Self Care

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2015. Two billboards went up next to each other at the bottom of my street. One said LEAVE, the other said REMAIN. They were huge, and seemed to cut off a significant portion of the sky if you looked at them too long, which I did, every day for over a week. I was a term into a PhD in social science. I already knew it was important to really consider the arguments, so I took the time to stand in front of each of billboard, stretching and craning to gain perspective. I refused to soothe my cricked neck at night with the lavender warming pack offered by my flatmate, Florette. She was audibly concerned but I repeated to her what I’d found out: “Those billboards are ginormous, Florette. Google is no fucking help.” I wanted to ask how she felt about the stability of her life here in London, but it would be obvious the question of her leaving or remaining was really the question of how it would affect me. My mother had left me, so had a few significant others. A good flatmate was hard to find. She shook her French head at my nonsense and headed out to the pub.

2016. I hadn’t eaten in three days. There was a woman at the bus stop near the vandalised billboards with a black eye like a rotting peach, and bruises either side of her windpipe. She looked at the pavement as I walked past, headed to another march with my placard in my hand: NO FEES NO CUTS NO DEBT. Wrongheaded, I doubled back to ask her how she was. I’m dying, she said. But what’s it to you? In what way do you possibly think you can help? I guessed I was at least two skin
shades lighter than this woman. The bus came and carried her away, but it took me a while to move from the spot; I had to consider the billboards again, which wished death upon each other in brutal layers of spray paint. Humans made little sense; my research on intersectionality had long since spun out of control, as had the concept itself, maybe, a little bit, if you thought about it, which was all I did into the small hours. Later at home, I Googled bruises on neck and all the images that popped up were those of women. I noted they were all white women, and wrote this down somewhere with a question mark. On an old memory card in a drawer there was a photo of my own throttled neck. That didn’t matter. The man now running America had talked about building walls, grabbing pussies, and punishments for abortions. There already were punishments for abortions as far as I knew. Not that what I knew mattered. Florette tried to feed me, but I shrugged her off, and then crumpled to the parquet between the kitchen and the living room. “This is not normal,” I heard her say as I came around, but what did normal mean these days? And who were any of us to decide? I felt the weight of my head in her lap and the smell of rotten peaches filled my nose.

+ 2017. If there were a test for goodness I would fail it. Just wanting there to be a test, a way to revel in possible success, indicates a profound lack of character. It was Pride and Florette was on to it. She had made us both t-shirts for the parade that said we are going to change the world with a little rainbow stitched underneath, and she was so excited that I try mine on that I got tired and told her I couldn’t go. “You need a nap and a fuck,” she said to me, but in French, so I really had to parse it. Sleep proved impossible, because I was afraid of cladding our flat didn’t even have, and charred bodies, in Kensington of all places, real people half forgotten already, if the news was any way to judge. My PhD supervisor had emailed: perhaps it would be a good idea to interrupt, until you’re able to continue. There’s no shame in sticking a pin in things until you have the energy to turn
them around. I started swiping right and kept going until I found a warm body, but the embrace was brisk and bland. In the morning I sat up in bed and looked dumbly at the bouquet of placards propped against my wall: DUMP TRUMP NO FEES NO CUTS NO DEBT FREE PALESTINE IMMIGRANTS ARE WELCOME AT MY HOUSE PUSSY GRABS BACK—I was living in a Fellini out-take. The last right swipe had left nothing but the absence of a real connection behind.

2018. “You need a nap and a wank.” This was Florette’s advice, revised. “You have a problem with awareness.”

“You mean self-awareness.”

“Merde. I know what I mean.” She glared at me, and ripped an old Bowie poster off her wall, tearing his poor dead face along the zigzag. I was helping her pack, and folded a sweatshirt she’d dumped on her bed back into her drawer. She had met somebody and in the morning she was moving just a five-minute tube ride away to live with them, to pay bills, dine, converse, argue and laugh with them. Maybe we would see each other again, but we hadn’t decided a time. I was developing a migraine so I flipped her suitcase shut and lay on it, feeling like all the endings inside me had frayed. Florette roused me at dawn by tapping me firmly a few times on the crown. The light rubbed pink through her curtains as I came to and she was talking about how I hated myself, one hundred percent, and how that made it impossible for me to take good advice, meant well. I rolled off her suitcase into the corner so she could continue leaving and when I came to again, both the suitcase and Florette had gone.

