

Someone Else's Story

Lou The Girl Dog sleeps on her side beneath the desk in my bedroom, her belly breathing against my feet. I rotate in the dining room chair that has become my work chair, careful not to adjust my legs in such a way that signals I may be going to the treat jar, or to the coat rack where the leash hangs.

There's a full moon tonight and its white light is profiling the holly bushes and fence posts in my suburban yard. It's winter in Nashville, but I'm a smoker and lonely, so I always know the sky.

My bedroom has become Lou's room, and Lou's room has become my office. I'm doing the work of addiction consultation in pandemic isolation, and I'm wearing nothing but gym shorts while suggesting, assessing, and directing. Red lights blink across the block of a secure, work-issued phone, and each light is a call in a queue of desperate seeking. Sometimes, Someone Else's Mom calls looking for their child, but their child does not want to be found.

"I'm sorry," I say, "but I can neither confirm nor deny the presence of any individual in our program."

"But I really am her Mom," says Someone Else's Mom into her end of the call, "and if I knew she was there, then I'd know she's not somewhere else. In trouble. Please."

It's been a few years since I've been drunk or thought about killing myself, but I'm not a therapist or priest. My lawn needs to be mowed, the fridge needs to be filled, the dog needs to be walked and I'd like to find out what it's like to be in love. I do this work because I survived, and by surviving I've become the story Someone Else's Mom wants to hear. I lived in halfway houses and relied upon food stamps. I overcome hopelessness thanks to family, a supportive community, and my determination. My story is true, and Someone Else's Mom is often glad to hear it, but I'm giving away a counterfeit currency. A lie as predatory as the American Dream.

"I only need to know that she's okay. And for her to know I love her, and that everything that happened doesn't matter. I'm her mother."

"I hear you, I do. But I'm bound by HIPAA laws, so I can neither confirm nor deny the presence of any individual in our program."

My drunk driving was a misdemeanor, but Someone Else's drug possession was a felony. My poverty was a choice, theirs a restrictive boundary. My demons were internal and no greater than myself, theirs were everywhere and systemic. I am a cisgender, straight white able-bodied man

born into the mobility of economic security. My recovery is earned, but my success has been aided by unmerited privilege. Someone Else's recovery is subverted, and their continued suffering is more than permitted.

"I know I haven't always been the perfect mother, and I am her mother, but she came to me through adoption. There have been challenges from the beginning. And I know she's grown, but it's still my job to be her mother, and I don't know where my daughter is, or if she's okay, or if she needs help."

Every night, just before bed, Lou the Girl Dog and I sit on the stoop. I smoke and watch the sky. She yawns and watches me for a signal that we can go to bed. I unplug the phone when we sleep, but the red lights don't stop blinking.

"I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I don't have anything useful to say. I hear you, though. And my mom's name is June. And she's been where you are."