

Erika G Abad

Corners

Another break up to explain to another therapist, Cyn thinks as she buttons her camel coat. Break ups tend to happen in the winter. *After* the holidays. *before* Valentine's Day--Gerri, Lisa, Ella and now Rhea.

As she slips her black leather gloves over her hands, she asks herself, was it the four letters in their names? was it the snow seeping in through their shoes? These questions and their probable answers distract her from securing her keys, her phone, her wallet and her purse before she gets to her front door. So she turns around. Fuck time. She needs to be safe. Make sure, so, again, she check the stove: touch each turned knob and recite the date and the time; replug then unplug the hair straightener; empty purse and pockets until all are found. Until she can, by memory, recite the status of every key, every knob and every empty outlet.

At the door, she concludes the review: grab each set of keys in either hand, "Today is Tuesday, January twenty-third, eight a.m., and I am wearing my camel coat which," she adds looking down at her feet, "match the color of my uggs." Making sure to put each image in each crevice where anxiety wants to leak from she explains to herself, "and my purse holds my phone in the secret zipped pocket, right next to my wallet and I am putting my keys in each coat pocket and I will hold them in between locking the door and unlocking my car."

She repeats, "Today is Tuesday, January twenty-third, eight a.m.," once the front door is locked, unlocked again to check the back door and then relocked. As she walks down the stairs of her building and out to her car, she recalls how her past girlfriends reacted to her morning routine. Gerri used to grumble at Cyn's effort to diffuse her own tension. Lisa and Ella would wait outside and let her do it by herself. Rhea

would stand to the side and sigh, pursing her lips and smiling through the frustration using high-pitched insincere forms of encouragement that Cyn would barely tolerate.

Cyn gets to the car relieved that she could make peace with what she needed to do to remember. That, that morning, she didn't have to worry about someone else's pity. or frustration. or passive aggressive impatience. In the end, none of them understood what she needed to feel safe, secure and stable. She usually found that days after those relationships ended. Things returned; messages deleted; unwanted gifts from them donated. Easing out of the parking, at least she has her senses about her to differentiate between what Rhea did wrong in comparison to the others.

Despite the delay of rewalking her morning exit routine, she arrives to her appointment early. She sits in her car, watching the moving cars go ahead of her and contemplates rereading the exchange she and Rhea had before Cyn cancelled the moving truck. Cyn reabsorbs the words, the defeat that finally gave her the release she gets at the end of every messy relationship. Rhea asks for change. Change that challenges Cyn's safety. Safety is the word Cyn uses a lot when trying to explain what she needs before she moves in closer and deeper, which is why Cyn insists on space and time. Time that translates into walls for Rhea. Rhea uses walls to not listen, to ignore where Cyn is and where Cyn needs to stay until she can move. Rhea then writes Cyn pushes people away for not being there right when she says they need to be there. Rhea forgets; Rhea, like always, forgets the why behind Cyn's feelings. Rhea wants to bypass, to contain, control Cyn's shouts and cries and explains about the why she pushes, the why she walks away. Rhea wants to heal and fix and file away the childhood where bathroom corners were the safest corners for Cyn; she wants to bubble wrap and ship out Cyn's sorrow and suspicion of flashbacking to bedroom corners that were the most dangerous. Bedroom corners that needed lights and warmth and sweet smells to get Cyn to open up, to lay down, to love, to reluctantly yet hungrily love. Wounds and holes still unraveling inside her, pulling and leaking the more she tries to love. Rhea's words sting, even as she rationalizes the need, the survival strategy of pushing away before she loses. Cyn wants it to stop, needs it to stop, but doesn't trust how.

Walking out the car, she remembers the last sessions' conversations. The ones about Rhea who encouraging moving in. The ones where Cyn wanted to do what was right, what was courageous and optimistic. The ones about Rhea wanting the stories no one else wants. The ones where Cyn still did not know how to share the stories, the stories that kept her heart and her body from braiding what fears and

feelings they contained in a way that could be held, warmed and melted away. The ones where Mina, her therapist, wanted more for Cyn, wanted joy and hope and possibility, The ones where Mina, her experienced therapist, didn't push or cry or frown or reach out to pick Cyn up from the shattered pieces she would sometimes become. Cyn knew; Cyn knows that much in each session--that her messiness could be hers.

