

# She went quietly

I knew something was up because the kitchen was spotless. Even my brother's breakfast bowl had found its way to the dishwasher, as if by magic, and that before ten in the morning. The smell of lemon soap was in the air and fresh, purple tulips were placed in the vase on the kitchen table. Laura was coming home

I heard my mother's footsteps approaching the kitchen. "So when is she coming?" I did my best not to sound antagonizing. It wasn't that I did not love my sister, because I did, she just tended to be more of a headache than I thought she was worth. Six years ago, she'd moved across the country, a year later she almost stopped visiting, two more years and she stopped coming home for Christmas. I found it hard to feel close to a person who wasn't a part of my life, apart from an occasional *'like'* on Facebook.

"Tonight." My mother said, and put down the bucket of water she was carrying. She dried some sweat from her wrinkled forehead. "She's staying the whole weekend. So maybe you can stay in Tommy's room?"

"Sure." This visit was going to be great, I thought, I would bunk with my teen brother who was just discovering masturbation. Fantastic! I understood my mother's excitement though; we hadn't seen Laura for a whole year. And I *did* want to see her, but see her as in a skype call or a normal two-hour visit, not for a whole weekend. "Is Matthew coming with her?" Her on and off boyfriend over the last few years, according to Facebook anyway.

“They broke up in May.” My mother sighed. “He was cheating with that Nicole girl. You know, from that place she used to work.”

I didn’t know, but nodded anyway. From the sound of it my mother had demanded a complete debrief on the phone when Laura informed her of the visit, whenever that was. I made the assumption that she hadn’t told mum about her visiting until the last possible moment. The last Christmas she visited she said nothing about coming, just showed up on the door with Matthew.

“I don’t have to tidy my room then.” I said, grinning so my mother would know I was kidding and not throw a fit. “Don’t worry; I’ll even change the sheets.”

My mother smiled, and for a moment she looked like the mother I saw in my childhood photos. “She’s bringing Pouch.”

“Really?” I thought cats hated car rides. Laura’s Facebook wall was filled with pictures of Pouch and her everywhere, even the grocery store when the large cat was hidden inside a large bag, only his head popping out. He looked like a fluffy toy in that picture.

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“You’re not answering my question again, Laura.” Connie’s voice reached me through what felt like a thick layer of wool in my ears. I glanced at her; long enough for her to recognize that I’d heard. But what had the question been again? I knew it had nothing to do with the tricolored cat my mind was occupied with as

he lay nonchalantly in my lap. She asked about my weight during my Monday session, I think, I couldn't remember. The antique wall-clock showed we were midway in the session. In a normal session I would now begin to open up, or connect as Connie said. It took me this long to get warmed up for the big talks, only to get cut off twenty to thirty minutes later. Someone else was in Connie's back-to-back queue to get their head put straight. I had a sip of water.

"It is a very important step for your recovery to reconnect with your family." She said before I had a chance to say anything at all, I could tell she knew she'd lost me. I was grateful for the change of topic. "I'm glad you are taking this initiative. When did you say you were going?"

"Friday."

"And returning?"

"Wednesday." That was the official plan anyway.

"How do you feel about this visit?"

Pouch purred loudly as I scratched his chin. He was a good cat, an unusual sociable one, and so easy to please. I stroked the thin passage of his nose and he looked like he would fall asleep in an instant. He looked so comfortable; his nails digging rhythmically into my thigh, I envied him for his peacefulness.

"Laura." I could hear the suppressed anger in Connie's voice. It wasn't like I did it on purpose, I think. She stared at me. Maybe she thought she could will me into talking.

“It’s too long?” Those days would last a lifetime. Connie wrinkled her forehead and I did my best to send her a polite smile. “But I think it will be good.” A satisfying answer, not sounding too enthusiastic or too demotivated. Connie’s expression eased up and she leant back in her chair.

“What will be good about it?”

“My mother will take Pouch to the vet for me.” Pouch needed his yearly check-up and vaccinations. Saving money for that had been out of the question when I had to pay to see Connie three times a week. Not to mention that I didn’t know how to budget. Two weeks ago, I bought five pairs of shoes and a ‘Cat Tree Cat Temple Extreme Elite’; an activity centre for cats. Last week rent was due, and I had spent it all on shoes and a cat tree Pouch had no interest in.

