1-1-2016

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Class of 2018

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Author Bio

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The feeling of his breath on the back of my neck is like the first warm breeze of spring. I melt into his arms and we mix like the root beer float we shared the night before, our six month anniversary. This bed is only meant for one but we don't mind sharing-- it just means we get to hold each other closer. I am happy, I am in love, he is in love with me, and I still have trouble believing that he is not a dream. Before we go to sleep, I have to extinguish a small flame of fear in my chest that I will wake in a different place, without him, realizing that none of this was real. He makes it easy. But the fear still exists.

I never truly believed anyone would find me worthy to be by their side. From the age of eleven I have felt the crushing weight of wanting, wanting someone who was just mine, who would always choose me first, who would love me even though I didn't. After being turned away by multiple boys, in multiple fashions both kind and cruel, I started to think that maybe love was something I would never get. There was nothing else on the television, in the numerous books I read, that said a person could be happy, was worth something, if someone didn't love them romantically. And I took this to heart.

I was always asked these strange and invasive questions at family reunions: "Do you have a boyfriend?" "I bet you're a real heartbreaker!" "You like any boys?" "The boys in your class probably fall all over you!" My answer to (most) of these questions was "no". And I felt alright about that. I didn't see why it mattered, or why anyone cared. My aunts and uncles would always giggle when asking these questions, like it was a joke or a secret. I remember my mother trying to help me deflect the questions, smiling her tight smile at my various relatives, informing them that it was "none of their business". She knew how
strange it made me feel, and I suspect she knew what it would eventually make me think. But still, I felt trapped. Even my family felt like it was about

time I started dating. But I couldn't seem to get the attention of any boy. I worried and cried and felt generally depressed and anxious about it. My small preteen body was full of confusion and the beginnings of self-loathing that I'd still be working through in college. I knew I wasn't alone, but I felt like I was anyways, because all the adults around me seemed to have a lot of preconceived notions about where I should have been in my love life. I felt the fear that still exists.

I wasn't wrong about the adults having these notions. According to chemistry.com, nearly two in three adults feel that a long-term romantic relationship is essential to living a happy, fulfilling life. I too felt this way at the time, possibly because a lot of the adults in my life, consciously or unconsciously, pushed this upon me. The emphasis on marriage in our society is fading, but it is still heavily believed that to be happy, one needs to be in a committed, romantic relationship. I disagree, vehemently, now. But that, obviously, didn't stop me from agreeing as a younger woman.

It is the first day of eighth grade, and I'm excited for school for the first time since elementary school. My middle school is in a very rural area, and I have always felt strange going there, as it has a very different feeling from my elementary school down the street. Half of the kids are the children of farmers, the other half the children of the professors who teach at Slippery Rock University, right across the street. I fit into neither of these groups, and it only serves to make me feel even more like an outcast. I am frequently called "freak" behind my back, giggled about in passing as the "weird music girl". But today, I don't let it get to me. I wake up and put on my favorite dress, and when I look in the mirror I don't mind how I look. This is pretty big for me, and I am very happy about it. I have just started acne medication, and my skin is clear for the first time since I was nine, around four or five years ago. I still put on makeup, just to be safe; the fear still exists.

"Wow, your skin is really clearing up!" My mother tells me.

I beam at her.

"Thanks! I don't even have to wear much makeup!"

My mother smiles at me, relaxed for the first time in a while. I know that what she calls my "angst" worries her a lot. She has recently asked me if a want to see a therapist, and I have declined. I have just started feeling better. I am doing musical theater classes and shows down in Pittsburgh, and have made a lot of friends who seem to accept me. I am beginning to think that maybe I'm not as bad as I thought. I figure I'll pull through.

I have science first thing that morning. Let me tell you, science at 7:45 in the morning is not a fun time, especially for someone who sucks at

it (i.e. me). I take a seat in the back, next to a boy from the football team that I vaguely recognize.

"Hey, you're Brynn, right?" he asks.

"Uh...yeah," I say, "Andrew?"

"Yeah," he says, and smiles at me.

From that day, we talk every morning, and eventually exchange numbers. I feel amazing. My confidence is higher than ever and I feel pretty for the first time. A popular boy likes me! I tell my mother and brother all about it, how much I like the fact that a boy has interest in me.

One day when we're texting, Andrew calls me 'babe'. I feel very uncomfortable for some strange reason, and tell him so. "Well, I'm going to call you whatever I want, babe," he replies. I get a sinking feeling, a rock in my stomach, as I message him "I am uncomfortable with this. Stop it or I won't talk to you anymore." I wait, knots in my stomach and chest, for his reply. The gist of his answer was this: "I'm high as hell and I don't care enough to keep this up anymore. It was a joke. Me and the boys made a bet to see if I could get into your pants. Guess not." The sinking feeling drops to my feet, and I find myself reverting back to how I felt just a few months before. Reluctantly, I tell myself that I should have expected this. Why would anyone like the freak, the "weird music girl"?

It didn't help that I was always told "you're too pretty to be single!" I always replied "well if that were true, I'd have a boyfriend!", which never failed to shut people up. I cried almost every night, feeling like I was worthless, for years. I felt I needed a male to find me attractive, nice, and good to be those things.

