

BRADFORD WRITES
University of Pittsburgh-Bradford
Fall 2021

Bonfire

By Anonymous

A warm, midsummer breeze brushed up against my legs as I anxiously tapped my foot into the dirt: Up, down, up, down. The crackling of the bonfire was not enough to drown out the voices of my friends while they interrogated him via a phone call. I heard his emotionless voice, as he owned up to the lies he had been telling for the past two years. My stomach churned and my foot began to create a hole in the soil: Up, down, up, down. The call ended. Jake, a close friend of mine, looked at me with sorrowful eyes.

“Has he ever hit you?”

The secret I had been holding in my heart for the past 2 years finally came to light. I felt my heart drop into the hole I had made in the dirt. My eyes flooded with pain as I nodded my head, tears ran down my cheeks. I had finally felt free.

Three years ago, I began dating what I considered to be my first love. He was sweet and kind and funny and charming. In my eyes, all I saw was perfection. My heart decided that it belonged with his, and he knew that I was wrapped around his finger. Sure, I could ignore the red flags. The anger issues never mattered because he loved me. The lying never mattered because it was always justified and he loved me. The flirtatious tendencies behind my back never mattered because he loved me. I saw him through my own tunnel vision as this perfect person who did everything out of love.

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The abuse was gradual. He grabbed the back of my arms a little bit too hard when arguing. Held my head under the water too long when play fighting in the pool. Pulled my arm up behind my back if my attitude got to be too much for him. Pinned me to the ground and pretended to spit in my face as some sort of sick joke. Grasped onto my throat and grueled me for speaking to my guy friends, whom he thought I was flirting with. I began keeping my mouth zipped shut, and, while walking on eggshells, figuring out what buttons not to push. But none of it ever mattered because he loved me, right? And he always apologized. Not with words, of course, but by showering me in gifts. Rings, flowers, and dates always made up for the bruises that he left behind, right?

Through it all, I stayed. But why? That's the million-dollar question that I still do not have the answer to. None of the answers that have swarmed their way into my mind make sense because of the way I view myself. It makes my skin crawl to think that maybe in my own sick mind I started putting love and pain in the same category. After a while, a slap to the face was just as pleasing as a kiss. But that's not me, is it? Maybe I liked the pain he brought upon me because it was his way of showing his love. And God, his love was my heroin that I couldn't seem to stay away from because the withdrawals would make me sick. Maybe I stayed because it was more pain to be without him than to be with him. It wasn't like he held a gun against my head, forcing me to stay with him. Maybe I thought that one day he would change, and right now it was just a rough patch. But that rough patch was never-ending. These are the ideas that I keep to myself because it is hard for someone else to understand why someone stayed in an abusive relationship. People in my personal life would call me "dumb" or "stupid" for staying for so long, as if I didn't already know that. When they would ask me why I stayed, I would jokingly

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say “good question,” and just change the topic of conversation. It has always been an uncomfortable subject for me, even as time passed. No one has any idea of the battle that has been raging in my head for years as to why I didn’t leave. It would have saved me so much so trauma, so much pain, and my idea of love wouldn’t be so warped and utterly fucked up if I just would’ve left. I never wanted this. But then why did I stay?

It was the summer of 2020. My best girlfriends just graduated from high school, ready to face the ups and downs of this new adult world. To celebrate, they planned a trip to the beach, inviting me to tag along with them. His friends and he decided to plan a beach trip themselves, booking a condo only a few streets down from ours. The trip was going to be the best kickoff to summer ever, leaving our parents for a week to do whatever our hearts desired.

Our first day started off with chaos. He and I had been arguing back and forth for the past week, as he said that he had no plans of seeing me on our beach getaway. My anxiety shot through the roof while questioning why, but at least I would not have to deal with his angry outbursts for a week. We left at six o’clock in the morning, drove in a car for 8 hours, and navigated our way to our condo. After we unpacked our suitcases, it was time for the week-long party to start. Two of my girlfriends decided to walk the boardwalk with his friends and him. Us remaining two decided to relax in the condo, talked about our agenda for the week, and stuffed our faces with pretzels.