“You will call in on Friday and Monday?” Connie was anything if not dedicated to her patients. Wasn’t I lucky; free phone check-ins on holidays instead of £70 a session.

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The day went by with two lectures at Uni and then an exhausting trip to Planet Organic with my mother. The trip was filled with asking the employees about the organic food and Fairtrade and whether or not this or that was vegan-friendly even though we were in effing Planet Organic. Laura had stopped eating animal products when she moved out. Baked Mushroom Risotto with Caramelized Onions was prepared and ready around half five when Laura had said she was due to arrive.

“It might be traffic.” My mother entered the kitchen again after standing on the front porch for almost fifteen minutes. I sighed. This was so typical Laura. Whenever she wanted anything, it had to be done pronto, the rest of us were just extras in the Laura-show.

“Yeah, why don’t you call? Or can’t we just eat? I refuse to eat this crap if it turns into mushy soup.” I should have known that Laura wouldn’t be on time, she never was.

“Language! No, we will eat as a family.”

“Mum!” Why was it always like this? When Laura found it convenient to show her face, we had to pretend she was a part of the family, whatever family we had left since dad died. “Sure, but then you take responsibility for this food thing.”

The doorbell rung and the door opened. I heard Tommy yell “Laura!” from upstairs. Mom smiled at me and I shook my head again. To her this was faith intervening.

“Go help Laura in the door, or get the table set.” She didn’t wait for my answer before heading off to help Laura and I was left with the risotto. I got something labelled ‘better than cheese’ and placed it on the table, I very much doubted it would beat cream cheese. I was facing the stove when she spoke.

“Hi, Emilie.”

Her voice sounded like a vague memory, we hadn't talked since her last visit. I turned and my chin fell down to my knees, I covered my mouth with a hand and pretended it was a yawn. If I didn't know it was her I wouldn't have recognized her.

"Sorry. I..." I didn't know what to say.

"Yeah. I've gained some weight." That was to put it lightly. Last time I saw her I swear her cheek bones could have cut glass. My sister had changed. Her razor cheekbones and experimental, always styled, hair was gone. She looked so normal, so average Jane, with blond hair and blue eyes and a little bit on the chubby side, no designer clothes either. No Chanel hand bag. This was the sister I knew when I was thirteen, this was the sister I knew when dad was alive.

"I'm so glad to see you." I said.

She helped me finish setting the table and we all started the meal in silence. It wasn't a pressing silence, but just calm.

"Seriously mom, are you guys vegan now?" Laura asked and pointed with her knife towards the "better than cheese"-cheese.

"We thought you were." Mom said, looking confused.

"I'm living with a carnivore now The vegan thing was just a phase. Got some cream cheese?" She asked smiling. The furry carnivore sat by her chair looking like he might hope she would drop something. I figure he wouldn't like the food we'd made much.

"Yeah, you bet." I said and grabbed the cream cheese from the fridge.

"I really appreciate your effort though... I didn't mean to be rude or anything."

This was the first time I had heard Laura say anything resembling of an apology.

My mother hesitated, then laughed briefly. "Honestly we're just relieved, love."

Mum said.

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"Why do you repeat my name all the time?" I asked Connie. "It doesn't make you seem sincerer."

"Laura, you are avoiding my questions." Connie looked calm as ever, as she looked at me through her half-moon glasses. That was what I liked about her, the glasses. They gave her age even though I doubted she had passed forty. "You seem like you're under a lot of pressure today, you're not yourself. So can you tell me what's going on?"

"I work 45 hours a week, of course I'm under pressure. I'm fine" It was the answer I gave everyone. I'm good. I'm fine! The last couple of weeks the charade hadn't made me want to scream. "I have nothing going on, and that's the problem. I'm just a waste of space."

"You applied for that manager position..."

"Senior regional production manager." I corrected her, but didn't feel like saying I hadn't got it.

“Have you heard back yet?” Of course she had to ask, I rolled my eyes. I just had to keep it together for the next 50 minutes. Oh shit, I forgot today was a double session. My mind was scrambled this week.

“No, but I doubt I got it. They wanted someone with experience. I was like born yesterday.” They wanted someone young, about twenty/twenty-five with fifty years’ experience, the enthusiasm of a toddler and a DBA. It hadn’t been their exact words, but what they meant.

