

Trivial Emotions

Eddie rolls his wrists and pops each knuckle, trying to find some amount of pleasure in the hollow *pop pop pop* his joints make. He props his screen up on the surface in front of him, both to center himself in the camera and to see the image better.

“I’ve never actually done this before. Seeing a shrink.”

The doctor on the other side of the screen faces away from Eddie, flipping through a stack of papers with the ease of someone who doesn’t mind wasting time.

“Most people don’t see the point in it,” the doctor says absentmindedly. “Especially men. We were raised not to talk about our feelings, instead bottling them up so as not to inconvenience anyone with trivial emotions. For a long time, it was thought of as a trait aligned with women to show emotion past a tough exterior.”

A pen repeatedly clicks from somewhere offscreen.

ckck. ckck.

A nervous habit, one Eddie himself is still working to break. He wonders what the doctor could be nervous about. The man is on the older side. He doesn’t look nervous—even his tone conveys a disregard for Eddie’s time—but if the winding feeling in Eddie’s stomach compared to his own blank expression reflected back at him are anything to go on, there is no way to tell how the doctor really feels.

“You are aware of why you’re here though,” continues the doctor, still leafing through the papers, jotting down notes here and there. “Speaking to me. Correct?”

Eddie shrugs. “I’m here because my dad thinks it’s a good idea.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea?”

Eddie shrugs again. He picks at a spot of rust on the metal table before him, the powdered residue coming off under his fingernail. “I keep telling him I’m fine, but he doesn’t want to listen to me. Keeps saying every time he visits that I should go speak to someone, that I’m scaring him. Which is bullshit, frankly. I’m the same as I’ve always been.”

ckck.

“Do you know why you’re here?” the doctor asks again. He still doesn’t make eye contact, now occupied by something else offscreen.

Eddie decides he doesn’t like him very much. How the hell did this guy get his license to be a therapist when he can hardly give Eddie the time of day?

“My first boyfriend died and my dad thinks I can’t move past it.”

The doctor exhales through his nose, then lifts a piece of paper to briefly study the underside. “Edward, you’re here—”

“Eddie.”

“Eddie. You are here because your ex-boyfriend killed himself in front of you.”

Eddie stares at his folded hands resting in his lap, swallowing against the lump suddenly blocking his throat. He has no way to tell what the date is—no calendar hangs on his wall—but at his best guess, it has been close to ten months since that night. He’s improved during daytime hours, but at night he still wakes up screaming from the memory, feeling the need to viciously scrub Charlie’s blood from his hands.

When he trusts himself to speak again, he says, “Calling him my ex makes it sound like we broke up, went our separate ways, and that was that. I don’t think they’ve come up with a word for what happened to us yet. What do you call it when someone offs himself in front of his partner?”

The doctor gives him a withering look. Eddie blinks, taken aback by the unprofessionalism. The number one rule of being a therapist is to respect and empathize with your clients; Eddie would know.

“But, uh, that was months ago,” Eddie amends awkwardly. He pops his knuckles again. “In any case. I’m a grown man, I should be able to decide whether or not I’ve moved past something.”

“You’re here, aren’t you?” the doctor says. “That counts for something.”

Eddie puffs out his cheeks. “I guess. But I don’t exactly have a choice here, do I?”

The doctor nods, either in pity or affirmation, Eddie can’t decide. Perhaps it’s a combination of both.

“Let’s talk about Charlie,” the doctor suggests. “Whatever it is you want to call him. We don’t have to discuss that final night today, not if you don’t want to. But I would like to know what kind of person he was. What your relationship looked like.”

“Do we have that kind of time?”

The doctor raises a quizzical eyebrow. “Pardon?”

“It’s just, if you really want to know all of it, it’s not a short story.”

“Don’t worry about the time, Eddie. It may take forever, and you might not want to talk about it now, but you know as well as I do that once you start talking, you’ll find you may not want to stop.”

Eddie heaves a sigh, wishing his chair was more comfortable. This will take awhile.

Charlie was my first love. Simple as that.

You know how it goes with first loves, don’t you, doctor? Very quickly this person becomes everything to you after a while of them just being there. It may get unhealthy—I know sure as shit that we got there in the end—but for a time you’re both young and certain there isn’t anything better.