Messiness with no reason- but trying to make sense of the pain and evade the possibility of a more deeply punctured soul-flesh. Messiness only corners could cushion. In what they softened, Cyn, with time, could come out of corners like love. But if wrenched, jolted from its refuge, Cyn's defenses would emerge swinging, clawing to another room, another building, another city. Those consumed corners keep asking her to move, to seek more solace, to unravel more scars, to crawl without the claws that scratch out others who couldn't keep more scars from coming.

Cyn's shared those stories plenty of times in such rooms with social workers and psychologists and intervention workers. This time, though, she reflects on how, in all those conversations, in all the attempts to get over and grow more, she still doesn't know how to live or move without those claws, without her arms swinging out for the temporary cuts of space that cocoon her from the loss that wanting more than bruises, shouts, more than broken glass and the scars words and unwanted hands still left. Not enough to look for love without the smell of stale beer or the dark eyes or stretch marks that others would say told them 'love me more than I love myself,' so she has to love herself more and them less; hold them at arms' length till what they would, whatever *they* at the time, let her know enough she could be; enough with or without them. Blinking back into the present, darting her eyes between the cream-colored walls on either side of her, she finds her preparation to tell the Rhea story reveals the truth she doesn't want to admit. Rhea's words remind her she is not enough yet; not enough because more is wanted and expected, the more that keeps, still, so many who were there longer and deeper, away.

When her body meets the crimson-framed frosted glass door of office 307, Mina Thermopolis LCPC, her gloved hand knocks the door. She takes in a deep breath, trying to find another way into letting Rhea go that doesn't end in her worthlessness. The door opens before she can.

When dark-skinned, curly long brown hair streaked silver Mina opens the door, Cyn is already holding her leather gloves in her hand, smiling through what she has already accepted for herself. "Hello," Cyn says as she unbuttons her coat, "how are you?"

Mina steps to the side, giving Cyn room to enter the office, and answers, “I’m doing well, how are you?”

Cyn takes in a deep breath. Her eyes sweep the closed door to the kitchenette where Mina brews her tea, the warm canary walls of the closet size lobby before Mina’s teal walled therapy office. Walking in to the sea foam green room, whose windows fog opposite the cold winter air outside, Cyn hangs up her coat, sits in the arm chair closest to the door, evading the long sofa alternative, as Mina walks in and sits at the armchair in front of her desk. After Mina sits down, Cyn begins, “How am I...That’s a hard question to answer,” and after filling her chest with warm dry air adds, “did you read the emails?” Cyn meets Mina’s gray eyes wanting her words to direct the day. .

Mina nods, beginning, “Yes,” she adds as Cyn looks down, “I can see that there are two different conversations going on there. The one Rhea believes she’s having and the one you’re trying to have.” Mina waits for Cyn’s eyes or Cyn’s words before attempting to continue.

As the pause becomes more pregnant than Cyn can stand, she nods as she explains, “I need to know I can hurt people,” adding with a sigh, “and I know that giving her what she wanted would mean she thought that it was—I was okay—and so I didn’t.” Cyn stops there, taking in Mina’s interpretation that she and Rhea were having two different conversations. A lot there, a lot about not listening that Cyn knows she often avoids to evade weakness and failure. She doesn’t know if she wants to ask why. So she briefly looks up at Mina to signal her to speak.

Mina’s eyebrows furrow in that way that lets Cyn know she is not making another judgment. An expression that says no, no staring game today. Cyn doesn’t know how to continue so she changes her focus from Mina’s eyes and stares out at the window wondering if the predicted snow will fall. She breathes in the foggy window, remembering how, as a teenager when left alone, she’d put her fingertips to the frost of her bedroom window, wondering why poreless glass could turn water into ice despite the heat against it. When Cyn sees, from the corner of her eye, Mina opens her mouth to begin asking, “Could you elaborate on that?” Cyn meets her eyes again and answers.

“What I mean is,” Cyn takes a beat. She has let Mina look at her eyes too long. Eye contact makes her leg twitch. “What I mean is,” Cyn then turns to focus on the lamp hood reaching up above between the

window and Mina, “is that when I get scared; when I get paralyzed by what’s going on, when too much happens all at once, I need someone I can push away.”

Mina softens her posture and, pulls out the printed exchange, “Could you elaborate on that?”

