

Escape

As he was choking me, his hands gripped about my throat, the air around me prohibited from entering my desperate lungs, I wondered if this was it. This time will he just kill me?

I am sure he wouldn't have meant to. It would not have been what he set out to do. But once it is done it is done, a thing like that. Very difficult to take back. And he would be remorseful I am sure, or am I sure?

Finally he released me and I coughed and spluttered. I tried to clasp the throbbing pain of my neck with my own hands, placing them where his had been. But he wrestled them away from me, pinning them to the floor. He put his knees on my shoulders and sat there leering into my face with his finger waving millimetres from my nose.

I didn't know what he was talking about. He wasn't really talking but pretending to think of something to say. Rubbing his chin in mock thought, taking his time as though he had plenty of it. I could wait.

Any movement from me, any struggle or even a shift in the focus of my gaze and he would slap me hard across the face. My ear was throbbing too and it felt wet. I later found there was blood. I stood over the sink as the door rattled on its hinges contemplating the gargoyle in the mirror. My ear drum had burst.

I was so angry. All I wanted to do was shout and scream. But he had complete control over me then. All I could do was lie there and wait for him to finish whatever performance he was putting on for himself. Maybe it was a recreation of his school days with him in the role of bully and me as his old self; beaten, weak and helpless. It could have been any number of things I suppose. I didn't care, I wasn't listening.

He couldn't reach me in my thoughts, couldn't bruise me there. So they were my sanctuary. I carried myself away in them. I became detached from what was happening to my physical self until it almost seemed as though it was happening to someone else. I felt sorry for her. But I refused to pity myself. I refused to admit I was hurting at all. Though my eye was swollen almost completely shut and my jaw, my neck, my ear were stingingly present. Funny how you are not really aware of all your different body parts until they are wounded. As if the pain brings them to life.

This was not the first time. He promised it would be the last. I honestly don't know if I believed that or not but I stayed anyway. It is not what you want to hear is it? That is not how the story should go. Yet there it is.

What was it about him I was so addicted to that I would risk my life to keep it? I do not know. Was it even him or the morbid side of myself who believed that for some transcendent fault of mine I deserved to be punished?

I hated him. But I loved him also.

Life just carries on. At the time it seems so momentous, earth shattering, life changing and yet suddenly a week has gone by and nothing is different. The supermarket continues to sell the food that you need to eat and that is where he would go to get it when we became hungry. Sheepishly, or I imagined so, he would visit the chemists at the same time to buy pain killers and anti-inflammatory drugs for all the swollen bruising on my face and neck, sometimes my ribs as well. I would take the drugs, sitting up in bed, convincing myself I was being looked after.

We didn't talk about it. We would sit in silence with each other. Him on the edge of the bed, me under the covers, both staring at the space in front of us; enraptured by it.

My job at the restaurant would continue to require my presence and I its meagre wages. I would cover myself with layers of make up. One time he got me a rather unflattering eye patch from the chemist. I told everyone I had some kind of infection. It fooled no one but they didn't question me. Some girls like it. I heard another waitress say once. It made me feel sick. The only person I had to confide this in was him. He was very sympathetic. She is a bitch, he said.

But the reason it made me sick was that I wondered if it was true. Why else was I still in this dire situation when I could easily have called home and asked my parents for a plane ticket the fuck out of there. What exactly was I a part of and why did I defend it so relentlessly?

I did defend it. I lied for him. I agreed with him that it was our business. No one else need know what went on behind our doors. I made excuses for him in my own mind. Those were not really his actions they were a product of the violent conditioning he received himself from childhood. We were drunk. I am a bitch when I'm drunk, an intolerable bitch and aggressively argumentative. I don't back down. Of course it had to end with me being beaten bloody on the bedroom floor.

Was it the culture? Had I been brainwashed into believing this was normal? We were living in South Africa. He is Afrikaans. I do not mean to be rude about it but the prevailing attitude of men out there is misogynist in the extreme. They did not, as a group, understand how to react to a girl like me. I told them they were full of shit. I drank with them and argued them with logic into corners.