Whole days passed in the corner of that room. News alerts on my phone kept me bashed, in relentless company. Then whole days passed in front of the billboards at the end of the road; the left warned that OB_S__Y is a form of cancer, while the right sold frozen chips. A jogger chugged past me so I followed him, just to break away. He was fast, with high, determined buttocks that kept me focused as my breath grew short.
and ragged, and I tailed him along the high street, dodging elderly black women in headwraps with shopping trolleys full of yams, and through the park, a green interruption, where he showed me he had reserves of energy I didn’t, breaking into a sprint that tore a sad distance between us, further and further, until I was no longer in his tailwind but alone in the psychosphere again.

... You hate yourself, one hundred percent.

In the weeks I wandered around the borough, the idea of therapy gripped me. Florette had mentioned it one or two times. She had also emailed about it: save your own life first, Al. All of her advice had begun to jumble up in my mind: save your own life, nap and a wank, get therapy, get happy, leave it alone, start the PhD again when you’re ready, stop emailing my partner about things like how I take my tea.

The therapy I found was located in a bland shop-front rental on Charles Street, near the laundrette with the plastic dolphins stuck on the window, which meant I could get two things ticked off in a day. For a little while, this therapy consisted of daydreaming about the plastic dolphins riding actual waves, and smiling over how my filthy knickers and wretched soul were getting themselves cleansed at the same time. I liked to position myself on the ground while my knickers spun, spread in front of the floor to ceiling window, knowing how people in London never looked up. From my spot I could just about see the laundrette.

Would you say you have trouble being present in the moment, Al?

My therapy loved to play these tricks so I always refused to answer. Every time I showed up there were increasing numbers of new and slippery tricks. Are you unhappy? Are you unloved? Do you know yourself? Do you have a reasonable grasp of the value of your existence and what purpose you serve in the world? The tricks were opaque but I could see them. The blandness of the office was designed to support this subterfuge: flat off-white walls and carpet, no art anywhere (a non-position), no desk, two
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chairs, a coffee table with a chrome cube spewing tissues on it. The absence of a desk bothered me the most. It screamed that my therapy had no need for drawers because it had nothing to hide. You were supposed to draw a blank on everything but yourself. I’d seen on TV how the arctic blankness of Svalbard could trick you into thinking the place was benign, when actually there were hoards of titanic bears everywhere, ripping the blubber from seals. In between climaxes, I liked to tell my therapy I thought my life would be better if I were a polar bear. I wouldn’t hate myself if tearing up seals and surviving the winter were the only things I was expected to care about. It nodded and pretended like it wasn’t despairing of my prognosis. I spread wider and rubbed myself carefully, with precision. I guessed I was now hating myself at probably around eighty-nine percent.

Then I met my nemesis. She was the receptionist at the front desk of the building. I didn’t notice her for weeks because I used the back entrance, for privacy. Also because the desk was quite high and there was also one of those big Swiss cheese plants in the way. On the wall behind the desk was a brown sign that told you which floor to find the office you were looking for. All the offices were rentals so you could slide the names out of the sign and throw them away if somebody didn’t pay up. My therapy was definitely on the third floor but I stopped to look at the brown sign every time I passed by the desk. It wasn’t a ruse; I just liked re-discovering something I could rely on, something I already knew for sure. I looked until I was comforted.

“Do you need help, miss?” The first time my nemesis spoke to me it was to say something mean.

“Everybody does,” I replied, and walked quickly along the corridor and up the stairs to my therapy. I walked running a finger along the dado rail on the wall to make sure I stayed grounded and didn’t lose all my remaining self-hatred over something as pathetic as the quickness of my own wit. My therapy smiled at me when I entered the room. I told it about
everybody does.

The following week the brown sign said my therapy was on the second floor. I peered behind the flat, green gloss of the Swiss cheese leaves like a naturalist searching for a rare animal. I was searching for someone primal. I found her wolf-toothed and glowing, maybe even post-orgasmic. She boosted her pneumatic chair with a few wicked puffs so that she was head, shoulders, and small sharp breasts above the desk. I took this as an act of aggression. What is it, exactly, that you are trying to do?

Her face was sneaky. My nemesis had the criminal eyes of a magpie. I’m trying to bruise you into acknowledging me, she said. Into really loving me. Is it working?

That’s a ridiculous tactic. I didn’t know what to do about her top lip. I could see the sweetest little hairs there, and a mole under the make-up, knobbly and insistent, like a limpet. In all my dreams of love I’d never pictured a wolf, a magpie, or a limpet. I have an appointment, I said, and scuttled off to find the dado rail. She was yelling something insane as I left.