Charlie was around a lot in my life, especially when we were little. See, our parents knew each other back when they were in school. I think our dads were friends. So we grew up around each other. I couldn’t tell you what my first impression of him was, I’d known him that long. What I do know is that for a long time, I was kind of intimidated by him. He was quiet, but he had this look in his eye like he was daring you to fight him. He got dealt a pretty shitty hand in life, but I didn’t find that out until later. We never really talked outside of when our parents made us hang out.

The day that changed was actually the funeral for my best friend at the time, when I was around sixteen. She died of a drug overdose, and Charlie and his family came to the funeral. I didn’t think they knew each other, Jen and Charlie, but that day I learned they were, like, step-cousins or something weird. Related enough to where Charlie’s family would attend the funeral, but not enough to where Jen spoke about them to me.

I was really broken up that day. After the service I went to find somewhere quiet to sit by myself and just feel everything. Wasn’t a good look for me, crying in some back hallway of the basement of the church we were in, but I didn’t care. I’d just lost my best friend.

Charlie of all people found me, said he saw me leave and wanted to make sure I was okay. Kind of a dumb question given the circumstances, but I wasn’t upset by it like I would’ve been if someone else had asked me the same thing. He sat down, and we just talked non-stop,

without awkwardness or prolonged silences or anything. I don't remember what all we talked about, just that he made me feel safe, and seen, and heard.

A couple hours later I got a text from my mom asking where I was. The reception had ended without us knowing. Charlie went to stand up, but something came over me then. I didn't want to let him go just yet. So I took his face and kissed him. In hindsight, it was pretty stupid. I didn't know if he was gay or anything. I wasn't even completely sure about myself at the time. But I did it regardless.

Needless to say it freaked him out pretty good. He ran off, and I didn't see him for a couple years after. We attended different high schools, and sometimes his parents came over for dinner or to play pool in our basement, but he didn't come over then either. I'd ask his dad if he was doing all right, but the answer was always the same. 'He's just busy with schoolwork. Maybe next time.'

That next time came the day I graduated high school. My parents invited Charlie's, and he came with them to the ceremony. I never told my parents what had happened at the funeral, and it seemed neither had he. He had his own reasons for not saying anything, of which I also found out later. At the ceremony, we were really awkward with each other for maybe fifteen minutes, but then he cracked a joke and it made me laugh so hard I almost choked. After that, it was like those two years never happened. Or rather, like the time and distance between us had been filled with proximity instead. We were closer than before. I think it freaked our parents out a little, if I'm being honest—to them we'd gone from short, friendly conversation to acting like we'd been best friends our whole lives. But really I think they were glad for the most part to see their sons finally getting on.

We had a reception at my house after the graduation ceremony. Nothing too big, just us and Charlie and a few other friends of mine. Food, drinks, some games, giftgiving, that kind of thing. Once almost everyone went home though, Charlie took me out back and told me he'd been thinking of that kiss almost every day since. He said he'd been too scared to see me again after. He regretted running away that day. He touched my face, put his thumb on my lower lip, and said that if I was okay with it, he wanted to make something more between the two of us. Something more lovely than sharing conversations in the hallways of a church's basement.

'If you'll have me,' he said. 'If you'll have me.' And that was more than enough for me.

That summer we really got to know each other. Not just as boyfriends, but as friends first. I saw that his tough, quiet demeanor was a front to a sad and injured boy. Unbeknownst to any of us, Charlie's dad abused him pretty bad. I'd see scars on the insides of his arms from cigarettes; ugly, raised lines on his back from the belt. Not to mention the emotional scars too. He cried the first time I told him I loved him. At his graduation party a week after mine, my dad told Charlie he was proud of him for making it through high school, and Charlie had to excuse himself shortly after. I guess no one ever said those things to him. His mom, maybe, but it's different when you hear it from your dad, you know?

We never told anyone we were together. Maybe a friend or two, but we didn't have any friends in common. If it came up in conversation, I'd say yeah, I'm seeing someone. It was a fun story to tell. But we never told our parents. Not... not while Charlie was alive, anyway. The only reason my dad now knows what Charlie meant to me is because after that night, I told him everything. It hurt too badly not to. But the two of us kept everything quiet the whole time. And not from a lack of want, at least on my end. My parents would have been fine with it, even at the time. Maybe even encouraging. It was Charlie's dad that was the issue.

Charlie's dad was the type of guy to go on homophobic rants at the dinner table and make everyone uncomfortable. Honestly, I don't know why my dad stayed friends with the guy for so long. He made sure to tell me afterward that we should be accepting of everyone no matter who they are or who they love. Now that I think about it, on some level my parents must have known about me and Charlie, but they never mentioned it. And really, the only reason I didn't tell my dad about us was the fear that he would let it slip to Charlie's dad. He's never been good at keeping secrets.

