

Charlie Scaturro

The Things I Tell Myself About Going Home

I cut my hair off three weeks before I was supposed to be discharged. The staff said it fit into my pattern of irrational behavior. Then they said cutting my hair might delay my discharge from the clinic.

They had me sit down with the director of the clinic to explain why this was different than the other times I had done something impulsive.

During our meeting, the director scribbled down notes like everything I said was fascinating.

I peppered some humor into our conversation by comparing myself to Britney Spears when she cut her hair and saying at least I had the good sense not to buzz my hair all the way down like she did.

He chuckled a few times. When you're funny and you intend to be funny, people think you're normal. Which is weird because most people aren't funny, so being funny is anything but normal.

Whenever the director spoke, he usually said, "Here's the thing," before making his point. I noticed a lot of men who considered themselves smart started out by saying "Here's the thing," as if they discovered something the rest of us were ignorant to. What I've observed about these men is they can be smart concerning matters of little importance but careless concerning matters that mean everything.

"Here's the thing," he said toward the end of our meeting. "We're worried that this act of cutting your hair is a cry for attention."

I nodded. If you protested too much, they said you were being difficult. Being difficult was just as bad as being sick.

Later that night, after I found out they wouldn't delay my discharge. I cried because I missed my hair. The staff was worried about the crying too. More irrational behavior, they said. I tell myself it's the most rational thing I'd done during my fourteen months at the clinic.

We had to earn our privileges at the clinic. But privileges at the clinic were different from privileges in the real world. Life is relative.

They let us wear our own clothes at the clinic, which brought up the inevitable issue of having to do laundry.

And laundry was a privilege. You could only do it if you behaved. If you took your meds. If you ate. If you complied with staff directions. If you said things your analyst wanted to hear. If you kept your room orderly and your bed made. If you didn't do those things and you ran out of clean clothes, you had to wear clothes made of paper provided by the clinic. In those paper clothes, we looked like giant dolls that had escaped from a child's play set.

I was so compliant I never missed an opportunity to wash my clothes. What I wouldn't do to wash my clothes.

If you stayed at the clinic long enough, chores became privileges.

Ronald worked the graveyard shift on our unit. He drove a motorcycle and parked in front of the clinic so everyone could hear him as he approached and departed. He was different than the rest of the staff. Working at the clinic wasn't Ronald's life; it was what he did to get to his life.

The staff didn't tell us anything about themselves outside the clinic. Most of us preferred not to know. Probably because we wanted to believe that the people helping us were doing better than we were. I filed a complaint about Ronald with the director of the clinic. Not because Ronald had done anything wrong, but I complained that an all-female unit had a male working the graveyard shift when we were supposed to be sleeping and some of us had trauma with men.

The director said, "Here's the thing. If anything were to happen late at night, you'll be happy Ronald is working."

His response didn't reassure me, but I had to accept it.

After fourteen months, I was an expert at accepting things that made me uncomfortable.

Everything at the clinic was either disposable or in short supply. The cutlery. The plates. The toiletries. The cups you drank from. Your fellow patients. The staff.

Nothing lasts long in this world.

But the environment at the clinic didn't allow us to get comfortable enough to own anything. Which seemed ironic because the reason some of us were here in the first place was because we had an issue owning things.

We weren't allowed shoelaces or belts for obvious reasons. We walked around with our shoes sliding off and our pants sagging. No belts and no shoelaces was the only thing I didn't get used to about the clinic. I tell myself I would've gotten used to it if I had more time.

Jeanine sent me letters, but she never visited. I understood. I don't think I would have visited if the situation were reversed.

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In her letters she asked how things were going, but she never dealt in specifics. Except one time when she asked, “Do they allow you razor blades for shaving?”

As if the things I was allowed at the clinic determined the severity of my condition.

“They do,” I replied a few weeks later, “but you can only use them under supervision.” I went on to tell Janine I hadn’t used a razor on my legs or underarms in months. What was the point if no one was looking?

“I hope you’ll consider writing us,” the director said to me on my second-to-last day. “You’d be surprised how attached we get to our patients. We like to keep up and see how you’re doing.”

“Certainly, I’ll write. I think writing will help me find my way.”

I had a difficult time saying no to the director.

“Good. Best of luck,” he said putting a hand on my shoulder before walking away. It’s the last time I saw him before they discharged me.

After I had been there a while, I asked my analyst why we had to be at the clinic. Why anyone had to be here and why a place like the clinic existed at all.

“Have you ever carefully observed the last sip when you drink a glass of water?” She asked.