“You have a Master’s Degree.”

“A lot of people do. MBA is the easiest Master to get.” Quite frankly, I believed they passed on me again because they knew I’m seeing Connie. I was running on empty. I was a nutcase. So I resigned the following day.

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After dinner I helped Laura carry her luggage upstairs. It proved she still had one Chanel bag, filled with cat food and toys.

“Are you moving back home?” I joked as I helped her screw together Pouch’s scratch post.

“No, no. Pouch is staying for a while.” The cat had wandered around my bedroom, investigated every corner. Right now he was very interested in sniffing a jacked I had worn while babysitting a friend’s dog. He didn’t seem the least bit traumatized by the car ride.

“Why?” I rocked the cat post a little, it seemed sturdy. “I think this is done.”

“Mum’s just taking him for yearly check-ups and stuff.” Laura shrugged. “I bought a cat temple for him, you know, those with several levels of scratchiness. He refused to use it, he prefers that one. He tore the box to shreds though...” The scratch post was clearly worn and almost all the rope was gone on one side of it.

“I know, you told Facebook, with pictures and videos and all...” I didn’t really understand the need to give pets their own furniture, but I suppose Laura had the extra money.

“I do post everything on Facebook.” She admitted and we went quiet for a while. I didn’t know what to say.

“So how have you been?” I asked while reaching for Pouch, he evaded my hand and jumped onto Laura’s lap.

“You still have that.” She pointed towards my desk where I had a glass with a preserved trout.

“Yeah, never felt like throwing it away. Doesn’t smell or anything.” Dad had taken us on a fishing trip the day before his accident.

“You refused to throw it back, it was so tiny.” I assumed she was teasing me, but it just sounded more like a statement.

“It was the only fish we got. We’d been on the lake for two hours.” It wasn’t like I was going to throw away something I had spent hours waiting for.

“I got a fish too.” Laura insisted, and I remembered. She’d thrown hers back.

“Throwing it back in probably killed it.”

“Yeah, or getting hooked.” We went quiet again and sat in silence for a while. I couldn’t find anything to say. “Do you think about him a lot?” Laura asked.

“I try not to.” We didn’t really talk about dad. Tommy didn’t remember him well and mum, I didn’t blame her for not wanting to talk about losing the love of her life. “Do you?” His death might seem cartoony, but falling off the roof was no joke to us after dad’s death.

“Yeah, a lot. I just wonder why...” Laura said, her voice broke and I looked at her but she looked just fine. She sent me a smile and I smiled back. “Just thinking how things could be different, you know...” Her voice trailed off and she stood up. “I need to talk to mom about which vets she should use for Pouch. Thanks for letting me use your room.”

“Used to be yours.” I shrugged.

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“Do you blame your father?” Connie stamped around in that old swamp again, as if my answers would change if she just asked enough times.

“For what?” I snapped. “For leaving? For dying?”

“Why are you getting upset, Laura?” No matter how much I wanted to yell that I wasn’t upset, I restrained myself. She knew why I was upset; I was mad so I couldn’t cry. Because it was so much easier to be mad about dad’s ‘unfortunate accident’ rather than dealing with him being gone. I could feel my lip trembling.

“This is a safe space.” Connie pushed the Kleenex box closer to me. I tugged Pouch’s fur and he looked at me, the soothing purring stopped and I eased my grip. I didn’t want to talk about this, again.

“No, I don’t blame him. I just don’t understand why. Why he left.” I grabbed a tissue and blew my nose. “Can we talk about something else?”

“We could, but I think this is an important topic right now.” Connie said. “Why don’t you want to talk about your father today?”

“I just don’t want to! I never want to.” I knew why, if I had to talk about this I would say something that would make her worry. If she worried too much, she would have to take action, and if I was hospitalized now my travel plans would fall apart. “It’s too hard right now.”

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When my alarm went off at nine I could smell the sweet smell of pancakes. Mum was making a family breakfast; she hadn’t done that in years. I noticed that Tommy was already downstairs, when I got out of the top bunk. It’s funny how when you’re a kid everyone wants the top bunk and when you get a little bit older everyone fights for the bottom one. Or maybe it was just us being lazy and not wanting to climb the ladder. Tommy won after three out of five matches of rock, paper and scissor last night and got his pick.