Charlie and I spent almost the whole summer together. I don't need to tell you how our days went. We were irresponsible eighteen year old boys completely new to anything romantic. Lots of... activity. It was great for a time, until the day Charlie's dad caught us. We were fooling around in Charlie's room, alone in the house while his parents were at work. His dad must have come home early, because before we knew it, he was shouting and banging things around. I don't think I've ever moved that fast before. Or since. I begged Charlie to come with me, we would be safe at mine. Or anywhere else. Anywhere other than the place that was supposed to be safe for him. But he wouldn't move. He stood in the middle of the room staring at the floor while his dad screamed all kinds of slurs and profanities at him.

His dad must have forgotten I was still there, or he was drunk or something. Right in front of me he hit Charlie across the face. The force sent him sprawling onto the bed. And something inside me broke. I hadn't had time to put my shirt back on yet, so half-naked, I swung. I'd been aiming for his dad's temple, his jaw, anywhere that would get him to stop. But by chance he moved out of the way. I tripped and fell, hitting my chin on Charlie's bedframe. He called out to me, his voice so full of fear and pain. But his dad wrenched me up by the arm and threw me out of the room.

I didn't want to, but I left. I was so scared. It was a shitty thing to do, leaving him there with someone so full of hatred. But I didn't know what else to do. As I left I promised Charlie that I'd come back for him once things settled down, that I'd see him again soon. But I didn't see him the next day. Or the day after, or the day after that. I messaged him countless times but never heard anything back. Tried his house a couple times, wracked with nerves and praying that his dad wouldn't be the one to open the door. Luckily for me, I got his mom each time. She was nice, but she wouldn't let me see him either. I don't know how much she knew about the situation, but she looked apologetic each time she closed the door in my face.

I didn't see Charlie for two weeks, just before we were supposed to leave for college. I was out running an errand for my mom, walking by stores on the way back to my car, when Charlie exited one of the buildings up ahead. To put it lightly, he was not okay. Neither physically nor emotionally. His dad beat him *bad*. The bruises were only just beginning to yellow around the edges. I took him into my car without a second thought, and he just broke down. He'd never cried like that before; not in front of me, at least. It scared the shit out of me.

'I can't do it anymore, Eds,' he'd said once things calmed down a little. His head rested on my shoulder, and my shirt was wet with his tears, but I didn't care. 'I can't keep living like this anymore.'

And there I was, no clue about which way to go or what to do. I wanted to reach inside of him and fix it all. Just a touch of my fingers or a wave or my hand and it would all go away. Darker thoughts crowded my mind too, seeing him like that. Visions full of his dad's blood staining the floor, a hammer or a gun or a knife in one of my hands, Charlie tucked protectively in the crook of my other arm so he could see the hell I wrought for him. So he could watch the light leave his dad's eyes and know that I did it for him. That he'd be safe. I would have done it right then, had he asked. He only needed to look at me, show me how broken inside he was. You

know how they say the eyes are the windows to the soul, doc? Had I seen his eyes then, they would've been shards of stained glass, sharp-edged and cutting him from the inside out. If I had seen that, I would've turned around and done horrible things, all in his name.

But he kept his head on my shoulder. The center console in my car dug into our sides while we sat uncomfortably, the sun arcing carelessly above us. We didn't move for a long time.

We left for college soon after that day. Luckily we chose the same school, so after our freshman year of living in the dorms, we got an apartment together. And god, those were some of the happiest years of my life. Charlie's too. He never said anything about it, not to me at least, but I could tell. He smiled a lot more. I'd almost forgotten what his laugh sounded like before we left, but when we were together, it seemed like all he did was laugh. It was a light thing, a careless thing. Unburdened by the weight of the shit he'd been given. And every time I heard that sound, my love for him only grew. He was happy. He was mine. And at the time, that was everything I could have wanted.

Before we knew it, we'd both graduated: him with a degree in mechanical engineering and me with my behavioral psych bachelor's. I never ended up pursuing that one, though. Charlie became the breadwinner of our household. I was the housewife, I guess. Learned how to cook in college and that ended up being how I contributed.

