

This is the third time I'm standing outside this door, scuffing my shoes into the ground, and reminding myself all the reasons I would rather be anywhere else. This is the third time I've entered despite my best excuses. The walls beyond the door are the same grey as the stairs. They are the same unwelcoming cold too. My shoes click against the floor. The only sound in this haunting building. I wrap my coat more snuggly around myself in an attempt to keep out the cold that is trying to sleep beneath my skin. The others are already here. Huddled on chairs. Feet tucked under legs, legs tucked to chests, arms wrapped around themselves. I join them. There is no greeting, only flighty eyes peeking out from oversized hoods to meet mine and silently express that we are the same. Just as stuck. Just as lonely. Just as desperate. I take my seat. I'm sure I look just like the rest of them, though I like to tell myself that I am nothing like them.

Silence is like air here. Always present. Passed between strangers. Expected. Those who come to this meeting like to drown themselves in it. I drown myself in it too. There is nothing in silence except anything you want it to be. It's never healing, though it rarely causes more damage. We tell ourselves that encouraging silence is good. It means you can live with yourself. Really live with yourself. The kind of living with yourself that is hard and unpleasant. The kind of knowing yourself people try to avoid. Except they can't, because everyone ends up here sooner or later. They call this place a refuge. Not for us, but for the secrets we breathe into its air. The mistakes we leave engrained in its walls. That's why we came. Seeking some kind of peace. Some kind of forgiveness. Some kind of acceptance.

There is a woman here who killed her daughter. She was driving drunk. She looked down for a moment. She crashed into another car. She took her daughter's life. This woman tells the same story every meeting. She whispers it in a shaking voice, holding her fingers to her

lips as tears trace their way down her face. This is her mistake. The one she can't live with. I'm sure there have been others, but this is the one that spreads like poison from her stomach to her heart, until it consumes her chest. Until it consumes her body. Until it consumes her soul. She will keep telling the story, until her throat is raw and her lips bleed. She will tell every stranger she meets until her breath ceases to flow. She will never stop for the hope that someone might share her burden with her and one day she can breathe again without the pain crushing her lungs.

There is a man here who is a drug addict. He comes every month and sits in his chair. He sucks in a deep breath and spews a list of new mistakes he has made since the last visit. Every month he tells the meeting that he is going to stop taking drugs, get help, and build a new life for himself, yet every meeting after he confesses that he hasn't made any steps forward. His mistakes are always the same. He puts his failings on display as if someone will reach out to him. To tell him it's okay. To give him permission to be wrong. But no one does. He speaks into the silence and yet he keeps coming back.

There is a boy here who went to jail. He won't tell us why, only that he regrets it. He sits in his chair as small as possible and says fewer words than anyone else. He has the hunchback of an old man though he can't be much older than I am. He won't ever meet my eyes. He won't meet anyone's eyes. Because he keeps his eyes flashing around the room, never landing on anything long enough to truly see what he's looking at. His parents keep sending him back because one day they hope our pain will crack open his shell and he might be the boy they used to know. I bet they know why he went to jail. I bet they know why he doesn't talk about it. I bet they could help if they wanted to, but they don't. They send him here instead.

There is an old lady here, who just likes the company. She can go on and on about her mistakes because they don't matter to her. She talks about a parking ticket she got when she was

a teenager. She talks about how she didn't hold the door open for the person leaving the store behind her. She never talks about the son she doesn't see. She brings her knitting to keep her fingers occupied as she rambles. She spills yarn across the floor whenever she gets flustered. She gets angry whenever anyone asks her a question. She overflows on her seat, pulling out granola bars and crunching them without asking to share. She comes early every meeting and stays late, talking to anyone she can find, though they seldom reply. I don't know why she comes. Maybe all her little stories lead into something bigger that she's afraid to admit to herself. Maybe being around the hurt of others makes her feel less broken herself.

I'm here too. Every month since the one three months ago. I sit on my chair with my coat pulled tight and my hands clenched. I silently watch the faces of everyone who goes before me. I hope I won't have to speak, but I always do. There is something about the silence that makes me speak. Maybe it's something inside me that is drawn out by the silence. I tell little things first; I told a lie, I fell in with the wrong crowd, I didn't do the dishes. I tell what my parents would want me to tell next; I know how it feels to have drugs flowing through my veins, I crashed a strangers car, I told a lie. I tell what I'm really here to say last. Somehow that makes it easier for the words to come out; I witnessed a crime. I was called to court. I told a lie. I saved a girl who was never really my friend from a life in jail. I told a lie. She should have gone to jail, but I told a lie. I tell other mistakes too, but I always come back to that one, because that is the secret I can never tell anyone other than this group of misfits. I tell my mistake and then I sit back in my chair and I let the silence wash over me like waves. Let the pain wash over me like tall, strong, consuming waves. No one says a word and then we move on to the next troubled soul and I am left to wonder if airing my dark truth changed anything in the tumultuous storm in my stomach.

Every month we come to this building. Out of the way. Run down. Safe. Every month we shuffle inside and drown in the quiet. Every month we tell our mistakes. Next month, we come again. I'm not entirely sure why we come. Maybe it is because we are looking for just one person to understand. Maybe it's because somewhere deep down we believe mistakes are easier to carry around with us when they linger in the air instead of just our memories. Maybe it's because there is nothing else we can do to try and heal ourselves except come back and try again. Does it help? I'm not sure of that either. Are we lighter when we leave? No more lighter than when we entered. But more at peace maybe. Like we have smoothed the edges of a giant rock the way the waves would have. We leave each month with new hope that what holds us tight will one day let us go and we return each month attempting to find that same hope again. Does it help? We like to kid ourselves that it does. Sometimes we can even convince ourselves for a little while. That little while is why we come back. Because relief is relief even if it's temporary, it's worth it.