“Get Laura and come down for breakfast!” My mother yelled from downstairs. I put on my slippers and went over to my room to knock on the door.

“Breakfast.” I said after knocking twice. There was no reply and I knocked again. Laura could be asleep. She was a heavy sleeper.

“Laura?” I asked and opened the door slightly to look inside. A paw slipped out and pulled the door, I let Pouch open the door enough for him to step into the hall way. The bed was made. I opened the door wider. Laura’s suitcase was still standing neatly against the wall. Had she gone out? I headed downstairs, and was surprised to find Tommy helping mum set the table.

“I think Laura’s gone out.” I sat down by the table. “Didn’t she need to get a charger?” I’d overheard her mention that to my mother last night. She had a blackberry and we all had iPhones.

“Her cars still here.” My mother said, looking out the window. “Did she take Pouch?” As on key the cat pranced into the kitchen. A furrow appeared between my mother’s eyebrows.

“Maybe she went to the corner shop?” I shrugged. It wasn’t like she didn’t know the neighbourhood. We had grown up here.

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The ticking of the clock filled the silence between us for minutes. I looked at Connie, trying to calculate how much I paid for each minute of silence; wondering if she kept track of it too. She waited for me to answer, it seemed to be the theme of our session. Where her patience came from I had no idea.

“I think I called her last week.” But no one answered the phone, mom had tried to call back later but I’d ignored it. “I try to call once a week.”

“Good, try to keep that up.” Connie didn’t look convinced. At my best I called every other week, and sometimes once a month felt like too much. “Do you still want me to keep her informed of your progress? We talked about before, but I have to reaffirm this every now and then, as you are not a minor and --”

“Yes.” I cut her off. Sometimes she sounded too much like my manager as if my mental health was some sort of business she was managing, in some sense I figure it was.

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I had breakfast with Tommy on my own, while my mother went into the living room to try to call Laura. Since she didn’t return I assumed Laura didn’t pick up.

When Laura still hadn’t showed up by lunchtime I got an uncomfortable knot in my tummy I couldn’t quite explain. Pouch still pranced about the house. I’m not a cat expert but I thought he looked a little distressed by his owner’s absence. He meowed meekly every now and again and wouldn’t settle on a spot to sit or lay down. If just some hours without Laura did this to him, I wondered how he would react when Laura went back home without him.

Mum was on the phone again when I went downstairs to get some camomile tea. I heard her voice from the living room. The kettle made too much noise for me to make out what she was saying. The kitchen table was still a mess from breakfast

and I decided to clear the table while the water boiled. Why was mum so worried? Laura always came and went as she pleased. She would suddenly resurface, she always did. But then why was mum still on the phone? Who was she calling anyway? Was she just making the rounds in case Laura had decided to visit some extended family last minute? She would have needed to take the car, our closest living relative was Aunt Sylvia, dad's sister, nine miles away.

I blended some sugar into my tea when the water was done, but left it on the table. The knot in my tummy had grown, and I felt like I was about to puke. Mum's phone call was coming to a close; I heard and headed into the living room just as she put her phone down.

"Mum, what's going on?" It felt like something was going on, something bad. I had never seen my mother cry, but the red edges of her eyes told me she'd been crying. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Your sister is very sick, Emilie." She said, her voice was thick.

"What?!" I asked, I had just seen her yesterday. "What are you talking about? She's fine, she was just fine." She would have told me if she had some sort of terminal disease, wouldn't she? "Has she gone to the hospital?"

"Not that kind of sick." She reached for a box of paper towels and dried her eyes before any tears had the chance to travel down her cheek. "I thought she was getting better."

“How’s she sick? Getting better from what?” She had seemed well, of course I knew people could have an invisible sickness like diabetes or Lyme disease but... “Where’s she gone? Have you talked to her?”

“Your sister is suicidal.” Mum said so steady that it almost unsettled me. I shook my head. She couldn’t be, she shouldn’t... “I’ve called the police and her psychiatrist. They are on their way.”

I shook my head again. This was real. My gaze flaked around the room, searching for something to settle on, something to pull my focus. This was real. I crossed my arms to keep myself from falling apart.

