

(synth music leads into the show, starting ethereal and slow and building)

Hello, this is By the Wayside: fictional stories about those on the peripheries of life. This is season 1 episode 4 of High Risk, a story about high risk people's lives throughout the ongoing pandemic. And in this episode I wanted to explore a person who really doesn't think of themselves as high risk, and maybe before catching it wasn't high risk. So here it is, episode 4, Cory.

(synth music continues, becoming more energetic with a sad edge)

1

when Cory was 19 she got in a car accident  
it was abrupt  
loud and overwhelming  
and in a quiet moment in the middle  
she thought  
"huh, so this is it"

lying in the hospital bed  
she felt this strong sense  
that she had almost died  
and she hadn't even lived

the beeps of the heart monitor  
the buzz of fluorescent lights

as she felt like she was floating away  
as she felt like she was coming to awareness  
she knew  
this life was valuable  
it was beautiful  
it wasn't to be taken for granted

2

9 years later  
in 2020  
a week into quarantine  
she was pacing around her small apartment  
or bouncing her knee up and down  
restless and irritated

she had plans, see  
everything was starting to come together  
things started to be so hard at work but  
in the past year it had gotten a lot better  
after Will left  
and she got the advice to just  
ask for the work that would excite her  
people like ambition

and she finally had a solid group of friends  
after moving 4 states away  
with no one around that she knew  
sure, it was mostly Roz's friends  
but she had started to really connect with them

so to just be told to  
sit still  
felt impossible

everything could just fall apart again  
she hated the idea of going backwards

3

as the weeks passed she found that  
everything felt better if she just focused on  
building skills  
building the person she was going to be after all of this

so she learned how to bake  
like everyone else  
with that same sourdough starter that  
was being passed from home to home  
around that time  
and started learning Spanish  
or relearning it  
she took it in school but it didn't really stick  
but there were a lot of Spanish speaking clients  
and almost all of her coworkers just  
knew the same 20 words she did  
and it felt wrong  
some of these people lived on barely any money  
and were turning to them for some help  
and she saw their faces

their hope  
and how hard it was to keep it  
and she thought about those friends she grew up with  
who skipped meals to save money  
people she had left behind  
her old neighborhood

why did she leave it behind

but  
keeping her eye on building  
channeled the nervous energy  
the friction  
she felt inside  
into something useful  
made her life make more sense

4

a few months later her work started shifting language  
calling their work “essential”  
a coworker of Cory’s called it cynical  
that their boss was just trying to force them back to work  
but it felt right to Cory  
people’s lives depended on the job training that they gave  
all of those people searching for new employment  
when the lockdown started  
must have become desperate since

she was happy to get back to it  
to get back to her life  
she had wasted too much time  
cooped up inside

5

“I, I  
know  
I know I was supposed to  
fill it out but”  
a client told her  
shaking his head  
with a dreamy frustration on his face  
“things got in the way I guess”

he said

Cory tapped her pen against her table  
and sighed through her mask

“look

we can fill it out now okay?”

she said

“but this isn’t the best use of this time  
so in the future

do your best to do this work at home”

he nodded

and they worked on the form

she kept asking questions

and he stammered and struggled

simple questions

“sorry, uh

sorry”

he said

“just a little

a little out of it”

he had trouble remembering his address

his own address

he said he hadn’t lived there long but

still

she tried not to be impatient with him

but she was glad when it was over

and he was gone

6

walking home from the bus stop

she’d pass by this bar

and gradually

there were more and more

people in it

hearing laughter and boisterous energy

she felt lonely

she missed her friends

zoom just wasn’t the same

tipping their drinks to the screen

no, no  
it just didn't fill her up  
it felt like  
some part of her just wasn't getting fed  
hungrier and hungrier  
and now every day  
she spent it around people  
around the world and yet  
never sated

she tried to bring it up on a call  
but Roz shut it down fast  
no way was a bar safe  
she said  
don't worry we'll be back to it  
she said  
just be patient

7

a couple of weeks later she got covid  
for the first time  
at first just a tired, off feeling  
but slowly more and more  
until she was just lying around at home

looking up at the ceiling  
she remembered waking up  
after the car accident  
the acoustic tile and geometric vent  
hospital smell

and in her fevered head  
she was afraid  
that same fear  
that awareness of the tenuousness  
of mortality  
fragility

vulnerable and weak  
she felt that same strong desire  
to live

to grab life

whatever it took

8

it didn't last too long  
after a few days she was through the worst  
and a week or two later  
she felt pretty much the same as she had before

all of that time spent restless  
trying to set up zoom calls  
trying to do whatever little projects she could

it was nothing, really  
she'd had worse colds  
really the hard part was just waiting around  
for work to let her to come back

