

Unspoken Reality

Written by Kyle Lindo

I can't sleep.

Somewhere outside the room, a door slams. My eyes open, and footsteps move quickly down the hallway before everything goes quiet again. I wait for another sound, but nothing comes.

I don't know what time it is. That's one of the things I've noticed since I got here. There aren't many clocks. Maybe there are and I just haven't seen them. Either way, lying in a dark room without my phone makes five minutes feel like an hour.

I close my eyes again and turn onto one side, then the other. I pull the thin blanket up to my chin, only to kick it toward my feet when the room starts feeling too warm.

Nothing is working.

The old guy in the bed across from me doesn't seem to share my dilemma. He's been asleep for at least an hour. Every few minutes, he snores, and at some point, I start measuring time by it.

Snore. Silence. Snore. Silence.

Then nothing.

I wait a little longer before lifting my head from the pillow. He hasn't moved. I stare at the shape of his body beneath the blanket, trying to see whether his chest is rising.

Still nothing.

I sit up a little farther.

Then a snore explodes through the room. I drop back onto the pillow and turn toward the wall, covering my ears.

I don't belong here.

I've been telling myself that since the first hour I arrived. It wasn't just one thing that made me realize it. It was everything—the locked doors, the bars covering the windows, having to turn in my phone, keys, wallet, and everything else I walked in with. The alarms nobody explains. The sounds coming from hallways I can't see.

Most of all, it was realizing that I needed somebody else's permission to leave.

I came here voluntarily. That must count for something. Nobody dragged me through those doors. Nobody found me somewhere and decided I needed to be here. I knew something was wrong, and I came looking for help on my own.

At least that means I'm aware of what happened.

Doesn't it?

Turns out, coming here voluntarily doesn't mean I can voluntarily walk back out.

I don't know what I expected when I came here. I just know it wasn't this. Somewhere during those first few hours, the panic that brought me through those doors disappeared, and once it did, everything seemed obvious.

I overreacted.

I had a bad couple of nights and things got more out of control than I expected. Then I panicked and came here. But the fact that I knew something wasn't right must mean something too. I recognized it. I came here on my own.

People who completely lose control don't usually know they've lost control.

At least, I don't think they do.

Now, I just have one person I need to convince before I can go home.

The psychiatrist comes in the morning. I'll explain everything, she'll talk to me for a few minutes, and she'll realize I'm fine.

That's the plan.

Another door closes somewhere down the hall.

Click.

Morning can't come fast enough.

I try closing my eyes again.

Earlier, I played cards with a guy whose name I can't remember. I remember him telling me. I just wasn't listening.

He was probably in his early forties. There wasn't anything particularly memorable about him, which was probably why I liked him.

He seemed normal.

I know that sounds like a strange thing to say about somebody in a place like this, but that was exactly why I noticed it. If I'd met him anywhere else, I probably wouldn't have thought anything about him at all.

We sat across from each other at a small plastic table while he shuffled what was left of an old deck of cards.

"Half the damn cards are missing," he said.

"That sounds like an excuse."

He looked up. "Excuse for what?"

"For why you're about to lose."

He laughed, and I laughed too. An actual laugh. Not the kind you give somebody because you can tell they're waiting for one. For ten minutes, we were just two guys playing cards.

I needed that more than I realized.

Then a staff member walked over. “Few more minutes, guys. Then everybody needs to head back in.”

Just like that, I remembered where I was.

The man put another card down. “You got family?”

“Yeah. But mainly my mom.”

“She know you here?”

“No.”

He looked up at me. For a second, I expected another question, but instead he drew another card.

I appreciated him for that.

My mother had no idea where I was. When I left the house, I told her I had errands to run. That was hours ago.

I’m twenty years old, so technically, I don’t have to tell my mother where I am. Being twenty feels a lot less grown, though, when you’re sleeping in the same bedroom you grew up in.

I wasn’t supposed to be back home. A year ago, I was away at a university with a scholarship.

Then I lost it.

I can still see my mother’s face the day we found out. We were sitting in an admissions office while a woman behind a desk explained something about grades and academic standing. I barely heard her. I was watching my mother.

She didn’t yell. Honestly, that might’ve been easier.

She just looked at me.

Disappointment has a look. I learned that day.

Now I'm back home. Community college. A different plan. Another chance. At least that's what it's supposed to be.

The man across from me tapped the table.

"Your turn."

I looked down at my cards.

Right.

For those few minutes, I managed not to think about my mother at all.

My eyes open.

A shadow passes beneath the bedroom door.

Footsteps move down the hallway and slow near our room before stopping completely. I hold still. A few seconds later, they continue.

Probably a nurse.

My heart is almost pounding. This place has me paranoid.

