

A Story That Spins and Lands Whole

Doctors often tell us to have a script in our heads when approaching a patient encounter.
I try, but sometimes the patient hands me a different play altogether.

I told her I liked her socks (*building rapport*).

One was orange with fruit. The other was navy, thinning at the heel. "From two different exes," she said.
"They were both in love with me. Not at the same time."

She told me she used to watch a lot of videos.

"I watched hours of TikTok. Diagnosis Roulette."

She rattled off symptoms like horoscope traits: Fear of abandonment. Unstable relationships. Rapid mood changes.

"Sometimes I think I just wanted a name for it," she said. "Other times I think I wanted an alibi." She paused. "Do you think I'm textbook?"

I paused. "Not exactly."

She told me her last doctor called her "a magician with the truth."

"But I think he meant liar," she added, with her chin slightly tilted, as if waiting for me to flinch.

She said she was previously married.

That she was born on a bus between two cities and has never stopped moving since.

That she had a grandfather she had to go back home to care for.

That she'd died once in a bathtub in Regina and come back.

That her boyfriend had visited last night and promised her marriage after discharge.

The nurse told me no one had visited.

It felt like playing two truths and a lie, only no one said stop. No one said guess.

In medicine, we ask: *Is this true?*

But sometimes we mean: *Is this useful?*

Other times: *Is this a way through?*

There's a lie that protects. There's a lie that tests.

There's a lie that says: *If you believe this, maybe I'll let you closer.*

And a lie that says: *You will never understand me, but here's something shiny to keep you entertained.*

She asked if I wanted to be a psychiatrist.

"Maybe," I said. "It depends."

"On what?"

"On whether I can live with the uncertainty."

She narrowed her eyes. "You mean, live with people like me."

I think about the lies, or maybe just the platitudes, told in psychiatry.
Not the patient's. Ours.

I hear you.
This space is nonjudgmental.
We're here for you.

We mean them. But we also don't.

We are listening. But we are also observing.
We are connecting. But we are also reducing.
We are with you. But we are also with the chart.

Sometimes I caught myself hoping she'd say something I could use.

In the room, I nod gently. In the write-up, I reduce her to phrases I didn't invent but still signed off on:
MSE: Dishevelled; affect labile; tangential thought with hints of grandeur.

This doesn't feel like lying. Not exactly.
But it doesn't feel like truth either.
I notice myself taking apart fictions, even as I'm putting others together.

She asked if I liked thunderstorms.
Didn't wait for the answer.
"He did," she said. "Said I sparked like static, couldn't be touched without consequence."

She pulled at a thread in the blanket like it was a fuse.
"We had a kitchen with yellow tiles. They glowed at night. One time I threw a plate and it kept spinning.
Bounced off the wall, landed whole. I don't know why that was worse than if it broke."
She looked at her hands. "I think that's when he stopped yelling."

A long silence.

"We didn't talk for months, and then one night the phone rang. It was his number, but all I could hear was static and breathing. I stayed on the line for forty-seven minutes. It felt like prayer."

She smiled, then winked, like we were in on it together.
I didn't know my next line.

I didn't ask what was real.
Sometimes knowing doesn't help.

What stories surface in the silence of her mind, which must actually be a cacophony?
Maybe the telling was the quietest part.

She said, “You must think I’m one of the wild ones.”

I told her no.

But part of me did. Of course I did.

She was volatile and glittering, something between spectacle and sincerity.

At times, I thought she was performing.

At others, I was certain she was trying to tell the truth the only way she could.

I wasn’t sure I understood her.

I wasn’t sure I didn’t.

I didn’t know if I envied her or feared becoming her.

Maybe both.

She told impossible stories with such certainty. I still hesitate before telling my own.

On our last day, I told her I was leaving the unit.

She looked at me for a long moment.

“Are you going to write a paper about me?”

Her tone was light, almost playful. But her eyes, sharp.

She knew who I was. The type.

The ones who listen too carefully.

Who scribble later, in private, pretending the distance absolves them.

I smiled (*a beat too long, I think she noticed*).

What I didn’t say:

That I would write around her, but not about her.

That the facts would be rearranged, diluted, disguised.

That it would be called reflection, or fiction, or testimony.

That her question would be the spine of it all.

That I would tell myself this was okay. That this wasn’t a betrayal.

That this was something else. Something softer.

That maybe this was care. In its own warped form.

I told her no.

All characters in this story, including the patient and any dialogue, are fictional or composite in nature. While inspired by clinical experiences, no real individuals are described.