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Half a session had passed again. Connie’s voice filling my head with questions I barely knew the answer to. Her checking off on her mental health sheet in order to assess my current mood. She was not happy. Happy was the wrong word, dissatisfied would be better, if I cared I might say her dissatisfaction was worry.

“I think I’m doing better though.” The last few weeks I had been stuck on an emotional roller coaster in hell. But I think I was starting to see the light after hitting an all-time low by spending all my rent money again, this time on a VIP ticket for a band I didn’t even like that much, and I didn’t even go. So I spent three days with no gas or electricity, and I had to plead with my landlord to take rent from the safety deposit. I terminated my contract and packed everything into boxes.

“That’s very good, Laura.” Connie said, but her eyebrows stayed furrowed and she kept glancing at me. I avoided looking at her. “How are you sleeping? Have you gotten any more sleep? Are you still sleeping erratically?”

“No, yes. I’m not sure.” We had been talking about sleep hygiene the last couple of sessions. My sleeping had no pattern, I passed by with minimal sleep and my brain worked overtime. “I try. It’s just... I can’t make my brain shut up.” Somehow it felt like my brain was convinced I didn’t need that much rest, causing my body to feel like it was filled with lead.

“It can be hard, I know, but have you tried to clean up your sleep routine?” She asked, hitting the problem at its source, one of them anyway.

“I try not to stay up too late. But when I can sleep, I wake up two hours later wide awake.” Sleeping wasn’t rocket science, but something in my brain kept me up for days at a time.

“And what do you do, when you wake up?”

“I try to just go back to sleep, I try to give it ten minutes. If I’m not asleep by then I go for a walk—” I liked walking. It cleared my head and sometimes managed to make me sleepy.

“In the middle of the night?” She interrupted me.

“Yeah, usually around two, or half two.” The world was so calm at that time, walking around just listening to the silence not afraid of running into anyone, or

feeling like time was infinite while walking and listening to music on my headphones.

“Where do you go? What do you do?”

“I just think about stuff. I walk and think. I look at things.” I shrugged.

“What do you think about?”

“Anything, everything.” I smiled a little. “Just whatever comes to mind. Life, my day, Pouch.” Often I would get stuck in a downward spiral where I would consider the likelihood of dying if I jumped from that bridge or fell from a roof top. Sometimes I would think about what would happen to the people I knew, if I fell down and broke my neck accidentally on purpose. It didn’t make me sad. All the pieces were falling into place.

“I don’t want you to go for walks at night Laura, I don’t think that is helping with your recovery.” She looked worried.

“Okay.” I said.

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I stayed in the living room while mum went to talk to Tommy and drove him to Aunt Sylvia, so he wouldn’t have to be around the house. When dad died, mum had taken both Tommy and me to Aunt Sylvia. Laura hadn’t been home. The Police showed up half an hour later, they introduced themselves, but I wasn’t able to remember their names. He asked me questions about Laura. I don’t remember what I said, but I remember answering. My voice didn’t stop shaking. They said

they would find her. Then mum came back home, and they talked to her and I went to get my tea.

I thought I should be crying, maybe. But sitting by myself in the kitchen I just felt empty. Laura had been here just a few hours ago. I picked up my phone and went on to Laura's Facebook page. There was a new picture of Pouch on my bed, posted last night. At 2.15am there was one status update stating: "Forgetting is easier." Pouch entered the kitchen and meowed timidly, I almost jumped at the sound.

"She's not here." I said, as if he could understand. Of course he didn't, he just looked at me. I leant down and picked him up and brushed my hand through his soft fur. He only stayed in my lap because I held him there, his body tense and his eyes flaking around the kitchen. The moment I let go of him he jumped to the floor.

The doorbell rang and I went to the get door, outside was a woman in a pencil skirt and blazer. I had no idea who this woman was.

"You must be Emilie." She said, she offered a greeting hand. "I'm doctor Constance Blunden. You can call me Connie." Her grip almost squashed my hand. "Your mother called me this morning, is she still home?" She must have seen how confused I looked.

"Yeah..." I looked around, scanning the driveway. Laura's car was really there; if she had left on foot; she couldn't be too far. "She's inside... talking to the police." Connie said something but I didn't listen as she walked inside. Why

weren't we looking for Laura already? I put on my shoes, and was about to go when I spotted Laura's keys. I grabbed them and headed outside.