“If I have to think about my answer, I assume my answer is no,” I said looking at her feet to avoid eye contact.

“After the last sip, there’s always a little water left in the glass. It’s usually clinging to the sides. Out of a whole glass of water there’s always some left. And this happens every time, you can’t avoid it.”

I squirmed in my seat, “Are you talking about fate?”

“I wouldn’t know anything about fate,” she said. “All I know is what I see when I finish drinking a glass of water.”

On the day of my discharge, the clinic sent someone with me to the train station. They said I was still under their supervision until I got on a train heading north.

A man I had never seen at the clinic chaperoned me. He was muscular with a shaved head, probably ten years younger than me. We took a bus to the train station and existed in uneasy silence during the thirty-five-minute trip.

As we walked to my train, I entertained the idea of asking him on a date, then thought better of it. Besides the fact that I was taking an eight-hour train ride away from the clinic, asking him on a date could be seen as another strike against me in the irrational behavior department, and I thought he might have orders to take me back to the clinic if I did anything impulsive on the way to my train.

He told me to sit by a window so he could make sure I was on board when the train pulled away. He stood on the platform waiting for us to depart.

When the train finally started moving, he didn’t wave goodbye.

I got off the train in Baltimore and went to the nearest drugstore.

I bought hair coloring with the few dollars in my pocket and dyed my hair orange in the bathroom while waiting for the next train going north. I figured coloring my hair would give people something to talk about besides the length.

I was visiting Janine before I went home to my parents.

Things hadn't gone well the last time my parents came to the clinic. My mother thought I looked sickly and badgered me about how much I was eating.

I told her the food at the clinic was either over-salted or tasteless. And, mostly, it ran right through us. I told her the majority of us had lost weight. Even with the side effects of our meds. I told her we'd started joking that maybe the clinic should focus on weight loss instead of what was going on in our minds. The staff never laughed at these jokes. My parents didn't either.

Eventually, my mother started yelling at me and then at the staff. The director had to ask her to leave.

I spoke to my father a few days later. He said they wouldn't be coming to see me anymore. That my mother couldn't handle me in my current condition. But I thought she didn't want to visit anymore because visiting reminded her of the time she had spent in a place like this. And maybe visiting made her feel like she failed to prevent me from following in her footsteps.

Sometimes I think it's the things I tell myself that make me sick. Other times, I think it's the things I don't tell myself that make me sick.

"It could be both," my analyst said during one of our last sessions.

I didn't like her suggestion. It's probably because she was right.

I asked Janine not to tell anyone who knew me from high school or college about where I'd been for the last fourteen months. I thought it would sound like I'd cracked up and lost it. But it's not that simple. It's never that simple.

I met a millionaire in the clinic. Well, she used to be a millionaire, but now she was in debt. I knew four people at the clinic who had master's degrees. None of them had worked in at least two years, so I guess those degrees weren't doing them much good.

The point was, really smart people were getting treatment at the clinic. Some of them were even smarter than the staff. Which, I think, was part of the problem.

Janine met a man and got married during my fourteen months at the clinic. It seemed fast, but love doesn't work on a schedule. At least that's what Janine said when she wrote to tell me the news.

Through a series of letters and phone calls, I had arranged for Janine to pick me up from the train station.

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I saw her black Jeep waiting for me in the parking lot when my train arrived.

Janine was just like I remembered. All dark hair and blue eyes. She could have been a model.

When I was in the car with Janine, I tried to pretend like nothing happened. But fourteen months is a long time. You can miss a lot in fourteen months. She commented about my hair. I used the same Britney Spears line I'd used on the director of the clinic. Janine didn't find it funny.

I shifted the conversation away from me and asked Janine to tell me about Harry. What he was like. What he did for work. How they met. What kind of cake they had at the wedding. Whether or not the band was any good. What their song was. I was starved for these details like a wild animal.

Harry wasn't like the guys Janine had dated before my fourteen months at the clinic. She showed me pictures, scrolling through her phone. He was skinny and a few inches shorter than Janine. He had dark circles under his eyes. Janine said Harry was the nicest man she'd ever met. I thought he had to be.

No matter how nice he was, it didn't seem like a good match. But dating was more difficult in our thirties. Looking at the pictures of Janine and Harry, I told myself difficult situations yield strange choices.

I spent a lot of the drive hoping everyone was aware of the relationship between difficult situations and strange choices. I told myself everyone would understand.

I didn't hear about how my parents met the way most children do. It was not told to me like a fairytale where my parents recounted, with glints in their eyes, how he was the most handsome boy in school and she was the most beautiful girl. Or how, when they'd first met, he swept her off her feet and the rest was history.

