

# Missing Pieces

Category: Coming Undone

written by Kathy Swearingen | May 4, 2023

"Your love makes me feel alive," she says, eyes on the floor, blank faced, looking anything but alive.

This once bubbly girl with a jazzy soul and a voice bursting in major chords, weeping over the beauty in Chopin's Preludes, as lights soared beneath her slender fingers moving across ivory keys. Who attended college until her senior year only to suddenly withdraw with a forest fire burning through her mind.

"It happens at this age," a doctor had said. "When the circuits of the brain knit together, these synapses sometime misfire."

Except there's been a mistake, I say. This wasn't on my list of motherly concerns. That a daughter finishes college, establishes a meaningful career, meets a loving partner, lives a fulfilling life.

My list scatters as I sit across from her, on an orange vinyl chair beside a finger-smudged glass top, in the Quiet Section. No television, no music, no flimsy boxes of puzzles.

To my left, a psych nurse sits behind a large glass window, one eye on her computer, another on us. My daughter's blonde bangs hang like heavy curtains across her blue eyes.

Last night nurses had dressed her in a sheer lavender hospital gown, after the police had arrived, after they'd strapped her down, angled the metal gurney into the back end of an ambulance, delivered her to this hospital's pale, empty room. Sedated. Eyes shut. Hands that once cradled kittens drawn out from either side, wrist-bound like a crucifixion.

This morning she sits across from me, wearing a discarded black oversized NASCAR sweatshirt. I struggle to compose myself.

*Don't ask questions, I remind myself. Don't make her talk. Just tell her you love her.* I lean forward, touch her hand.

"I love you."

After a pause, she says, "I think you can leave now."

I rise, stunned. Reluctant to leave, after clearing security downstairs, after an escort brought me in a locked elevator, signed in at the nurses' station. But as staff approach she follows, allows me to embrace her once more. I hear a mechanized whir as the automated metal doors sweep open, then lock shut.

On the Open Side, patients are free to wander. Tattooed women my daughter's

age braid each other's hair, giggle. Canned laughter from day time television spills into the community room where staff wearing royal blue scrubs sit around tables covered with puzzles to help patients find the missing pieces.

*Kathy Swearingen  
Haslett, Michigan*