Nobody can deny that in our society, we value romantic love and relationships above all other types of relationships. Everyone expects you to have crushes, date, and to eventually get married. In a lot of media we see people who have not dated, or who show no interest in it, as sad, and usually ugly or too serious. It is difficult to find stories--whether they are books, movies, or tv shows--that do not have some heterosexual romantic relationship as the focus at some point. We are conditioned from birth to believe that one day we will date, get married, and have children. People will say things about babies, like, "Oh, he's such a ladies man!", when this child isn't even old enough to talk. In my experience, and in what I have observed, this effects others negatively. In a study done by Kristen Myers and Laura Raymond on elementary school girls, it was discovered that girls as young as first grade see having a crush as normal, and that it actually gives a girl more social status in the other girls' eyes. These girls fed off of each other's crushes and would sometimes make up a crush to fit in. Basically, from a very young age, girls are viewing themselves through how

males see them, and seeing romance and dating as an inevitable thing that will happen to them. Because of this, we women seem to place all of our self esteem in the hands of the people that we want to find us attractive. If nobody finds us attractive, we assume that "logically" this means that we are ugly, or undesirable in some way. This happens more once a girl hits adolescence. Many girls experience something called "the fall" where they begin to "define themselves primarily through the eyes of boys". This is what I, and almost all my friends, experienced as young women. I can only assume that people of other genders have this issue as well.

I remember the first time a boy who I deemed "normal" confessed he had a crush on me. I was so ecstatic, because I had convinced myself that this would never happen to me (the fear still exists). I lied and told him I liked him back, solely because I wanted to show myself, and the world, that look! I must be attractive, cool, desirable in some fashion because someone who isn't a stalker likes me! I felt so awful about lying that I ended the "relationship" after two days. The boy chastised me for leading him on, and I deserved that, but it didn't help. I went, as they say, "two steps forward then three steps back". Yet again, I felt like an awful person, but now I had a "legit" reason for feeling so.

All of these experiences piled up. Crush after crush, I was turned down, or lead on only to be turned away. My mother and friends tried so hard to convince me that I didn't need a boy's affection to be attractive, or to be the best version of me that I could. For some reason I didn't believe them. I only believed them once I managed to wrangle myself a boyfriend, a relationship that lasted two years and shaped a lot of who I am today.

My first love put a lot of things in perspective for me, and showed me some things about myself that I otherwise never would have guessed (like my sexuality-- but that's another story). I don't regret it as a whole. But there are parts of it that I do, things I wish I had said something about, things I let myself believe for no other reason other than that I wanted to- the fear still existed. I wanted to believe that I had found someone I would be with forever, that I would never again have to go through the pain and struggle of finding someone I liked who liked me back again. I wanted to believe that our relationship was healthy and perfect. And, as I usually do, I learned the hard way that I was wrong.

It felt like fate. From the first moment he stepped on the school bus in tenth grade I could feel myself pulled to him. I told myself, this is how it's supposed to feel. You should feel this connection with someone. And I still believe that; that's chemistry. I let it take me in, even though I wasn't even sure I liked him as a person, at first. That should have been my first clue. But I had never felt anything like it before, and I didn't want it to stop.

When we first started dating, I felt happier than I could ever remember being. I had renewed confidence in everything that I did, and I felt good about my appearance. Everyone told me how cute we were together and how lucky I was. I sure felt lucky, at least those first few months. My life felt like a dream, and for once I stopped daydreaming about having a 'better life' because I finally loved my own. I didn't notice when I was being taken advantage of, because I wanted to be dating him so badly. I stuck with him through the strange episodes of isolation, depression, and "I don't know if I want to date anymore" that he started to go through every few months. He had me wrapped around his little finger and I couldn't be bothered to change that, even though he had started to make me feel like I needed to do everything right and be the perfect girlfriend so that he wouldn't leave me; the fear still existed.

I let him ditch me for his friends so he wouldn't get mad; I let him say things to me that occasionally made me feel bad because 'hey, maybe he's right, and I don't want him to get upset', and I let myself believe that if I was the best girlfriend I could be that he wouldn't ever want to leave me. But he did. Three weeks into college, not too long before our two year anniversary, he drove down to tell me he didn't want to see me anymore. At least he drove down. At least he didn't do it over the phone, or through text. But that didn't make it hurt any less, and I spent the rest of the semester in a thick depression, wondering if I would ever find someone else to love me ever again. I felt like I had taken a huge leap backwards. But this time, I had good friends and quite a few more years on me, and I discovered why I had such low self esteem all these years; because I put it in the hands of the people I wanted to date. And I was sick of it, so I decided to focus on myself, school, and having fun with my friends. I realized soon that I actually enjoyed being single, and my self image began to get better. Once I began to love myself more I found myself looking at people in a more sympathetic and realistic fashion.

Now, I've never been one to say "you have to love yourself before someone else can love you", because, frankly, that's bullshit. What I will say is that it's easier to see through manipulation tactics and lying when you believe you deserve better. It's easier to find a healthy relationship when you believe you deserve the best, and that's how I found my current boyfriend, who respects me and treats me well. When society throws things at us like *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* that glorify abusive relationships, it gives young people the wrong impression about love. I know that's what I experienced. But even now I can look across the bed and see a smiling face that loves me. And he loves me because I am who I am, even in the worst of times. Do those fears still exist, and do I occasionally doubt the fact that someone loves me without strings attached? Yes; it is difficult to find your

way from absolute loneliness to something that looks like love. But I'm un-learning the harmful things society has taught me about love and relation-ships. And I'm doing just fine.