I learned from a letter I found in my father's study when I was eleven. It was a notice of termination from a hospital my father had worked at before I was born. In the letter, it listed the reason for termination as "Engaging in a romantic relationship with a patient."

Harry was expecting me. He didn't bat an eye when he saw my orange hair or the marks on my wrists that couldn't be hidden in warm weather. I'm sure Janine had told him about the marks weeks ago when I confirmed I was coming to visit, and I'm sure she told him about my hair via text message as she drove us back from the train station.

While Janine had picked me up, Harry had been preparing dinner. Steaks and sausages and peppers and onions and roasted potatoes on the grill. Asparagus too.

It was a beautiful night. The temperature was in the low eighties as the sun set. Janine suggested going for a walk on the beach after dinner.

Harry was drinking a corona with lime. Janine offered me a glass of red wine, and it took everything in my power to refrain from telling her I'd be happier with the whole bottle.

When the food was ready, Janine set out paper plates, and I protested. "I'd really like to eat on real plates," I said.

Janine smiled.

"You're doing the dishes," she joked as she put the paper plates away and went inside to get real ones.

We ate on the patio that overlooked their backyard. They'd stained the wood on the patio a dark red, almost the color of the wine.

Harry's cocker spaniel, Rufus, wouldn't leave me alone during dinner, and I snuck him little bits of steak under the table.

I thought about making a comment that the food was so much better than what we had at the clinic. I decided I shouldn't and instead complimented the food without comparison.

"What are your plans now that you're back?" Harry said.

"A job, probably," I said trying to sound like I wasn't horrified by those three words or the fact that Harry knew where I'd been for the last fourteen months.

"Any idea of what you'll do?"

"Harry, sweetheart, let's not bombard her with so many questions," Janine said before I could answer.

"Oh, sure, I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I didn't want to appear fragile. "I think maybe something small, part time, just to get back on my feet. That's what they suggest at the clinic when you're looking for work again."

Harry nodded and didn't ask any more questions about the future.

Janine changed the subject to movies. Harry was a big fan. Especially super-hero movies.

Once we finished eating and the plates were cleared, he spent twenty minutes talking about the challenges of bringing comic books to the big screen. Janine humored him the way you humor someone you love when you have no choice.

"Here's the thing. It's so easy to criticize an attempt to bring a popular comic franchise to the big screen," Harry started to say. But I didn't wait for him to finish before standing up and walking inside. I knew everything I needed to know. Besides, the dishes in the sink were singing a song only I could hear.

We walked on the beach after I finished the dishes. The moon was out, and I felt like I'd never seen it before. I lay on the sand for a long time. Janine and Harry wanted to go home and asked if I remembered the way back. "Don't worry," I said.

I fell asleep in the sand and was woken by Harry and Rufus about an hour later. Janine had sent a search party to find me. I told myself I'd have woken on my own.

During one of my first sessions, I told my analyst that everyone who ever met me was worse off because I was in their life.

“Even me?” She asked.

I looked her up and down. “Well, yeah. But we barely know each other. You’re getting off pretty easy.”

She laughed a tiny, exasperated laugh. “That’s only true if you were no longer here. If you were no longer here, everyone who knew you would be worse off.”

For the rest of our session we played the silent game. Both of us waiting for the other to say something. Neither of us gave. Twenty minutes later she informed me that our session had expired. I told myself she was keeping accurate time.

The next morning over coffee Jeanine said I could stay as long as I wanted. I thanked her and asked to borrow her bike. I went into town in search of a wedding gift and purchased the best blender I could find. I also purchased some toiletries and stationary and envelopes and stamps.

When I got back, I presented the blender to Janine and Harry. Then I tried to make myself useful around the house. Walking Rufus. Taking out the trash. Washing more dishes. I offered to do Janine and Harry’s laundry, but they declined. I ended up just doing my own.

That night, I sat down to write a letter to the director of the clinic.

I thought for a long time about what to say. I started writing several drafts, and they were mostly terrible, so I crumpled them up and started over.

Finally, all I said was: “Laundry is going back to the way it used to be. I think that means I will be okay. Either that or it means I haven’t learned anything.”

I told myself I’d mail the letter on my way home.

I stayed with Janine and Harry for ten days. Eating good food, drinking nice wine, and walking on the beach every night.

I wanted to stay with them forever, but I knew I couldn’t. I had to go home in search of things I needed but did not want. I told myself everyone feels this way about going home.