That night I emailed Florette: I’ve taken your advice. I’ve also met a very strange, potentially demented person I want to tell you about. You’ll laugh, I promise. If you’d like to meet for a coffee, that would be nice.

I got an out-of-office back.

...  

I heard therapy doesn’t come cheap so I got a job in the dolphin laundrette. My bras came out of the machine one day in their protective net bag and the laundrette manager, Sharron, came over and commented that she’d never seen such a thing before. She fingered the bag, genuinely intrigued.

“It’s from John Lewis,” I said. “It was £9.99. It stops the hooks snagging all your other clothes, and it stops the under-wires from bending, and the padded cups from going lumpy.”

“Hmm.” Sharron was an older black woman with blonde braids scooped up in a banana clip. She wore a tabard over a very colourful outfit, and lots of gnarly gold rings that probably snagged on everything. I watched, helpless, as she punched
a ringed fist into one of my cups. My small sharp breasts felt a twinge, deep in the muscle. I wanted to tell Sharron I was actually working on a PhD that was progressing wonderfully well and that I didn’t need her approval. “No lumps,” she said, “good idea,” and she patted me on my arm. I tried to hug her, but she steered me to a chair and made me drink tea that tasted like burnt corn. I told Sharron about my nemesis across the road. About gaslighting and how women are conditioned to despise each—

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, and went off to help someone with a dryer. Sharron was just playing; she knew. I accepted the assistant manager’s job at exactly 73p below the London Living Wage. I had a placard at home about the London Living Wage.

... My therapy wanted to know what I thought the job could offer me: Is it social interaction? Is it interaction across the social strata? Are you lonely? Are you afraid of dying alone, unclaimed and/or profoundly misunderstood?

My nemesis wanted to know what I thought I could offer the job: You’re making a mockery of suffering people. You have a washing machine at home. It’s a brand new Hotpoint. Have you even considered what it’s like to really live without a Hotpoint? You should be ashamed.

I was ashamed. There were homeless people, marginalised people, whole economies skewed and hobbled by imperialist greed. There were knock-on effects, consequences, and ramifications. My therapy nodded then shrugged. My fingers found warmth and wetness, pressing and circling between my legs as I lay on the ground, creating a little envelope of feeling just for me. I could live inside it, at least until the fresh air called, listening to the muffled rhythm of my flesh and bone working my flesh. The carpet in the blank room was rough on my back and dusty in my nose, and when I opened my eyes, the pigeon-shit roofs of red double-deckers skated past. From my vantage the laundrette was just visible.
Maybe my nemesis was right about the job. I discussed this with Sharron while she pasted a peeling dolphin back onto the laundrette window with poster glue. “Your schooling doesn’t pay you any money?” she asked me.

“No. I pay them.”

“Well then,” she said. “You need a job.”

“But do I need this job?” I followed Sharron back to our little cubby where she hit the switch on the travel kettle.

“This job is a job,” Sharron said.

I explained to Sharron about tautologies, and then about this woman, Gertrude Stein, who I’d studied. If I had to guestimate I’d say my self-hate levels were hovering at around ninety-eight percent just then. She told me I needed to eat, which was a damn fine argument. I got us packet sandwiches on two-for-one from the Costcutter next door, and told the sales assistant, who was probably making even less than I was, to keep the change. I knew this was in no way a solution.

When I returned Sharron was helping a man who had large brown beseeching eyes. He didn’t know how to operate the machines. Once everything was bundled in and spinning, this man sat down on one of the benches, pulled his legs up and then stretched right out. He put his arm over his face and sobbed. I followed Sharron back to the cubby. “What’s his problem?”

She stirred the tea. “That man has never had to wash his own pants,” she said, and shook her head, disgusted. I had no idea Sharron was a feminist, and wondered if she had gotten something from our chat about Stein after all, and if she would like to see my placards. We looked after newly dumped men all the time, showing them the buttons and the different parts of the detergent drawers. I wanted know more about Sharron’s feminism.

“So do you think domestic labour should be shared equally in all cases?” I asked.

Sharron looked at the little mirror on the wall of the cub-
by. “If you soil it, you should know how to wash it,” she said and swished her braids.

Florette emailed me back: I’m glad you’re sorting your head out. You’re a good person, Al. You are. Text me when you want to meet. Maybe next week? Stop sending emails. It’s weird.

I likened my reaction to the same feeling a rescue dog must have when it finally gets itself rescued. Of course my nemesis had questions: Everything is about animals with you lately. What’s that about?

I was staring at the brown sign again—I had grown to accept the presence of misinformation. It is? I hadn’t realised.

