

Let It Be Mine

Francesca Ghosn

What separates us humans from wild animals is comprehending rules. Cats, undeterred by “wet cement” signs, will unabashedly leave paw-print trails. They don’t understand courtesy; humans do. We put signs protecting possessions, easy instructions announcing publicly we don’t want damage done to what’s ours. So why is it difficult to do similarly for what is intangible but just as susceptible to harm? Why is our mental and emotional wellbeing not placed higher on the list of valuables we want protected? My nineteen-year-old self, with her amicably complaisant attitude, was gradually gathering the answers.

I stood in the corner of a hospital hallway in my pajamas holding my phone to one ear and plugging the other to drown out noisiness. Nurses bustled around and I gave them wan smiles as they passed. I stared at flickering lights on the small propped up tree until my eyes crossed, vision blurring. “I’ll be back soon mom,” I said into the receiver, “start dinner without me.” It was Christmas eve. Some nurses wore Santa-hats and walls were decorated with glittering garlands. On this holiday I usually forced myself to avoid stress, focus on family. That year I was unsuccessful.

I had been animatedly telling an anecdote, swaying trees visible out foggy windows, when my phone started ringing: a specialized ringtone for this especially needy friend. I immediately tensed up, muscles locking, thoughts racing. *What’s wrong now.* I answered, my limbs moving feebly, on autopilot. The person on the other line was breathing heavily informing me: accident resulting in broken nose. Ridden with worry, I started to ask questions but was interrupted: “I’ll tell you when I get there.”

Confused, I asked, “Get where?”
“Your house, I’m on my way.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, migraine forming. This was not the first time something of the sort had happened, not this particular scenario but the same urgency. I was often whisked away to go solve some “emergency” that doesn’t *really* require my presence – but is easier to resolve with it. This friend had a flair for the dramatic and I felt wholeheartedly responsible for managing their emotions: calming them till morning when they were upset, ignoring my projects to help with theirs, analyzing their problems with the percipience of a licensed therapist. I know, had I not allowed this behavior repeatedly, it wouldn’t have been normalized. It wasn’t completely selfless – who doesn’t like being needed. Where others saw exploitation, I believed myself a Good Samaritan. Privately, I even took pride in such events; they cemented the notion that I was a good person.

But shortly people start having expectations, feeling entitled. Why ask when the answer is always yes. You don't recognize this unhealthy dynamic until it's too late, and you're put on a pedestal so high the only way down is plummeting to your death. To say it wasn't exhausting would be a lie.

Sensing apprehension, my friend asked, "that's okay, right? I'm almost there."

Immediately guilty for hesitating I answered, "no yeah, of course."

They arrived so quickly, I hadn't time to change. Ignoring my family's protests, I left.

In the car, I could see the injury wasn't as bad as I had imagined, but still favored getting a professional opinion. It was the last month of 2020 and, because of the seemingly everlasting effects of the pandemic, I wasn't allowed inside. I loitered, waiting to be helpful. The receptionist asked if I knew information needed for medical files: blood type, birth-date, family/parents' names, allergies, phone-number, insurance. I knew all but the latter.

Standing absurdly in my festive pajamas, I tried remembering when the lines had blurred. The shaming *I tried calling, you were busy*, the apparent bitterness, changed something: I must be readily available to anyone who might need anything, ever, or they might do or feel something bad. Psychologists might call it a savior, or worse, martyr complex. Or maybe it's an intrinsic need for acceptance. No one wants to spoil the fun. We play along, cause zero conflict. Nobody likes a person they deem difficult; people like easy. If you say *no* more than two times there won't be a third; and naturally, we'd rather be in-attendance and uneasy than uninvited at all. So, we let things slide, stretch ourselves so thin we begin to tear at the seams, but the transaction is worth it when what's being traded back is love, or what we, as naive adolescents, think love is.

Soon enough, one-sided efforts will feel unfair, resentment will build. We'll vacillate between wanting attention and condemning them for it. We grow taciturn, waiting for them to realize their oversight. *Why don't they notice?* The answer is simple: our silence. If the door is open, one need not knock. Having expectations, relying on decency, is plainly unfair. If people are decent, it's a nice surprise: an exception, not the rule. Protecting ourselves is no one's responsibility but our own, which is why one must set boundaries. Failing to do so puts the blame on us.

Examinations over, we were informed the bone wasn't fractured, merely bruised. We stopped at a pharmacy, getting the prescribed medicine *Arnigel* to minimize swelling. I was simultaneously thanked and apologized to, and typically, I downplayed it, making a dismissive gesture with my hand. The situation was treated with shared amusement but back home, hours later and having missed the festivities, I was in a foul mood, stomach in knots, pretending not to notice inquiring glances. Christmas was ruined.

We want people to rely on us, but oftentimes it's emotionally taxing. We cannot say *no*; it violates tacitly encouraged societal rules. We must give reasoning, excuses. So, we become a recluse, better than sounding a lunatic describing our minds' inner workings. How do you explain you're leaving texts unanswered not because you're indifferent, but are unable to stop yourself from floating back into that familiar pattern, causing irreparable damage to your psyche? In *On Self-respect*, Joan Didion writes, "to free us from the expectations of others, to give us back to ourselves – there lies the great, the singular power of self-respect." Evidently, if one has no boundaries, one has no self-respect.

It was midnight, on-call for yet another request that I said, "I can't." A pause. Shock palpable. But the world kept turning. A seemingly small step, still, a beginning. If setting boundaries makes me a cold, unlikable person, let me be one. Goodness never equated weakness. One can be "good" valuing oneself. It's so easy to be kind to others, never ourselves; to be considerate, forgive others' mistakes, never our own. My compassion used to be passed around to whoever needed it, an abundance for everyone but me. Now it is my turn: I need it, so let it be mine.

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