So they would look blankly beyond me for the remainder of whatever discussion we were having and just pretend that I had somehow vanished. I laughed the first time. But they were committed and totally serious in their utter rejection of my existence.

He was not so different. He would talk over me across the table cutting through whatever I was saying with diminutive remarks about it. He would belittle me to these other men and they would gang together, satisfied in their denial.

We would fight about it afterwards. I would try to explain how demeaning his behaviour was towards me, how disrespectful. He would flat out refuse that this was the case. I would laugh at this. He would tell me to shut up. I would not. He would hit me. And so on and so on.

Was I enjoying this? Or was I too stubborn to admit it had defeated me?

Months later I sit in front of my computer trying to unravel the now seemingly surreal events in my mind. I married this man. We entered into an angry, sexless, tedious partnership devoid of humour or conversation. It was awful. And when it ended he was confused, he asked me how we had gone from being happily married to this? I was shocked, maybe truly for the first time, at his perception of happiness.

We had returned to Scotland. At the time our intention was only to visit and then go back to South Africa to live and have the wedding. Fortuitously I was detained at passport control in Cape Town airport and told that I would be banned from reentering the country for the next five years. This was due to a number of visa issues that we had been experiencing in the four years of my living there.

So once we were here we were here to stay.

Suddenly I was home again and surrounded by the family and friends so dear to me that I had not seen or spoken to in years. I felt safe. As though someone I loved very much had just encircled me in a warm embrace. My confidence began to return to me. My understanding of my reality started to change. I was no longer destined to be with this man. The possibilities of my future life had not ceased to throw up new alternatives. It was not me and him against the world, in fact, the world was on my side.

I had no real grievance with the world. I began to realise it was his fears I was embodying. It was my positivity he was devouring and living off. It was my fearlessness he sought to suppress with his own insecurities. I am as strong as the North wind in winter and this frightened him. So he used my

lack of self esteem, which was severe, to direct its force against myself. I was caught up in my own gale.

It was the dog that saved me. We got a puppy a little after the wedding. A Border Collie pup. He has two different coloured eyes. He is the most adorable and affectionate creature.

He was sometimes aggressive with the dog, he would become easily irritated by small things. He was not violent per se. His behaviour had mellowed since our arrival in Scotland. Perhaps with exposure to a different kind of lifestyle here, one less toxically masculine and more inclusive, had changed his world view somewhat.

But he would shout suddenly at the dog and it would cower by my legs trying to disappear behind them. And I thought then, what if that was a child? I do not know if I want to have children at all, but if I did? I would have no control of the situation, he would be in my life and the life of the child whether we wanted him there or not. That would be his right. I could not predict how he would be in the future. Maybe he would continue to improve, maybe long stretches of time would separate each flare of temper.

But maybe he would beat me with the child present and aware. How frightening that would be, how scarring. What a life that child would live full of resentment, fear and loathing. What of love? Did I love this man? I did not.

And that was it. In my head it was done. He became a person I barely knew in place of one I felt tethered to by invisible and impenetrable bonds.

I slept with someone else. I didn't realise at the time but this was my way out. After it happened I saw my actions leading up to that point. How I had flirted with the boy, tried to grab his attention. So when finally one night he leaned into me I leaned back without any hesitation. I didn't know what I was doing but it felt so good and so freeing that I didn't think at all. For the first time in

years I was living in the moment and enjoying myself without a history of violence and manipulation pulling me down from ecstasy like a rock in still water.

It was hard to go back to the bed I shared with him that night. I didn't think I was capable of something like that. He wondered where I was. I said I was at a party which was true. He told me we did not go to parties in that house, in the village where we live, it was full of stupid kids and we did not socialise with them. He also said I shouldn't have gone on without him at all, did I understand? I didn't bother to respond. I remained silent and huddled into my pillow instead blocking out his voice and remembering the taste of the other boy on my lips.

It had to come out now, how could it not? The only question was timing. How do you broach a subject like this? How do you begin to explain to everyone around you that the wedding they went to was a farce? How do you admit that your self esteem was so low that you married a man who beat the shit out of you? How do you tell that man that you do not love him anymore?