It is. If you’re trying to simplify, don’t. It’s reductive and naïve. Simplify?

Anyway, you don’t like or care about animals. You eat meat.

Simplify what? The world around me?

You don’t support PETA.

Simplify humans? Simplify the mess we’ve made?

You don’t even give money to the WWF. Not a penny. It’s like you’re telling that sad panda to eat shit and die. You should be ashamed.

Every subject was a potential ISSUE, a derailment. I told my nemesis about the dumped man with the big brown beseeching eyes, like a signalman pulling the lever. She placed the chrome tissue cube from my therapy room next to the Swiss cheese. You see this? she said. It’s empty. I have to fill it up. I never fill it up after the women have been in there. Only the men.

This particular train was collision-bound. I was sure she hadn’t re-filled that thing ever.

The women bring their own tissues. My nemesis pursed her lips so that the limpet appeared to be speaking. That’s right. Or, they ration the tissues they do take. One or two per hour. Think about that for a minute.

I did. The reception area was very quiet. The brown sign told me that my nemesis had moved my therapy room down to the first floor.
It means, she continued, that women do not give themselves permission to own their own emotions. We deny ourselves legitimacy because we have been delegitimised.

Hmm, I said. I had to turn away from the brown sign. I tried to focus on the dolphins swimming on the launderette window. They were just visible through the glass panel in the door.

*How many tissues have you taken from the cube?* she asked me.

A surprise. A lie might put her on my side. *None. In therapy, I have never cried.* I had taken at least seven tissues to wipe myself with, and my eyes had watered once during climax, though I wouldn’t exactly label that crying.

*You should know better. Really. Aren’t you supposed to be smart?*

My PhD was roadkill. If I wanted to revive it my only option would be to scrape it off the tarmac and stuff it. *Humans are the only animals that cry,* I muttered. I didn’t cry in therapy because I was still on the polar bear thing, so I wasn’t just denying my intellect and my right to emote, I was denying my humanity. *I know,* I said to my nemesis. *I should be ashamed.*

My nemesis closed her eyes and performed an emphatic nod. For the first time with her I wanted to laugh out loud.

I popped the tissue cube into my bag and wandered up to my therapy on the third floor. The room was basically empty. Just two chairs (one broken, lying on its side) and an ugly scarred coffee table. Real blankness—not of the Svalbard variety. My therapy had moved operations downstairs after all. I was too tired to find its new location so I abandoned my appointment, and headed for my shift with the floating feeling of being early.

Sharron had ideas about blackness. “You’re wearing a foundation that is two shades too light for your skin,” she told me, while I inspected my lip mole in the mirror on the cubby wall. “No wonder you hate yourself.”

“Not you, too,” I said.

She pulled me over to a bench and got two little sachets
out of her tabard. “Here,” she said, tearing them open with her teeth. “Some samples. Mix and match until you find what fits. This way.” She held my wrist gently and dabbed a little of each there, then blended with her warm, sure thumb until I began to cry.

The dumped man with the brown beseeching eyes came and sat next to us with his newspaper. “What’s her problem?” he said to Sharron about me.

“Sort your own out first, maybe, yeah?” she said, which cheered me up, even though I knew the idea to be flawed.

The dumped man went back to his paper for a second, then held it out to show us the front page. “There’s a war going on out there,” he said. “It’s all connected.”

Me and Sharron couldn’t say anything to that so we both decided to keep quiet.

Later, when I tried to ruin myself lifting a huge bag of wet laundry from a broken dryer, the man saved it from my spindly embrace. “Watch it. Not more than you can carry, love,” he said. “That’s how people get hurt.”

…

I was pasting a dolphin back onto the window when I saw that a florescent orange sign had gone up in the window of my therapy building. I crossed the road and tried the front door. It was locked. I peered on my tiptoes through the glass pane to see if my nemesis was trapped inside there, but apart from the reception desk, there was nothing. No Swiss cheese plant, no brown sign on the wall. No therapy. No nemesis. I had not checked my self-hate levels in a while and made a promise to do it later over being so unceremoniously dumped. I stood on the pavement and waved at Sharron beyond the dolphins, but she didn’t see me. I’d never noticed before but one of the dolphins was swimming in a different direction to the rest of the pod. In the ocean, a decent distance away from London, there had to be reasons for this, why a dolphin would try to go it alone in a confusing abyss, but on the window it made little sense.
“Sharron,” I said, when I got back inside. “How do I get these off the glass?”

“Management won’t like it,” she said, standing next to me, squinting at the window.

“We’re management,” I said. “And anyway, I only want to turn things around.”

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