Charlie still had bad days, nights where he would wake up screaming, or crying silently. I put my psychology skills to use to help him, but I wasn't a professional. The most I could do was offer slightly better advice than he'd probably gotten before, and listen to him when he needed an ear. Most of the time he was okay, but as the years passed, he slowly drew further and further away from me without me even realizing.

One day I found him in the bathtub, sitting in lukewarm water with a razorblade in his fingers and a terrified expression on his face.

He yelled at me like I was wrong for coming in. That might have been the scariest part, other than seeing the blood running down his arms. Charlie never raised his voice. If I hadn't come in, he would've succeeded. Maybe it would've made everything a little easier, who knows. I took the blade from him, cleaned him up, got him dressed, and didn't take my eyes off of him for a second. He came around and apologized later that night, as we lay in bed. I held onto him so tightly, like if I loosened my grip even a little bit, he would slip away and I would never see him again.

It was quiet for so long after that I thought he'd finally fallen asleep, but just before I fell asleep, he whispered against my neck that he'd been thinking of his dad earlier. Everything blacked out in his eyes and all he could hear was a roar so loud that nothing else stopped it except pain. And that just broke my heart.

He never really got better. No matter who he talked to. I kept hoping that we could get back to how things used to be, but... well. Good things don't tend to last.

Adam doesn't know how long he'd been listening for. The man on the other side of the door sits at the janky metal desk with his back partially turned toward the main hallway, face obscured in shadow. The local government hasn't paid attention to the place in years, not even bothering to fork over so much as a penny to cover the cost of replacing the lighting. The prison is already scary enough, chock-full of murderers and rapists as it is; flickering lighting and mold patches creeping up in every corner definitely don't help matters.

With a start, Adam notices the tray in his hand had begun to tremble at some point from the effort of holding it. He was bringing this prisoner his dinner, he remembers, but got caught up in what the man had been saying to the empty room. How long has Adam been standing here?

Peering into the cell now, Adam can make out what has the man so enthralled: He'd propped a tray from a previous meal up against the wall, bottom facing outward, and was speaking into it like he was on a video call. Lord only knows how he managed to hold onto that tray. After mealtimes, it's the responsibility of guards like Adam to take those trays away. Someone must have shirked their duties. In the darkness of the room, the bottom of the navy blue plastic tray looks like a void. It reminds Adam of a television set switched off: just pure emptiness.

Shaking his head, he removes his nightstick from its place on his belt and raps the bars a few times. The metallic clanging visibly startles the man in the cell, and he ceases speaking immediately.

"Dinnertime, buddy," Adam says, opening the small hatch in the door and sliding the tray laden with concerning-looking food into the darkness. "While you're at it, why don't you hand me that spare tray you've got in there? You know you aren't supposed to have that."

“Can’t you see I’m talking with my therapist?” the man says, his voice rough. He doesn’t turn to face Adam. “It’s against the law to eavesdrop on a session.”

Adam looks to the empty tray standing in front of the man. Right. “Well, wrap it up. I don’t get paid enough to deal with this bullshit.”

He pushes the new tray in a bit further with his index finger, not leaving until the man fetches the food and returns to his desk. Adam waits a little longer, but the man shows no sign of relinquishing the other tray. He sighs, moving to close the hatch.

Bootsteps from his right sound on the concrete, and a man walks up to stand close to Adam.

“Hann.”

“Daniels,” Adam greets.

“What’s got you interested in here?”

“Paine’s talking to himself again.”

Daniels hums, peering in through the bars. “Anything good today?”

“We’re interrupting a therapy session.”

Daniels glances at him, one eyebrow raised. “Therapy.” Adam shrugs. “Huh.”

A brief pause. Then, “This is the same man that killed that one guy, right? Uh... ah fuck, what was his name? Some douchebag?”

“Roland,” Adam responds.

Daniels snaps his fingers. “Charles Roland, that’s the bitch. Senior, right?”

“Would’ve been hard to kill the son, seeing as he’d already done himself in by then.”

Daniels hums again. “Crazy shit.”

In all honesty, Paine is among those inmates that scare Adam the most. Word is, one day he just snapped, killing a man who’d just lost his son to suicide. As if the family wasn’t grieving enough. But Paine doesn’t seem to show any remorse over the act, not in the ten months or so that he’d been here. He just sits quietly, not speaking to anyone else apart from himself.

Paine’s voice reverberates through the cell now, oblivious to the two guards standing outside the door. It’s flat, emotionless, as it had been the whole time Adam had been listening. He and Daniels listen for a while longer.