I imagined and reimagined the scenario in my head. We were supposed to depart for a trip after the new year, we were then in the week before Christmas.

In the beginning I really thought we could make that trip together. We would share some happy memories and then one night we would go for dinner in a nice restaurant and I would lay it all out for him. I would tell him I had been with another man and that this was a product of the years of abuse I had suffered by his hand. In the beginning this made sense to me as a viable plan. After a few days though as the idea settled in my mind I began to think about his possible reactions. Was it really sensible for me to wait until we were alone in a country on the other side of the world to inform him the life we shared was over? Probably not.

In the end I just came out with it. We were in my parents house in Edinburgh for the festive period. Emotions were running high as they tend to do over the holidays and I was all of a sudden

overwhelmed by it. I took myself away to my room, my old room that was the same as it had been when I lived there as a teenager, as a child. My parents had not changed a thing though I had not lived in that house for more than a decade. I was overwhelmed as well by the love they felt for me and how hard it was going to be to tell them the man they thought was my protector was in fact my greatest danger.

He came to the room to find me. I told him to sit down I had something to say.

He was distraught, he cried. He immediately painted himself as the victim in our little drama. He told me it was the shittiest thing I could have done to him to go with someone else as I knew he had been cheated on before. I tried to explain myself, that it was not the sex that was important, it was the fact I felt such a desperate need to escape from him that I had gone to such lengths. I tried to make him see that what was really happening was an unveiling of the truth of our relationship. A truth that we were both aware of but had never confronted before. He had to face up to and take responsibility for his actions. He had to meet his demons.

And then I told my mother. She took it very calmly. She squeezed my hand gently and said little.

I couldn't bring myself to tell my Dad, I left that for my Mum to do. My Dad wanted to kill him. He wanted to turf him out but he is too good a man to do so. And so we shared the most awkward Christmas of all time together. The only one of us that seemed to enjoy himself, the opening of presents in the morning, the festive meal in the afternoon, was him.

At times he seemed unfazed and I wonder still if the gravity of the situation has sunk in at all. I know that in the weeks that followed he continued to complain of the wrongs done to him and all that I had taken away from his life. He had lost a wife, a dog, a family and several friends. He did not seem to understand that all of these things were dependant on his being a true and loving husband to me. That my parent's love for him and that of my friends was established on my love for him. To discover that he had put me through all that he had was to completely dismantle that love.

And with that a spell had been broken. I stepped out of the toxic bubble in which I had lived for the previous six years and into the light. My chest felt as though I could finally breathe fresh air again after living in a cave or underground for a long time. I walked around in a daze. I met with my friends and spoke with them openly for the first time in years. I had forgotten the person I used to be, unabashed and unafraid of other people's opinions. I got drunk and danced, got high and laughed. I felt younger somehow, unburdened.

I know it is customary to get your hair cut after a break up. To give yourself some new look, a totally different style or some mad colour. My hair was quite short already leaving not a lot to work with and I had tried all the crazy colours that I wanted when I was younger.

Instead I went for a piercing. It was nothing too outrageous, not a nipple piercing or anything. Just a stud in the cartilage at the top of my left ear.

I have a few piercings already and a number of tattoos. It is a painful process. But there is something very meditative about the pain. You know you are putting yourself through it for body art's sake. In some cases it's a right of passage, a transitional or significant moment in your life.

And so you detach yourself from the physical. You carry yourself away in your thoughts as the needle gouges or engraves you. You accept the pain, embrace it even. It awakens something in you, a recognition of the new chapter of your life beginning. This type of pain gives you control.

This is how I felt sitting on the leather seat, not unlike one you would find in a dentist's office, in the cramped little room of the studio near the foot of the Royal Mile. I was chatting away merrily to the ageing rocker of a man who was holding the needle about the last time I had had any work done and what it was that had brought me here this time. He had recently gone through a break up himself, he sympathised with me and he was gentle. We spoke about all the strange reasons people

had found their way to his chair. What changes in the capricious winds of life had blown them into a tattoo studio seeking finality. As the needle ran through me and a sharp shiver of pain shuddered satisfyingly along my spine my body became my own once more.