

I should be over it by now

“My mother says I should be over it by now, but I’m not, and I don’t know why,” I’m starting to cry as I’m sharing this with Karen, my therapist. I’m surprised at this outpouring. After my mom said this to me, I felt numb most of the week. I’ve been going through the motions of my days feeling nothing, like a machine. Now that I think back, it actually was kinda nice... well, not really... Yeah, I didn’t feel any pain, but I didn’t feel any joy either and... to tell you the truth, I didn’t want to live. I felt so fucking tired of it all! It’s been fifteen years since abuse stopped. It’s been ten years since I left my hometown and never, not even once, went back. I haven’t seen that animal for ten long years. How come I am still not over it?

“Laura... Laura... Laura,” Karen’s lips are moving, but I can hardly hear her. Finally, I’m realizing she’s calling my name.

“What?” I’m looking in her big brown eyes. They’re sparkling as if someone sprinkled them with magic dust.

“Where did you go?”

“Inside my head... and in the past,” she’s been asking me this question a lot lately. The first time she asked I really didn’t know what to say. I felt like I went nowhere and I was in no-man’s land, when she pulled me out by calling my name.

“I’m not sure whether you realize that you’re crying. How are you feeling?” I knew that question was coming. With all due respect for Karen and everything she did for me, I really hate this question!

“Right now I feel as if someone punched me in my gut!”

“You sound angry, when you say it,” Karen’s eyes look like two big ponds now, wet and deep.

“Karen, I’m fucking angry at you for asking this question. I am hurting so much, I want to die! I don’t know how to express all this pain... And, I don’t know what to do to make it go away. Will it ever stop? Will I ever get over it?”

“I know you’re hurting. I’m so sorry! But this is the way out... through talking about it and feeling your feelings. And, yes, you can get over it. It’s possible, even though right now it feels as if it’ll never happen,” I hear what Karen’s saying, but can I trust her? So far, she’s been good to me, supportive, helpful. It’s been eight months since I started seeing her. But I’ve seen it before. The animal’s been good to me too. I trusted him, I thought he loved me, and then one day I woke up in the middle of the night hurting like hell. He was on me, moving up and down, panting. I didn’t understand what was happening. I didn’t even know who he was anymore. That was the night, when my daddy transformed into the animal. I was only ten years old! But the most confusing thing of all is that he was my daddy again in the morning. Daddy by day, the animal by night...

“Oh, my God!!! I can’t breathe!”

“It’s OK, Laura. It’s just a panic attack. Breathe into your belly. Imagine that you have a balloon in your stomach, and you’re inflating it as you breathe in,” Karen’s voice sounds reassuring. Maybe, I’ll live after all. I’m focused on my breathing and Karen’s voice right now. I’m imagining pretty blue balloon, the one I always wanted, when I was young... And I’m working really hard to inflate it. It’s getting bigger... Oh, I can breathe again.

“I think I’m OK now,” I’m saying to Karen. “I can breathe again.”

“I’m glad to hear that. How would you like to end our session? We can do containment, or grounding, or safe place.”

“Let’s do containment. I really want to leave a whole load of crap here, in your office, today.”

“Ok,” Karen hands me the box. “Open the lid and imagine putting everything you want to leave here today in this box. When you’re done, close the lid and hand it back to me.”

I’m opening the beautiful green lid and pouring all those memories and thoughts into the tiny box. How can it hold so much? The animal will stay here, my mother’s latest comments will too, as well as me feeling bad about myself. I am closing the lid and handing it back to Karen.

“Now, if any of those things that you put in the box come up for you before our next session, imagine putting them back here and closing the lid.”

“Will do.”

“So, I will see you in group on Monday, right?”

“Yes,” I answer reluctantly. I almost wish she forgot that I agreed to join that damn group and that I am starting next week. But she never forgets stuff like that. It’s Karen.

I can’t breathe again. It’s dark. It smells like sweat. He’s on me again! I can’t believe it! I’m suffocating...It hurts so much!

“Get the fuck away from me!!!” I am trying to push him off.

“Laura, honey, it’s OK. It’s just a bad dream,” John is stroking my hair as I’m opening my eyes.

“The animal was raping me again. I’m so fucking tired of it!”

“I know, sweetie. I’m so sorry. Let’s go back to sleep,” John’s pulling me towards him inviting to spoon with him. I’m turning my back to him and closing my eyes...The animal’s face’s right there, red, sweaty, smirking... I hate it!

It’s Sunday night. I need to get up at 7 a.m. and go to work. In the evening I have my first therapy group. I have a full day in front of me, and I only got 2 hours of sleep so far...I get up and go to the living room. Here on the old green couch I spend at least half of my nights, watching TV, reading, sometimes dozing off, just to wake up screaming an hour or so later.

Today I decided to do something different. I remembered Karen encouraging me to use safe place, when I can’t sleep. So, I am stretching out on the couch, closing my eyes and imagining that I am walking barefoot along my favorite beach on Amelia Island. The air is dense and salty, there’s nice warm breeze and the sound of waves. I hear seagulls and see a dolphin jumping out of the waves in the distance. It’s soooooo peaceful!!! I want to stay here forever...

“Wake up, Sleepy Head! Your coffee is served,” I wake up to John’s voice and a smell of coffee.

“What time is it?”

“It’s seven ten,” John is smiling at me.

Wow! I can’t believe I slept for four hours straight with no nightmares. Is it even possible? I forgot it was. Actually, I feel pretty rested and my mood seems to be pretty good too.