Cyn takes in another deep breath, remembering the routine. “Panic sets in. Gotta get out of it quickly. I realize the situation has built up in a way that recreates the situation when I was five,” Cyn pauses, “when my cousin came into me the first time; or when I tried to get him to stop,” she swallows and offers, “or when my--when others...didn’t—and the only way out is to grab on to something or fight back, right? So I begin reaching, and I know I need a healthy reach. I know I need an available reach. So I reach but if I reach and land on the floor, crawling—literally and metaphorically speaking—I crawl. I crawl out and when someone finally responds, when someone finally has time,” she digs her nails in the arms of her chair as she continues, “I begin pushing with words. With unanswered phone calls. With downwards stares and glares. With crossed arms. I push with anything that will make them go away. Because I know I know I get *there* because no one was there; **no one** could be there; no one wanted to be there because I’m not important enough. So I push; I push despite their persistence, despite their apologies, in apologizing for whatever else came up, I push because, for me, for all the ways I have been blamed for being weak and being in need, I can’t hate myself for that, so it’s easier to hate—easier to blame someone *else* for not being there, for never being there, than it is...” Cyn meets Mina’s eyes after answering her question; the rush of water in her chest stirs something she can’t and does not want to name, “than it is to forgive them.”

Mina presses, “How come?”

“I dunno,” Cyn surrenders knowing this where she tends to get stuck, “but I need to know I can be on my own. That I can save myself,” she confesses, but decides to start talking about moving, moving because Rhea’s memory asks why Cyn doesn’t like moving. “Moving around as much as I have; looking for home, for belonging, being able to have me grounds me. —Because I move, because I grow, because I no longer need people don’t last for me. There’s a limit to how much needing we are all allowed, you know...” When Cyn meets Mina’s eyes, she sees answers Mina is not speaking. The moment in therapy where she tends to start breaking open and going deeper. But, taking in Mina’s concern and Mina’s questions crackling in the heated air, Cyn does not know how to move forward because these are the questions, the questions she can answer, questions she does not know how to predict. Cyn looks at Mina’s silver streak to feign eye contact but

keep...keep the tears Mina has, for a year of working with her in therapy, grown to expect when they talk about need.

Mina finds Cyn at her breaking point, the point where Cyn doesn't want to need because of her history of neglect. The history of being shunned, for more than gay, for more than gender fluid, she waits for Cyn's effort to challenge herself. She doesn't provide answers because Cyn doesn't want answers; Cyn moves away from people when they provide an answer, so she asks for more clarification. She asks for what Cyn wants to give. "I hear you trying to claw your way out of corners because you can save yourself, but I wonder," she begins leaning in which prompts Cyn to inch back in her chair, "if you could elaborate on the limitation of being able to need."

"When I was sick, on drugs, it was easy because all I had to do was pop a pill for a long period of time and wait...wait till I didn't come off as clingy or crying or angry, but then I got fat and no one could love me fat. So I had to stop the Prozac...but then the Welbutrin kept me from sleeping, from seeing anything clearly. Withdrawal or getting off of both was another bit of crazy. Which is why I moved here couple years ago; find a place where the crazy was—to find a place where I could keep busy to keep the crazy out of me. To see if keeping busy and insured could let me let others love me without needing too much or pushing too quickly.

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"I see," said Mina when Cyn pauses for a few beats to catch a breath in the middle of a reflection that speeds up her talking. "So you move to see if you can find others?"

"Yes and no," Cyn blurts, "it's more than that. Back then, when getting off meds or switching," Cyn says trying to control her heart rate, "I cried a lot; I cried and then all whoever was around had to do was hug me and tell me their story. And then it got to the point that, to keep their attention, all I had to do was cry and get angry. All I had to do was need. Because if I didn't need, then they wouldn't be there...but then, then I began to get angry. Angry at myself for needing. Angry at myself for suffering, for so many things. Angry because the only people I could keep really close, I mean, *really* close were the ones who, looking back, would need to save me to keep me around," Cyn explains leaning forward, gathering forces from remembering how asking others to let her give, to let her in would result in them pulling away.

"Oh," Mina catches a glimpse of Cyn's confusion, contradicting her inability to need with the hunger to be needed, which she then thinks out loud to Cyn, "So you don't want to need people who don't need

you?”