9

Cory had less interest in hearing the excuses  
from her friends  
she felt like the world had been turned upside down  
and she was the only one who had any sense

she had started to get closer to Duane from work  
who was mostly a quiet guy  
who would sometimes chime in with a joke  
and give a half cautious, half exuberant smile  
that always made her wonder  
what he was about

one day after work  
at the bus stop  
he told her  
"it's funny seeing people scared"  
looking off into the hazy sky  
late in a winter day  
"like they just burnt their hands  
on the stove for the first time"

10

at the bar with Duane

a week later  
Cory asked him  
what he was doing  
those times she had seen him at work  
cracking up to himself  
over nothing

"I don't know  
sometimes I think up  
jokes or  
ideas"  
he moved his outstretched fingers  
up and down in a wave  
"I like to imagine stuff  
I guess"

he reminded her of  
a boy she knew back home  
who was always talking to himself  
other kids would make fun of him  
but he just  
lived in his own world

she remembers looking at him  
and feeling jealous  
everything just  
slid off of him

Duane had that same laugh  
a cackle that he seemed to  
surprise himself with

11

the night before  
she got sick the second time  
she was with Duane

it was Spring of 2021  
and she was asking about love  
she had been curious for a while  
had he ever had a girlfriend?  
boyfriend?  
did he think about things like that?

“people are confusing”  
he said  
“I like talking, but  
but  
I’ve never really wanted to, uh”  
he paused

“fuck?”  
Cory suggested

they both laughed  
and he covered his face with embarrassment  
“I don’t really know if I’d like it?”

she felt like she was a kid  
hearing a big secret  
like he’d maybe never even  
told anyone this  
but he was telling her

“wh, what about you though?”  
he managed to get out  
uncomfortable as he was

“me?”  
I just want to live”  
she said

“ahhh  
I could have said that!”  
he shouted  
and they laughed

little yellow particles of pollen  
collected on the cobblestone path  
their sweet smell in the air

“I mean it though”  
she said  
“I don’t care what I do  
I just don’t want to miss life  
when it comes”

he looked at her for a split second  
and then his eyes reflexively darted back  
to his feet  
and she smiled

12

she remembered her bed wet with sweat  
her head pounding as she refilled her water  
leaving a pile of tissues and wrappers on the floor

it was worse than before but  
it was like the flu  
bad but  
she'd survive

after a week she was out of the worst of it  
and was anxious to get back to living

but the stairs kept winding her  
she'd sit down on the floor beside  
the door to her apartment  
and try to catch her breath  
each gasp felt more desperate than it should be  
but eventually  
it'd subside

a part of her so greatly wanted to return to work  
but each day she'd think she was almost through it  
surely tomorrow she'd be back in fighting form  
and it didn't quite happen

eventually she ran out of sick days  
and the choice was made for her

13

immediately there was this feeling that  
she just had to push through  
like she just hadn't slept well that night  
and could power through the sleepiness

a lot of her tasks were repetitive  
so she'd just ask

“what are you looking to do?”  
to a client  
and wait for them to list things  
it was hard to focus  
but she could make herself do it  
she’d trip over her words a little  
but she’d just laugh and say  
“skipped my coffee this morning”  
or some other bland lie

lunch felt more like a precious reprieve  
just sitting, empty minded  
chewing  
staring at nothing

14

Duane had asked her a couple of times  
if she wanted to hang out after work  
but she said no, no  
“rain check”  
she wanted to but  
just not that day  
she was too wiped out

she skipped zoom calls  
and kept meaning to write back  
to emails and texts

it was just for now  
for the moment

things felt out of control for now  
but she knew she could collect herself again

15

after a frustrating meeting with a client  
she hid away in a bathroom stall  
grumbling to herself about  
rudeness  
rushing her  
just the look in that woman’s eyes

she felt a feeling  
that hadn't touched the surface for her  
since her teen years  
that rattled feeling  
uneasy and  
wrong

she wanted to  
to

16

her landlord shouted in her ear  
about past due rent  
she mailed it, she knew she did  
she remembered writing the check  
why was he doing this  
it's not like she'd done it before  
sure sometimes it would be a few days late  
but just because she'd need to wait for a paycheck

she wandered around the apartment  
with this aggressive voice in her ear

"I don't know  
maybe it got lost in the mail"  
she said  
"maybe it  
it  
it"

"send it again!"  
he demanded

after the call  
she found herself standing by her front door  
where a letter sat  
propped up against the wall  
addressed to  
Gatina Property Management  
she  
had she  
really just  
walked past it

for days  
never sending it

17

she started dodging her boss's eyes  
at work  
and keeping to herself more  
she just felt like  
she needed to keep her head down  
not get noticed  
she knew her work had been faltering  
but if she could just  
get through a few days  
a week  
two weeks  
at some point  
it'd pull back together  
she'd been in down periods before  
it would be like that  
she'd get back to it

but as it went on  
and on  
she just felt like  
she didn't want to make eye contact anymore  
didn't want to be seen  
she just wanted to  
get through the day

and still  
each day felt like a slog  
pushing through  
harder and harder to get up in the morning  
harder to go to work  
harder to concentrate  
losing track of more  
more tired when she got home