The street was empty when I backed the car out of the drive. All the houses looked so familiar but the people we had grown up with had all moved away. Where would Laura go? We had never hung out together as kids, there were too many years between us. By the time I could venture outside on my own she was a teenager who didn't want to drag her baby sister along. The few times we played well together was when dad took us up to the lake.

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"You don't talk much about your sister." Connie commented and I looked at her.

"Emilie?" I asked. "We don't have a lot in common, we're more like cousins I guess. She's much younger than me." I'd just turned five when mom told me that I was going to have a baby sister. So I was a teenager while she was still just a kid.

"You are both girls, I'm sure you spent some time together." Connie said.

"When dad took us up to the cabin." I admitted, it had just been the three of us. Dad, Emilie and me, alone with a picturesque lake and the forest. Tommy had never gone, he'd been too young and mum had never enjoyed 'camping' as she called it. "We used to go fishing."

"Did you enjoy that?"

I smiled as a memory of the boat tipping over surfaced, the three of us screaming and laughing in the chill summer water. "Yeah, it was nice." My smile died away as I remembered it was the year before dad left us. Why hadn't I been home? Tears pressed behind my eyes. I should have been home. Connie handed me the box of tissues and I dried my eyes.

"Have you been back there?" Connie asked, and I shook my head. It was easier to not think about the place and let the memories float away into the ether.

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I drove aimlessly down the streets, not sure where I was going or what I was looking for. How long had Laura been out? She could have left any time during the night or just gone out in the morning. She could have gotten on a bus. Driving around town seemed pointless. She could be anywhere by now. I tried turning on the radio, but it had too many buttons. All I got was static noise. I drummed my thumbs against the wheel, just to make a sound. Somehow this person, my sister, seemed to be the core of my existence, but I didn't even know her.

I passed the gas station on the outskirts of town, and had to double back as I thought I saw Laura. When I walked inside the store was empty apart from the blonde cashier. Maybe she had stepped out for her break. I bought a soda before getting back on the road. I left the town behind me. Soon there were fewer and fewer houses along the road and more trees. I didn't realize where I was going until I was following an unkempt dirt road slinging its way into a familiar forest. A gate blocked my way, but it was the same old wooden one with no lock that had

been there forever. It didn't take me long to open it and drive through. Closing in on the small lake I hadn't visited in years. Mum had sold the cabin after dad's funeral, we hadn't visited the lake since.

I parked the car at the parking lot. There weren't any other cars there, so my trespassing would go undiscovered. The cabin seemed almost unchanged, still red and blocking my view to the dock. Behind it scarce sunrays reflected themselves on the lake. She had to be here, it would have taken her a couple of hours to walk, but she'd had the whole night. I held my breath as I rounded the cabin, and squinted my eyes looking towards the dock. The dock was empty. She wasn't there.

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I rested my chin on my hand and let my eyelids slip shut for just a few moments, while Connie talked continuously.

"Laura." She noticed straight away, I should have known. I yawned. Sometimes these meetings were incredibly boring.

"Maybe I don't want to?" I snapped. "Maybe I don't want to get better!" Changing my medication wouldn't help, it would just mess me up. I couldn't go through another period of waning off my current medication just to start fresh with new side-effects.

"We need to do something, Laura." Connie droned on, "You're not sleeping. The last couple of weeks you have been late for our session, and you missed one..."

“I was stuck in traffic!” I didn’t mean to raise my voice, but I spoke before I had time to think. Maybe I had been late a few times, but I had given valid reasons.

“You’re getting very defensive; I’m not accusing you of anything.” I could tell that she was frustrated with me, even if she tried to hide it. “If it was just one session or one lateness, I would dismiss it, but it is becoming a habit. We need to handle this now, before it runs out of control. You’ve been very erratic the last few weeks.”

I took a deep breath, attempting to calm myself down. She was right, there was no reason for me to be upset right now.

“I don’t want to change my medication.” I admitted, I’d finally adjusted to my current meds; I could live with the weight-gain and the bad reaction to hair dye they caused.

“To me it doesn’t seem like it is working well anymore.” Connie looked at me. “I’m worried about you, Laura.”

I was tired of everything, of feeling numb, of feeling cold. I was tired of not being strong, of doubting myself. Most of all I was tired of being on my own, to sit idly by watching time float away.

“I worry too.”