Cyn continues speaking without really letting Mina’s question sink in, “I couldn’t listen; I couldn’t console; I couldn’t be present in a way that was what they needed; from what I could see and feel. But they insisted; they insisted that I needed--I needed to let them in to listen and heal and save and at their time, even though I could never...I would never...”Cyn’s voice trails off and she focuses her eye on a rip she catches in the carpet under the long sofa.

Mina, catches on Cyn’s frustration, bringing Cyn’s attention back into their presentation situation in the room as she asks, “How did that make you feel?”

“The need to push, to get control,” Cyn answered, “the need to remind them that I was only good weak or that I was tired of being on the sidelines; I was tired of not being around for them or because of them. When I feel like being different is the reason they can’t or won’t love me...I push away because I need to love myself. Because they won’t. They can’t. “I hear that you feel being different is the reason family, friends, girlfriends have not been able to love you the way you need. I wonder if and when you have told them that, just like you told me right now.”

“I haven’t,” Cyn answers on the brink of shouting. She catches herself but can’t keep the anger out, “it’s not that simple because I try and then they get confused and angrier and I can’t get through to them.”

“You have talked a lot about how you have worked to change; how you’ve worked to move and be more than you feel others see when they see you and come near you. What do you feel confuses them? How do you know you can’t get through to them?”

“That’s easy,” Cyn answers crossing her arms, “They tell me they give up; they walk away; they say I’m too much; they ask for what I can’t give. And that’s when it happens. That’s how I get to a bad place. Because with no one to hold on to, with their anger, their hate, their grief I can’t rest; because I am not good enough. I get in that room again. I feel I’m pinned down and can’t get out; where I am doing everything asked but still have to hide, still have to be ashamed of giving what they, at first, asked me to give. Still have to be ashamed of what I missed. Of what they didn’t understand about the voices or the pills or the aftereffects or the clothes or any of it. And when I feel that way, when I feel I have done what was asked but still have to hide and wait and beg, then that’s not love. That’s not self-love and when I am in a point in my life where nothing can make it or make me better, where who I am matters less than what I do. I push. I

push. I push until it does. And pushing leads to moving. Getting out. Switching jobs. Switching cities. Switching states. I push until getting out has to, until getting out needs to be enough. Until I can be enough for myself.”

“So you have moved a lot. I remember you telling me you have lived in a few places. That the last time you had move across the country to here, right?”

Cyn nodded blinking her eyes and clenching her jaw.

And then,” Mina asks leaning towards Cyn who recrosses her arms, “then what?”

“Then I find freedom; then I can build relationships with people who can need me as little as I am allowed to need them; then I can garden and talk about nothing and do everything in what it means to touch the earth. Then I can love myself because I have time....”

“You have time for what?”

“I have time to love me in ways I could never in those moments,” Cyn says with tears in her eyes, “in those moments of quiet desperation and fear where no one listens; where trying to do good; trying to take risks; trying to be whole is the wrong thing--and I can make those moments less. I can make rules and guidelines I can follow where I can love myself more; I can live in myself more. I can make moments where I never have to go back...”

“But you have--” Mina says.

“Because I move,” Cyn cuts her off.

“And why do you move?”

Cyn answers, “Looking for something better, somewhere better--”

“Does moving help?”

“With jobs,” Cyn responds, “yes...with people--”

“Yeah,” Mina asks, “and with people?”

“As long as I don’t go back—“ Cyn says looking in, finding themselves in the corner of the corner room in their head where she keeps the little one hiding from the shouts, the bottles broken against the wall, the hot hands.

“Go back where.”

“There.”

“Where’s there?”

“To the beginning, to where I could never be safe no matter who said they loved me or how much, to where I could never find safety no matter where I hid; no matter where I tried to sleep, eat. Where I tried to breathe,” Cyn swallowing to keep her eyes and face dry, “as long as I don’t have to rely on the first ones or people like the first ones. As long as they’re different, they’re happy, they’re whole and they’re not trying to save me, I can be okay. I can be more.”

Cyn meets Mina’s eyes again, knowing that Mina waits for eye contact as though that alone can keep Cyn out of that room, “More than what?”

“More than the crazy one in need of saving, and I just need enough...enough and I never have to leave. One thing where I can be enough outside of me--not too much, not too little--but enough.

“Why?”

“So I can just,” Cyn says tears spilling out of her eyes, “because I’d love to just...”