18

lying in bed one evening  
looking up at the ceiling  
listening to the buzz of the lights

she thought  
about how empty everything felt  
how drab

she sighed  
and let her mind slip away  
into thoughtlessness

19

"it could be a lot of things"  
her doctor said  
"for now I'm going to order a blood test  
we haven't run your vitamin levels in a while  
and that will help us understand what's going on"

Cory nodded  
but she felt like he wasn't taking it seriously  
it felt like she was being rushed along  
when she talked about how tired she felt  
it was like it  
wasn't really real to him

"isn't there something  
like a scan or  
something  
that you can do?"  
she asked  
reaching for words

"let's rule out the obvious causes first"  
he said

20

she saw something about  
training your brain  
your brain is a muscle, it said  
use it and it will become stronger  
so she tried doing sudokus every day  
and at first they were okay but  
they kept getting harder and harder  
she'd get stuck more easily

and then  
coming upon the half finished puzzle later  
see something that should have been obvious

eventually it got too frustrating  
and everything in her head felt  
too fuzzy  
so she gave up  
on it

21

she found herself tempted by  
ads for miracle cures  
reading up on homeopathy  
it was nonsense  
she knew it was nonsense  
but she felt proactive

after a particularly long session one night  
she had a headache and just felt  
so unnatural  
like she was a few steps behind where she was walking  
a few thoughts behind her own perceptions

everything felt so unreal  
why should she care what was fake

22

she felt lonely  
she had pulled away from everyone  
she hadn't talked to Roz and her friends in months  
with Duane it was a passing joke  
every few days  
and that was it  
sometimes she wanted to reach out  
but  
but

it was supposed to be just a momentary bump  
over before she knew it

23

somewhere in the muddled array of scary words  
and too-easy reassurance  
of her online reading  
she found the words  
“long covid”  
oh  
she looked it up  
oh  
oh

but  
but the article said it could  
“last over 3 months”  
she was practically at 3 months by then  
maybe  
maybe this would clear up  
maybe if she could just hold onto her job  
if she could just  
push a little further  
maybe

24

some days felt like a dream  
and she couldn’t remember what she had done  
like she had blacked out  
and her body had lived without her

some days she just remembered looking at the clock  
exhausted and heavy

she felt less than she was before  
she remembered being better

25

there were piles of laundry  
and dishes in the sink  
unopened mail

she couldn’t do it  
when she was home  
it was her only chance to recover

the only place she wasn't pushing herself  
she couldn't

but no one could help  
why would they  
she hadn't talked to anyone in so long  
and they hadn't reached out to her  
no one checked in  
no one was worried  
didn't they care  
she thought  
thought that some people did, right?  
some people

why did she move out here  
away from her community  
she thought  
why did she need to escape  
so badly  
was it so bad

she missed her dad  
and the feeling curdled in her

26

after the car accident  
all those years ago  
she had a cast on her leg  
and her dad just  
changed  
maybe he thought  
that she had tried to do it  
that she turned into traffic  
that she

his harsh words would ring in her ears

and, and  
maybe he knew  
she was delicate  
so he would start to be decent again  
even a little kind

and so it was quiet for a time  
this is how people lived  
she thought  
peacefully  
this is what life could be

peaceful until it started again

she reflected on all of those things  
that her dad said to her  
the way he  
made it seem like  
everything was her fault  
that she had to make up for it  
he'd be a wreck if she left  
and  
no  
no

no  
she wouldn't be held back  
she would live

27

what was this life she was living  
it didn't feel right  
her mind was just a smear of muted colors  
her body was a heavy bag of flesh  
that she carried from place to place

she had plans  
didn't she  
before

what were they

28

crying in the stall of the work bathroom  
Cory just  
felt like she couldn't keep it up  
there was no other option  
but still

she couldn't

walking out  
she stumbled a little  
and wiped her face

"are you okay?"  
Duane asked from down the hall

"I uh,  
I'm"  
she shook her head  
"no  
I'm  
really not"

"oh"  
he said  
his hand opening and closing  
with nervous energy  
"can I help?"

(melancholy synth music plays, a lot like the melodies before but muffled, like underwater)

And that is the end. Just the moment of finally reaching out for help. If you enjoyed the episode, consider going to [patreon.com/counterintuitive](https://patreon.com/counterintuitive) (all one word) and supporting the podcast. You will also find a variety of other projects my partner and I have done over the years. The music you heard throughout the episode is by Leah Lindsaychen. Thank you for listening!

(synth music continues, and then slowly fades away)