

## Why I Can't Love You Right

When they took my shoes, I learned to run. Within reality, I never ran. That's one of the rules you learn when you are institutionalized: running is a boredom, a pointless pursuit. I knew what happened to the kids that took off from the ward. Extended sentences, re-capture, rough tackles into the tall grass. When they took my shoes, I hair-pinned into fight-or-flight, and I flew, flew into nothing. I ran into books. I ran into sleep. I ran into pills. I ran into wall after wall of emotional short-circuits until my brain became a lump of nothing, an obstacle to scale.

This is to say, I have been running ever since I stepped foot in the hospital, and I'm running, still. This is why I cannot love you right: you are another thing to scale, another hope to tear past. If I slow down to love you, the rest of it will catch up. The rest: It's enough to send me plunging into nightmares thicker than honey, to make me search for the faces of patients and staff in crowds in cities far from each hospital that held me, knowing there's a chance they could finally grab my heels. It's enough to kill me, and too much to share without killing you. Love, I will be your final straw. I am a walking surrender. There is a target that follows me, swinging from my heart by a noose. So I run.

I cannot hold your hand. Your hand feels like an entrapment. Your hand is a small cage, and my hand is an animal. Your hand is a wall I keep sinking into. I lock the door of every room I enter. I use my hands as shields, as tools, as weapons: keep the world away. I repel. I reject. Safety is the longest chord that I will hold onto before dropping off the edge. I cannot hold you; you are not safe.

When I was ten, I bought a book from the local Hallmark store: *101 Things You Should Do Before Your Kids Leave Home*. My mom found the purchase strange. A novel for parents, the most interesting thing I'd held in all my life. I flipped through the pages, examining mothers and fathers and children

with copy-paste grins, these stock-model photos of hot air-balloon rides and hiking and board games. I think I was always searching for love like that. As something tangible, trackable. Like if I made a memory of my life, then I would never leave home: home would follow after me.

(You don't feel like home and that's not your fault.)

I never made a list of these things. Just looked at the photos and wondered. When I left home at fifteen, I didn't take any photos. The hospital inventoried my little clothing, my stuffed bear, my books, but no photos. I had no proof of love. This is why I take so many photos, now. This is why I stop every time I see a red cloud or a dead bird or a sunset. I'm looking to keep evidence, to prove I deserve to be alive. This is why I cannot love you right: How can you love a person who you feel compelled to memorize, a person you've assigned to heal the past, frame by frame?

(There's this sweet sadness of knowing you're not a person anymore; I am within this.)

Institutionalization took eighteen months of my life. Three hospitals. Like schoolyards, like stepping stones, leading deeper into a rare darkness, a society beyond society. Institution borrowed eighteen months of my childhood, wrapped my youth in warm red ink, in dead things. I was a child when I entered my first facility, and a problem when I left the last. My kid-ness, revoked by the doctors, by the court. Illness exists beyond identity, forcing you to shed your skin, to lose your person. Eighteen months. This is time that I compartmentalize, make small in my head, and that is why I can't love you right: I make everything small in my head, including you. The bigger things become, the harder they hit. The more they hurt to have, to lose. Eighteen months—loss became the counter-balance. Loss robbed me of my sanity, but loss was stable, consistent. Loss, reliant and horrid.

Loss kept me alive. So I will lose you. And I will mean to.

Symptoms of Institutional Syndrome:

1. Loss of independence
2. Apathy
3. Depression
4. Lethargy
5. Repulsion of touch/social connection

6. I can't stay inside. Don't touch me. I can't stay inside, I can't and you can't make me. I can't sit still because sitting still feels like defeat feels like giving into the restraints and I have been gone from the hospital for almost five years but I am still just as untethered as when I got there as when I got there as when I got there and I can't stay inside. I can't sit here because I will sink and it will end me. Let go of me, let go of me, don't touch me, don't hold my hand. Don't fucking touch me. I won't be still with you. I'd rather die.

In the third hospital, I went six months without touching someone my own age. This was forbidden in Residential treatment: touch. Hugging, holding hands, even accidental brushes on the arm or cheek. The words *I love you* were forbidden, too, strangled from us with the threat of consequence (isolation, speaking bans, physical restraints, worse). The staff's veins of control prevented us from knowing our bodies, from knowing one another. Prevented us from cutting our hair, speaking out of turn, moving without permission, breathing too hard. My body was not my body. Denied from me, controlled down to each syllable that left my mouth, to each movement of my fingers and toes.

This is why I cannot hold your hand. When I hold your hand, I spend the rest of the day fighting heart palpitations. When you hold my hand, my hand doesn't feel like my hand anymore. Touch sparks panic in me. Not belonging, not comfort. I watched my fellow patients be pinned to the floor, their hands twitching like spark plugs. I watched them refuse to share their hands with the staff, because their hands were their hands, and, to prove that their bodies were not their bodies, the staff had them restrained and pried their fingers apart, one—at—a—time. When you hold my hand, I feel the imprint of that truth, feel as if my body is about to be brought to the earth. I feel trapped. I need my hands to be my hands, to belong to me, alone.

Courage is a law I keep reciting, but cowardice is a law I reach for. I live in a lie: *Wait*, I say, *wait*. I tell you to wait, that I can love you later when I'm better and kinder, but I can't. Love is the biggest lie. It is the biggest exhaustion. I once learned about love as starving. I once learned love as denial, as rejecting nourishment, letting my body drip back to the earth in

hot pools of grief. This love birthed from pain, in my horrible admittance, is a comfort to me. For so long, I knew love only by condition. And all my conditions have been conditioned out of me, pulled from my body in fine strings. I am hollowed and unfillable, a cursed combination.

All of these things live in me, still: the angry anorexic, the suffering child. I am no more myself than I was at the start of all of this. Re-cultured by institutions. Re-framed by insanity, a party word, a sweet whisper. My body is a shadow of something alive. I have a vocabulary you don't recognize: Haldol, booty juice, Seroquel, orthostatic. This is why I cannot love you right: I no longer remember your definition. I fall into triggers: airline grape-juice cups, plastic paper clips, the scent of lavender Lysol. I live in a second half of the world, an underbelly, deeply invisible to you. You cannot live there with me. If you did, you'd have to join me in this moving coffin, wall after wall, nail after nail.