Knock, knock, knock. I looked through our side window, the tiny one just to the right of our door. It was him, standing on the sandy, wooden floorboards of our front porch. I cracked the door open, as he pushed his way into our living room, reeking of booze. His hand fastened

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around my wrist, gripping it tightly, like how angry parents pull their children away from their friends when they misbehave. But I did not think I did anything wrong. As he pulled me into my bedroom, just a few feet away, he never said a word. I laid with my back pressed against the comforter, while he began to straddle me, pinning my body to the bed. Tears started to form in his eyes.

“I love you.”

I knew that those three beautiful words were a death sentence, considering that, by now, they were strung together few and far between. My heart sunk into my stomach, while my mind began to prepare for what I knew what was yet to come.

“I am the only person that has ever loved you.”

Thud. The first fist hit my sternum. I felt my lungs gasp for a breath of air, only for the second fist to push it right back out of my nose. I began to panic, my body not sure whether to fight back or not. As if his mind read the thoughts racing through my head, he tightened his legs around my hips. Fighting back felt like a distant option in the matter of seconds. This was going to go his way, and he was fuming with rage. Like a bad storm, he thundered his fists into my chest and with each hit, the storm only seemed to be getting closer.

Smack. An open palm to my jaw. My skin began to sting like a fresh sunburn, but it was nothing compared to my shattered heart. I began to plea for him to stop, begged God to listen to my prayers just this one time. A rainfall of tears began to flood from my eyes, dripping onto my now dampened t-shirt, as the cotton soaked up the storm. I heard my friends in the living room; they whispered to each other in between his screams. A door closed. It was now just him and I, no more chance of help to be called for. His hits started to become more forceful, focused on my

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chest and face. He took my throat with both hands, his grip not letting up. I muttered the only words that I knew might get him to stop.

“I love you too.”

His grip loosened up as he sat back on his legs, looking at me with regret in his eyes. The arms he then wrapped around my bruised body hugged me tightly, as if he never wanted to let go. I saw in his eyes how drunk he was, his world spun faster and faster. After what seemed to be an eternity goes by, he slumped onto the side of the bed, passing out beside me. I went to the bathroom to evaluate the damage he had done in the mirror. It looked as if someone was trying to paint the night sky on my chest with different shades of blue, splattering purple paint onto my face and neck in the process. That was it. I was done.

The rest of that week was a blur. I still had not told anyone what had happened that night, although they heard bits and pieces from the living room. My friends began to question his integrity and lying without my input once we returned home. We sat by our bonfire, and they dialed his digits into the phone, wanting him to own up to his lies. I anxiously sat nearby, and listened to his emotionless voice admit to all of the things he had done before. My friend Jake looked at me.

“Has he ever hit you?”

I nodded my head with tears in my eyes. The burden I had been holding tightly to my chest finally lifted.

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The following year after that incident took a huge toll on my mental health. I overrode the emotional pain with drinking for the rest of that summer. I simply just didn't want to feel, masking it with partying and putting up a pretty facade. I didn't care about my wellbeing whatsoever, and as dark as it sounds, I was ready to die. Once soccer season came around in August, the drinking stopped. Soccer kept my mind busy, so I never really had to think about the relationship. I had also realized that I would be just as bad as him if the drinking didn't subside. For those first six months though, my sleep was disrupted by vivid nightmares, waking me up every other hour. Melatonin became my new best friend from about June to January. As more months went by, the nightmares began to cease, and I could sleep again. He would only cross my mind about three times a week, usually when I saw something that reminded me of him, whether it was a picture or places we went on dates. I started to feel like myself again, falling back into love with my own identity and independence. No more walking on eggshells, no more fighting, no more bruises. Healing is not a linear process. There are times where I overthink, wondering why he did it and if this was something I would ever recover from. I wonder if maybe I deserved it, and his outbursts were justified. On the rare occasion that I would see him in person, panic attacks would ensue. Personally, I would rather take a punch to the face if it meant that these thoughts would vanish from my ever-racing mind. But these thoughts in my mind hold no weight and are not something I will not let myself succumb to. I have come to accept that a shitty thing happened to me, but that doesn't mean that my life should be cut short because of it. In the past year, I have done so many things that I never thought would happen. I began dating other people who genuinely cared about my wellbeing and truly had feelings for me. I stopped hiding my real personality and quit giving a shit about what other people thought of me. I turned eighteen years

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old, which is something I am proud of in itself. He holds no power over me anymore. I can finally say that I'm free.