Somewhere farther away, somebody starts crying. Quietly at first, then louder. I can't tell whether it's a man or a woman.

I stare at the ceiling.

The crying stops. Not gradually. Just stops.

Silence again.

I close my eyes, and suddenly I'm back in my bedroom last week, staring at my grades.

Two failed classes. My GPA lower than I've ever seen it.

My mother doesn't know. Not yet.

She knows I don't want to be in nursing. That's never exactly been a secret. We've argued about it enough.

To her, it makes sense. People always need nurses. Decent money. Stable career. A future. She isn't trying to make me miserable.

That's what makes it worse.

My mother has always worked hard for me. Sometimes, I think she looks at my future like proof that all that work will eventually mean something.

And I keep screwing it up.

First the scholarship. Now this.

I remember staring at those grades last week. I closed the laptop and opened it again, as if that might somehow change something.

Same numbers.

Of course.

What happened after that is harder to think about.

There were a couple of nights when everything in my head became too loud. School. My mother. My future. The fact that I don't even know who I am.

I couldn't shut any of it off.

The first night got bad. Worse than I expected. By the time it was over, I'd crossed a line I never thought I would.

But morning came.

I woke up, went through the day and told myself I just needed to get my head together. Everybody has moments when things become too much. Mine had passed.

At least, I thought it had.

The following night, everything came back.

Same thoughts. Same feeling. And somehow, I found myself crossing that same line again.

That scared me.

Not because I thought something was seriously wrong with me. I just knew I wasn't feeling like myself.

By the next morning, I figured I should talk to somebody. Get out of the house for a while. Clear my head. Whatever I needed to do to feel normal again.

So, I came here.

Honestly, I thought that was the responsible thing to do. And now that I've had time to calm down, I feel like myself again.

That's the part that should matter, but now I'm stuck here.

And all I want is to leave.

I remember walking into the facility.

From the entrance, the place looked small. There were a few chairs, a woman sitting behind a glass window and one closed door. That was basically it.

For a second, I wondered if I was even in the right place.

The woman looked at me through the glass. "What brings you in today?"

I remember the question. I remember answering it. Mostly, I remember how little her expression changed afterward.

Maybe she hears things like that all day.

She asked my name, my age, whether I came alone and a bunch of other questions I don't remember anymore. Eventually, she told me to wait, so I sat there staring at the closed door.

I figured somebody would come get me eventually. We'd talk. They'd ask me some questions, maybe tell me what I was supposed to do next.

Then I'd go home.

Part of me considered leaving. I could've stood up, walked outside, driven home and pretended I'd never come. But I'd already made it this far. Walking out now felt ridiculous.

Then—

Buzz.

The lock released, and the woman gestured toward the door. "You can go through."

I pulled it open and stopped.

From the lobby, I thought I'd already seen most of the place.

I was wrong.

A hallway stretched in front of me, doors lining both sides. Voices traveled from somewhere farther inside, but I couldn't make out what anyone was saying. A staff member approached and told me to follow.

I stepped through, and the door swung shut behind me.

Click.

I turned around and reached for the handle without thinking, but the door was locked. Something tightened in my stomach, though I told myself it didn't matter. I came here because I needed help. Maybe this was what help looked like.

I followed the staff member deeper inside. Another hallway led to another secured door.

Buzz.

We walked through.

Click.

Then they asked for my belongings—my phone, wallet and keys. I hesitated when I got to my phone.

“Do I have to?”

“Yes.”

I handed it over.

That’s when the picture I created of this place in my head started falling apart. I imagined a conversation, maybe a few hours somewhere quiet where I could clear my head and feel like myself again.

I hadn’t imagined staying.

A voice suddenly rose somewhere down the hall. I turned toward it, but I couldn’t see who it was. A staff member walked quickly past us, and nobody explained anything.

“Come on,” the person escorting me said.

So, I followed.

Another door.

Buzz.

Click.

That’s when the thought first came to me:

I made a mistake.

The old man snores again, pulling me out of the memory.

I’m still awake. Still stuck in this room.

I don't belong here.

The longer I'm here, the easier that becomes to believe. All I have to do is look around.

It's almost like thinking you're drunk until you get around somebody who is obnoxiously drunk. Suddenly, you feel completely sober.

I've seen people here who seem disconnected from everything around them. I've watched staff rush down a hallway because somebody was having an episode. Then there's me. I've spent most of my time keeping to myself, doing what I'm told and trying not to draw too much attention.

Nobody has had to rush down a hallway because of me or calm me down. I haven't caused any problems since I got here.

That's not me.

I'm just a college student who got overwhelmed for a couple of nights. I can hold a conversation, play cards and understand everything happening around me. Now that I've had some time to calm down, I feel fine.