“Come on,” John pulls me to his lap as I am passing by. “Have a cup of coffee with me.” I am sitting on his lap with a mug full of smoking hot coffee with a touch of crème and no sugar. I inhale smell and almost pass out. It’s strong and bitter and earthy. I love this smell so much!

“You got me worried there for a moment last night. You were screaming so loudly and it took me forever to wake you up,” John says.

“The dream was pretty bad. But you know what though, I used safe place afterwards, as Karen suggested and ... I fell asleep and slept for four hours with no nightmares!” I am so

excited to tell him about my success. He's been supporting me in this struggle of healing and I appreciate it so much! I still feel like damaged goods and think he could have partnered with someone better... Yes, yes, Karen, I know. It's not my fault that all this crap happened to me and it does not make me less of a person! But I still can't help myself feeling that way.

"This is great news!" John is smiling back at me enthusiastically. "You have your first group today, right?"

"Yes... and I'm scared shitless," I acknowledge. "I don't really want to go. The only reason I'm going is that both Karen and you think it's a good idea. Hopefully, I won't run away, when I see all those people."

"You can do it, Honey. I'll be thinking of you tonight," John wraps his hands around me. It feels so good to sit on his lap like that. Even though we've been together for four years now, I still can't believe I am in the relationship with him. Before I met him my love life was a mine field and a complete disaster. I was attracted to manipulative bastards, who looked sweet at a first glance, but always turned out to be abusive in the end. What a surprise! With John I have been waiting for his other side to come out for a couple of years, but it never did. I feel very lucky.

It's five forty five, fifteen minutes till the beginning of the group. I am sitting in my car in the parking lot of Karen's practice. I am shivering. I can't believe I agreed to that. What was I thinking? Such a terrible idea! What if these women also think I should be over it by now? It will be pretty devastating.

There are eight chairs in a circle in the room with two big windows. I take the chair in between two windows with my back to the wall and facing the door. I need to see what's going on. I'm the first one there. Maybe no one'll come, and I can go home then? My hopes're crushed as two women enter the room. They sit down by each other across from me and continue their conversation. I am starting to hyperventilate. I am closing my eyes and imagining being on the beach. I can feel my bare feet touching sand. I can hear waves crushing. I can smell salt and seaweed. Suddenly I hear Karen's voice.

"Welcome to the group. We have a new member today. Let's catch up... Please, share your name and what you have been working on or hope to be working on in the group", she looks around the circle.

"I'm Jennie", says the woman, who came in first. "I've been working on reducing my anxiety and on sleeping better. I was raped three years ago by a guy I dated for six months. Since then I've been having panic attacks and nightmares non-stop. I have a long way to go, but this week I slept through the night twice. It hasn't happened for three years."

"I'm Ginger. I'm working on trust issues among other things. I was physically and sexually abused by my father ..." I feel like someone punched me in the gut while wrapping me in the warm blanket and hugging at the same time. I don't hear anything else Ginger's saying. I'm just looking at her soft pretty face surrounded by long wavy orange hair, and I'm smiling on the inside. I think I can trust her. I think she'll get me. I am not afraid of speaking anymore, cause I can look at Ginger and remember that she lived through something just as horrible.

"I'm Laura. It's my first day here, and I was so scared to come in. But after hearing Ginger speak, I am feeling much better. I was sexually abused by my father growing up. Later, I guess as a result, I've been in several abusive relationships. Now I am dealing with the aftermath of it all, and it's really hard," I look around the circle as I speak. Ginger is looking directly at me and nodding with understanding. Other women are listening and paying attention. Karen is smiling

with reassurance. I'm feeling more and more at ease. I can't believe I resisted Karen's suggestion to join this group for such a long time.

"Welcome, Laura. I am glad you are here. I would love to get to know you more," Ginger says after I'm done.

"Actually, I wanted to talk about something today if I may," I can't believe myself I'm saying it.

"Whose permission do you need?" Karen asks with a smile. Other women are smiling too.

"Got it. My mom asked me last week how I was doing. I was honest with her and told her that I was struggling and having lots of nightmares. She told me that I should be over it by now. She said that so many people in Africa have experienced much worse than I ever did and they still continue to go on with their lives," I hear a number of responses, as I speak. Others are saying stuff like "Wow" or "unbelievable".

"This makes me so angry!!!" Ginger almost screams. "How the fuck does she know when you should be over it?"

"And how many people in Africa, who moved on, does she know?" says another woman.

"Wow! These are great questions. I never even thought that she has never stepped out of the state she was born in and never met anyone living from Africa. You are right, she would have no idea how people in Africa are actually coping with the horrors they survived. But when she mentioned those folks in Africa, I felt so guilty, so bad!"

"I get those feelings of guilt and shame. I feel those often, when talking to others about my experiences. So many people don't have any idea what it's like to live through rape and then heal from it. Both of my parents were supportive of me in the beginning, but now they think I got stuck in therapy and should have been done with it long time ago," Jennie says tearing up.

The rest of the group just flies by. I feel at home here. I don't think I ever felt so understood and supported in my life before. These women have very similar struggles, and they really get me, and there is no judgment or expectation that I should feel differently. I feel really surprised, when I hear Karen say that the time is up for today. I am already looking forward to the next Monday.

So, my mom says I should be over it by now, because everyone else is. Guess what mom, there're at least six other women, who aren't over it, who're working really hard in therapy and getting better every day. They're all smart, pretty, kind, and strong. And, I'm one of them! I'm not over it mom and I shouldn't be, but I'll be OK. I'll get there one day. I hope that you and the animal will get there one day too, but it's up to you, of course.