoll tiny. She cries at night, but it doesn't bother me. I pity the baby girl. The last thing I ate was some peanut butter crackers that the Kind Officer gave me at the police station. He also wrapped a big blanket around my shoulders to try to soothe my shaking body. The Indifferent Officer was judging and abrupt, annoyed that he had to work on New Year's Eve, but I get that. Before that, I hadn't eaten in over 24 hours. I couldn't. I can't. The thought of putting anything into my mouth and feeding my body makes me retch.

My favorite thing about the shelter is my blanket. The blankets here are handmade, donated I assume. They're also much too small, so each woman is issued two of them. I like to feel the way the yarn weaves in and out of itself in intricate patterns. The extra blanket is something to hold. I wish I could carry it out with me, but maybe the next woman will need it, too. Or the one after that. (My frozen body, my frozen mind.)

Time has passed, and it's morning now. Ashley is here to pick me up and take me back to the house to get my dogs, as well as what I can carry of my things, before we go to the airport. She carefully hugs my ruined form, and I tolerate the contact. I'm worried I'll never find a way to express the gratitude I feel for her. She had to drive halfway across the country, but I had no one else to call. We go first to the Litchfield Police Station. I am explaining that the Kind Officer said someone would go to the house with me to get my stuff, but this Other Officer says that he's sorry someone told me that, but it's not something they can do. I stand frozen, stuck, a solid block of ice. He looks at me for a moment and then offers to go with us to speak to him before Ashley and I go inside, but makes it clear he won't stay while I get what I need.

I'm shaking uncontrollably, a nuisance I could do without just now, as I find my backpack and turn in a slow circle, trying to think. My brain is a rabbit bouncing chaotically around my skull in a panic, and I can't seem to reel it in. I can feel his presence: a black cloud radiating towards me from his room across the house, where he cruelly keeps the door open to prove a point to me. What's the point? I can't organize my thoughts or shove down this visceral terror enough to explain it to myself. With uncooperative shaking hands, I get one clean set of clothes and line the bottom of my bag with it, then carefully stack all my notebooks on top. Fourteen identical green notebooks, satisfying in their uniformity. I slide my old laptop down the inside of

the bag. Not much room left. I'll need my toothbrush. Now I need to choose which of my books to take. I pause to stare at my modest collection, whittled down over the past few years to only the most sentimental ones and those which weren't valuable enough to be sold. I can fit maybe five or six books. I cram eight into my bag and shove one more in the front pocket, pushing and pulling the zippers to their absolute limits as they groan in protest. We get my dogs, who Ashley is taking back to Michigan with her, where she has worked with a local rescue to find a temporary foster home for them for a few months. As long as I have a place to live by then, I can have them back. I need to get them back more than anything I've ever needed, even as we aren't yet apart. Finally, we're driving to St. Louis, to the airport.

I'm on the plane, not thinking, not thinking, not thinking. I'm in New Hampshire, in my dad's car for a tense, quiet ride. At my parents' house—my childhood home— sitting on the bed in the small guest room in the basement. I need a drink. (The knife under my pillow.)

My eyes are burning but I won't try to sleep. I can't cope with the dreams just now, and it's hard to pull myself out of them once I've fallen in. Best to just sit and wait. Finally, mom and dad have gone to bed, and I tiptoe up the stairs to the kitchen. Quietly, quietly opening and closing cabinets, searching for relief. And then there it is. I take the bottles out one by one and line them reverently along the counter. I gauge the level of liquid in each bottle to determine how much I can take without it being noticed. I feel the smooth glass and the different shapes of the bottles in my hands, hear the whisper of the twist-off caps or the lethargic pop of the corks as they talk to me, —comforting me— smell the sharp bite that makes my mouth water. Soon I'll be free of myself for a while. I pour a little from each bottle into a large, round-handled

mug, and soon I have a full cup. I softly set the bottles back in their exact places and positions, taking care not to let them clink together, and slip back downstairs. (His fury, his eyes.)

I think longingly of the pills and cocaine we had just a couple weeks ago. Gone, all gone. “Don’t you want to know what these are?” But I didn’t—just take, swallow, chase with whiskey, wait for relief while I roll up a \$1 bill. Being Regular Drunk will have to suffice for tonight. As is always the case with my first sip, I wonder how I can hate the taste of something so much but also need it so badly. It tastes like a blessed escape, masked in poison. Then again, the taste and negative side effects feel like a well-deserved penance. I look at the clock when I start drinking, as I always do when I have less than “enough” to drink. I need to be sure to drink it at the right pace.

My breath screams in as I inhale sharply and at length, my head thrown back against the pillow, kicking and thrashing. I reach up to grab for my neck and feel my pulse pounding through the distended veins. I can’t sit up and go turn on the light for quite some time. Knowing, knowing I’m too weak to protect my own life if anyone else chooses to take it has stolen the last of my self-worth. Gone. It’s both a tragedy and a relief; although the result is grim, I no longer need to be so confused all the time, unable to ask the right questions. I have the answer now. I’m bathed in sweat, gasping for air, sobbing into a blanket to muffle the noise. (My body is not mine.)

At last, I gain an acceptable amount of control over my body and take it upstairs, through the garage, and out onto the driveway. I need a distraction, a cigarette. He texted me again in the night while he was drinking and God knows what else. Calling me a liar, saying I made it up and threatening to have me arrested, then telling me I deserved it. Then, changing

tone: begging me to come back, swearing he doesn't remember anything that happened that night because he was blacked out, pleading with me to agree that he would never hurt me that badly. I genuinely wonder if he remembers what happened. We *were* pretty wasted. It's somehow worse to think he doesn't remember— that I'm the only one with the memory of what happened. The only one in the world with the burden of living with it.

Back in the living room, I have the TV on the lowest volume possible. Still, mom soon comes down the stairs and asks, "Why are you up so early." Like that, so it's more of an accusation than a question.

"I had a nightmare," I explain. She sighs loudly and turns to step heavily back up the stairs. I sink lower into the worn couch cushions. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be anywhere.

It turns out you cannot receive any kind of counseling, therapy, or mental health services unless you have money or are actively trying to kill yourself or someone else (in which case you can take yourself to the emergency room). However, I found a counselor last night at a local self-pay clinic who is willing to see me later today and let me pay when I have a job, which will be as soon as possible. This feels like an emergency to me, although I understand why it doesn't qualify as one technically.

I've never been to therapy, but I need to do something to get myself back into my body before the separation becomes permanent and I can't see any other options. The desperation I'm feeling is devastatingly persistent. As it is, I kind of hover nearby, circling around my body and feeling any physical sensations from a muffled distance. Except for the sounds of eating, chewing, silverware on plates. Those sounds and certain others are louder than reality, drilling into my ears and invading my brain. I don't know why. I keep having a hard time changing my

expression to the appropriate arrangement of features at any given time. Usually, I have a very low regard for my life or safety and am ambivalent to any risk. But, now, I simply don't want to be here anymore, and for the first time that scares me. (Stop thinking. Stop thinking.)