That should count for something.

I've already made a promise to myself that whatever happened before I came here won't happen again, no matter how bad things get.

I mean it.

I close my eyes, but the guy from the card game pops into my head again. I'm not sure why.

He knew where he was. He could hold a conversation and play cards just like I could. If there was something obviously wrong with him, I couldn't see it.

He seemed normal.

For some reason, that thought bothers me more now than it did earlier.

I try not to think too much about why.

Tomorrow, I'll tell the psychiatrist exactly what I've been telling myself. I'll explain what happened, tell her I feel better and make her understand that I don't need to be here.

Anyone with eyes can see that.

My eyes are finally starting to feel heavy. For the first time all night, sleep doesn't seem impossible.

Maybe I'll get some after all.

An alarm comes out of nowhere, and I shoot upright.

For a second, I have no idea where I am. Then voices erupt outside the room. Footsteps pound down the hallway, and someone shouts something I can't understand.

The old man sits up across from me.

“What the hell?”

Good question.

I look toward the door, waiting for somebody to come in or at least explain what's happening. Nobody does. The alarm keeps going for another minute or so before the footsteps eventually move farther away.

Then it stops.

The old man lies back down like nothing happened.

Apparently, that's that.

Someone must be trying to break out again.

Can't say I blame them.

I look around for a clock and, once again, find nothing. At this point, I'm starting to wonder if we're not allowed to know the time. That feels unnecessarily cruel.

A few minutes later, there's a knock at the door and a nurse walks inside.

"Breakfast, fellas."

That's it? You would think we'd at least get an explanation for whatever chaos just happened, but apparently breakfast is the only thing we're supposed to be concerned about.

The old guy practically launches himself out of bed, so I guess he got the memo.

I follow him into the cafeteria. I'm not hungry, but refusing food doesn't seem like the smartest move when I'm trying to convince everybody I'm perfectly fine. I grab a miniature box of cereal and sit by myself, managing a few bites.

As I'm eating, I notice a nurse standing in the corner, so I wave her over.

"When am I seeing the psychiatrist?" I ask.

"She's making rounds," the nurse says.

"Okay. Like...soon?"

"She'll get to you."

Not exactly the answer I'm looking for.

So, I wait.

For a while, there's nothing to do but sit there and watch the room around me. Eventually, I get up and walk around, only to sit back down a few minutes later. Every time one of the secured doors buzzes, my head turns. Every time somebody walks into the room, I wonder if they're coming for me.

All I want is my phone, my clothes, my keys and a door I can open myself.

Eventually, a staff member steps into the room.

“Sam?”

I’m out of the chair so quickly that the legs scrape against the floor.

Finally.

The psychiatrist is a middle-aged white woman sitting behind a desk with a folder open in front of her. She doesn’t smile when I enter. Not even the polite kind.

She gestures toward the chair across from her. “Have a seat.”

Okay. So much for easing into it.

I sit across from her and glance at the folder. My name is printed across the top. She looks down at it for a moment before turning her attention to me.

“Tell me what brought you here.”

I’ve been waiting all morning for this.

I start with school. The university. Losing my scholarship and moving back home. I tell her about community college, nursing, my mother and the grades she still doesn’t know about. I explain how everything started piling up until, for a couple of days, I didn’t feel like myself.

“I knew something wasn’t right,” I tell her. “I figured I needed to get out of the house and talk to somebody. Just clear my head for a little while.”

She listens without interrupting. There’s no shock in her expression. No sympathy either. I can’t tell what she’s thinking, which makes it difficult to know whether anything I’m saying is helping.

When I finish, she looks down at the folder again.

“You’ve told me a lot about what was happening around you,” she says. “School, your mother, feeling overwhelmed. But you skipped over what actually happened.”

I know exactly what she means.

There are a dozen ways I could answer her. I wasn't feeling like myself. Everything became too much. I crossed a line. All those things are true, but none of them actually answer her question.

Okay.

Rip the Band-Aid off.

"I tried to kill myself."

The words sound different out loud. Heavier somehow.

She looks at me for a moment. "And according to what you told the intake staff, that wasn't the only time."

I look away. "No. I tried again the next night."

There it is. No *crossing a line* or *rough couple of nights*. Just what happened.

The psychiatrist gives me a moment before asking how I feel sitting here now.

"Better. A lot better, actually." I sit forward a little because this is the part I need her to understand. "I know how it sounds, but I was overwhelmed. I felt alone, everything was piling up, and I had a moment where I couldn't handle it. I'm not saying it wasn't serious. I know it was. But that's not how I feel now."

"And you believe that moment has passed?"

"I do. Coming here scared the hell out of me, but maybe I needed that. I've had time to calm down and think about everything. I know now that I can't let myself get to that point again."

