

On the Outside Looking In, On the Inside Looking Out

By: Shannon Annarella

I.

She narrates it like one of her scripts.

It runs through her mind repeatedly: a different office, a new face across the desk from her, but always the same scene. She walks in, timidly takes a seat. Eyes instinctively seek the nearest exit, body tenses to run at a moment's notice, hands fold, white-knuckled, in her lap. An ice-thin veneer of composure.

She goes through the motions with the latest Authority Figure: the handshake, the shy acceptance of a compliment, the trivial questions –automatic pleasantries to force rapport.

A beat. The real reason why she's here.

She steadies herself to open up –privileging a stranger with what even friends don't know. She hesitantly offers her trust to the system that broke it. Again. She begins.

Her story is not a new one, nor unfamiliar to the Authority Figure. She tells it anyway. It hasn't gotten easier. She's learned by now not to believe the reactions: the aptly timed head shakes, furrowed brows, concerned expressions. Her voice trails off. Eyes trained on her shaking hands look up, and make brief, hopeful eye contact.

Right on cue, the Authority Figure launches into a song and dance of well-rehearsed sympathy. It's a performance she no longer falls for. She knows how the scene ends.

The Authority Figure says all the right things, and then, that she's got it all wrong: a case of misrepresentation. She fights back tears, loses, as she's recast: villain, not victim.

Both parties are suspended in disbelief. The Authority Figure, paralyzed into inaction. So is she...not over a lawsuit, but retribution, stigma, the very world around her. She bows her head, reacts woodenly. Suspicion shadows fear as the Authority Figure casts doubt on her account: ulterior motives are insinuated, loaded questions fired. She has to remind herself: she *is* sure about what happened.

She weakly tries to point out flaws in policy, but is pushed down all the loopholes. She free falls, gets buried by bureaucracy.

No choice but to accept the hand offered to her. She pulls herself out, but not together. Numbly, she acknowledges the promise to help and agrees to keep in touch.

She sobs a reflexive thank you and stumbles out the door. *Dismissed.*

II.

She narrates it like one of her scripts.

It's an escape—a way of coping, of holding on when life becomes too much to handle. It provides distance: from pain, from panic, from *reality*. From broken promises and that desperate, lost sense of false security.

She retreats inward to a world of her own making. A world in which she sets the scene, provides the dialogue, and chooses the outcome. A world where she has control.

She is triggered.

That familiar stab of terror. The pounding heart, racing mind, heaving breaths: panic clawing its way out as she shakily holds it in. Anxiety thrashes inside her, masked by a pretense of calm. A too-bright smile betrayed by that unmistakable look in her eyes.

She continues on, weathering the storm until it is safe again. Perceived threats, rational or not, keep her constantly on alert. There are two options. Embrace the physical—the wild, wounded animal caged within—or escape it all. She prefers the latter. *Dissociation*.

It's not always enough. She lives life between crises, dreading what will send her reeling next. No indication that she's anything but happy. She hides it well.

Not during the empty moments. A far-off look creeps in, the smile fades during the lapses in conversation and lulls between activities. She sits alone in her room, silent, unmoving. Tries to untangle the chaotic thoughts but can't focus long enough. She gets lost in her mind instead as time flies by, unnoticed. The day goes on, a half-remembered nightmare, as stress and sensory overload sink in.

She finds solace in her writing, though her situation is too raw to put language to. She is comforted by the structures, parameters, *order* of her scripts. That sense of control again. She dramatizes her life, a running, internal monologue. Takes an outside approach, makes it someone else's story, *anyone else's* story. It's easier to stomach the Authority Figures' implied consensus: this isn't real.

It feels real.

III.

She doesn't narrate much anymore.

This isn't one of her scripts. This is reality, *her* reality. She may spend too much time in the past, but she continues to brave an arbitrary world –not as a character, but as herself. She lives off the pages, more than just a folder in a drawer or a name on an unfiled report.

She muses.

Somehow, she had internalized it. What had brought her to the offices had become her own, all-consuming reality: the ever-present past that haunted her relentlessly.

It's not something she can ever walk away from, but she's slowly learning to let go. She's come to accept it as part of her.

Trauma has colored her life: the muted shades of depression, the violent hues of anxiety, the cold gradients of fear. But they too, are giving way to something else. Optimism, though less rosy, is spreading itself out again and even hope is fragilely peeking through.

The story continues to unfold in front of her. She watches... on the outside looking in, on the inside looking out.

The road to recovery is a precarious one. There are victories and setbacks, but she treats it like a dance: moving forwards and backwards, but always, one step at a time.

She's still learning, still searching, still fighting.

I'll get there someday.