She studies me for a moment before responding. "I believe you mean that."

"I do."

“But everything you were overwhelmed by is still waiting for you when you leave here. Your grades are still the same. You still have to talk to your mother, and you still have to decide what you want for yourself.”

“I know, but none of that means I’m going to do the same thing again. I made a promise to myself last night that I wouldn’t. No matter how bad things get.”

“I’m not questioning whether you meant the promise,” she says. “I’m asking what happens if you feel that way again.”

“I won’t.”

She pauses. “Can you know that?”

I start to say yes, but something stops me.

The psychiatrist doesn’t rush to fill the silence. She just waits, and I hate that she waits. It would be easier if she argued with me because at least then I’d have something to argue back.

“I just know I’m not doing that again,” I finally say. “Before I came here, I wasn’t thinking clearly. Now I am.”

She nods slightly. “Before this week, if someone had asked whether you would ever try to take your own life, what would you have said?”

I don’t answer because I don’t need to. Before this week, I would’ve said no without even thinking about it.

I meant the promise I made last night. I still mean it. But before this week, I would’ve promised I’d never try to take my own life in the first place.

Then I did.

Twice.

The certainty I walked into the room with suddenly feels harder to hold onto.

The psychiatrist closes the folder. "I'm not asking you to predict the future, Sam. I'm asking you to recognize that feeling better today doesn't guarantee you'll feel better tomorrow."

I look down at my hands.

The grades will still be there when I get home. My mother still doesn't know. I still don't want to be a nurse, and I'm still living in the same bedroom I moved out of a year ago. I'm ashamed about losing my scholarship, and I still have no idea what I want to do with my life. Nothing that pushed me to that point has disappeared. I've just spent a night away from it.

"What happens when the pressure becomes unbearable again?" she asks.

I stare at the floor.

Yesterday, I had an answer for everything. I was overwhelmed and hadn't been feeling like myself, but I recognized something was wrong and came here for help. Now I felt better, and I'd convinced myself that meant I could make sure it never happened again. Every part of that explanation sounded reasonable until somebody asked me what came after it.

"I don't know."

The words come out quieter than I expect.

She nods, and for once, I don't feel the need to give her a better answer.

We talk for a little while longer, mostly about what happens after I leave. She asks whether there's anyone I can talk to when things start becoming too much, and we discuss therapy, school and the conversation I've been avoiding with my mother. None of it fixes what's waiting for me outside, but I'm starting to understand that maybe it isn't supposed to.

Eventually, she opens the folder again and looks through a few pages.

“I’m comfortable discharging you today,” she says. “But going home can’t mean pretending these last few days didn’t happen. You need to follow up with someone, and you need to be honest when you’re struggling.”

I nod.

She gives me the information I need for discharge and tells me someone will come get me. When I stand, I realize this is exactly what I wanted. I came into this room ready to convince her that I was fine so she would let me go home, and now she is.

I should feel relieved.

Instead, as I reach the door, I hear her question again.

What happens when you feel that way again?

I still don’t have an answer.

A few hours later, someone comes to get me.

The discharge process is mostly paperwork. I sign where they tell me to sign, listen while a staff member goes over a few instructions and wait for someone to bring back the things I handed over when I came in.

My wallet. My keys. My phone.

The screen lights up with missed calls and messages almost immediately. Most of them are from my mother.

I stare at her name for a moment before locking the screen. I’m not ready for that conversation yet.

A staff member walks me toward the front of the facility. We stop at one of the secured doors.

Buzz.

The lock releases, and I step through.

Click.

We pass through another hallway before reaching the lobby. I recognize the same chairs and the same glass window from yesterday, but this time, nobody is asking me to hand anything over.

The final door opens, and I step outside.

I thought that would feel different.

It doesn't.

The parking lot looks exactly the way I left it. Cars pass on the road beyond it, and my car is still sitting where I parked it yesterday.

Halfway there, my phone starts vibrating in my hand.

Mom.

I let it ring.

When I reach my car, I pull the handle and realize it's locked. I almost laugh before pressing the button on my keys.

For the last twenty-four hours, I've needed someone else to open every door for me.

Not this one.

I get inside and close the door. From the driver's seat, I look back at the facility. It seems smaller from out here. You'd never know how far it stretches behind that first locked door.

For the last twenty-four hours, I've been asking myself whether I belong in that building. Maybe I don't. Maybe I do. I'm not sure that's the question anymore.

My phone stops buzzing.

The silence inside the car feels different from the silence in that room. No alarms. No footsteps. No locks.

I can go wherever I want.

And somehow, the question I couldn't answer inside has followed me out.

What happens when you feel that way again?

I don't have an answer.

Only this time, I don't mind admitting that.