2015

Drowning

Hana Whisman

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol23/iss2015/2
There was no abrupt shift. I didn’t suddenly wake up one morning and realize that I was in a world I did not belong to; nor did I get out that way. It was a long, slow process. I was wading out to sea when a swift undertow caught me when I wasn’t looking and carried me out to open waters. I didn’t realize I was drowning until every single person who loved me tossed life vest after life vest. But I didn’t want to be pulled out. I wanted to swim out myself—kicking, screaming, choking, and bobbing with my head just under the surface before I finally landed on the sand—soaked, shivering, and gasping for air.

I had thought I was happy. (Ignorant and stupid might be more accurate statements.) He didn’t “treat me like a princess” in the way I imagined when I was little, but he was new, mysterious, and gave me a peculiar kind of attention I had never experienced before.

When he got jealous, it was cute; when he cried, he was sensitive; when he fell silent, he was sultry and mysterious. But things started to change. When he was jealous, it was frightening; when he cried to me, it was pathetic; and when he was silent, I knew it was only because screaming rage was welling up inside him.

When my feelings were hurt, I was “being overly-sensitive and a bitch.” When his feelings were hurt, I was “being rude and also a bitch.”

His fist fell heavy on doors, walls, lockers—anything but me. As long as he didn’t hit me, it wasn’t abuse, right? But his words fell like tarnished chains around my throat.

Of course it didn’t start out that way. I can’t think of any situation like mine that does. Somewhere I read this comparison: “If you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, he will immediately jump out. If you put him in a pot of lukewarm water and slowly turn up the heat, he will stay there until he boils. And that’s how abusive relationships work.”
At first it was exciting—I had never had a real boyfriend all to myself before! Suddenly, this boy popped up on my Facebook messages to ask about an assignment, and we instantly found ourselves lost in conversation. I think I fell for him because he was the first sixteen year-old boy I had talked to who knew how to use proper grammar.

So we did the traditional “high school relationship” thing. He asked me to the winter formal, and I told him I would think about it. His “hurt feelings” face alarmed me slightly, so I agreed that yes, I would go with him. We had a nice time. He bought me dinner at the Olive Garden and pulled out my chair and toted around my crutches that I had been using since I sprained my ankle the night before.

We sat in the back of each class we had together, whispering and giggling and wreaking general havoc for our teachers. He held my hand on the school bus and let me rest my head against his shoulder. He walked me to my classes, and even though I found it ridiculously embarrassing, always gave me a kiss in the doorway before hustling off to his own classroom.

He said he wanted to be my boyfriend. I told him to ask my father (per the agreement my father made with me when I was young that he would only help me pay for my wedding if all my boyfriends asked his permission to court me). I remember he came over to my house the day before my sixteenth birthday to meet my family. After most of them left, we were sitting on the couch watching Finding Nemo. He was rubbing his hands back and forth, back and forth over his thighs. He’d rock forward, holding his breath, then lay back and let out a deep sigh. I rolled my eyes. I thought he was being a giant baby, but it was still cute.

Finally my dad walked in the room, and in a feeble voice, the trembling boy at my side said, “Mike, I’d like to talk to you about something.” And then they went in the backyard for a while and when he came back he was grinning and trembling slightly less. Then he went home and I guess that’s when he became my first boyfriend.

“Did you threaten him?” I asked my father accusingly.

“Only a little,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “Great, just what I need. A new boyfriend
He was pretty popular, and I certainly was not. He was the varsity pitcher for the baseball team. At the time I was working, an honors student, and a track athlete, but I still made it to every one of his home games. I was usually freezing cold in my skimpy track practice attire, and the team was usually losing. But most of the time he would come out of the dugout after the game to thank me for coming before running off with his friends.

I think he came to one track meet of mine and watched my whole first event (a whopping 13 seconds).

He was also a musician. He taught himself to play the guitar by watching John Mayer performances and he had a decent enough voice. Whenever I was at his house, he’d usually play a song or two for me after I watched him play video games for a couple hours. He told me that he wrote his own songs in his spare time, but I never heard any of them. He said they would be too depressing and too loud for me. What I really wanted was for him to write me a song. I mean, what’s the point of even dating a musician if you don’t get original songs written for or about you? The money?

My uncle told me a great joke: “What do you call a musician without a girlfriend? Homeless.”

Later I remembered this joke and made up my own rendition: “What do you call a musician without a girlfriend? Starving and hitchhiking, apparently.”

Since I was employed and had a car, and he was “focusing on his music and baseball,” I usually was in charge of paying for meals and giving rides.

“Where are you going?” my mother would ask.

“On a date.”

“Well, after you’ve picked up your date and the dinner check, make sure you get her home before dark so her parents don’t worry.” My mother thinks she’s so clever.

“Please don’t say that in front of him. You’ll hurt his feelings.” My mother just rolled her eyes into the top of her head and
sighed loudly. She got really good at doing that.

After about a year or so, things seemed to be going the way they were supposed to. Although we were bickering more, it was never about anything big. He had also succeeded in coercing me into doing, “what all the other couples are doing,” in the stairway behind the locker room. I felt pretty invested at that point. He had certainly ventured where no one else had attempted without a sharp smack in the face. If I could trust him with that part of me, that obviously meant I was in love, right?

Then she came along. I wasn’t terribly threatened at first. “She’s small, I could take her easily enough if I need to.” I was only joking.

He didn’t think it was funny. “She’s a good friend of mine. So I’d appreciate it if you weren’t a bitch to her, okay?”

We hung out with her and his cousin on the Fourth of July that year. Per his instructions, I did not converse with her.

He began spending more time with her, but I still wasn’t bothered. What could he possibly get from her that he couldn’t get from me? I knew everything about him. No matter how he was struggling, I could read him like yesterday’s newspaper and then make everything better.

She started coming to baseball games. I cheered extra loud at those games. He said, “Stop being a jealous bitch.”

I hadn’t thought I was jealous up to that point. Until I started thinking there might be a reason I should be jealous.

One baseball game, I had just arrived at the field after battling traffic all the way back from my track meet in the city across the river. I was cold, wet, and tired, but I was there in time for the last several innings.

After the game, he exited the dugout. I raised my hand to wave and smile, but he continued walking. My smile froze plastered on my face like clown’s paint while he walked up to her and gave her a hug.

My jaw dropped. I’m not sure if I picked it up by the time he
turned back to me. “I can’t hang out today because I told Emily she could get a ride home with me.” (By this time, he had inherited his dad’s minivan with the tinted windows for part-time use.)

The words spilled out of my mouth before I could catch them. “That’s nice. Hey, I just got back from Wilsonville and I’m cold and wet and it’s raining and I parked my car all the way on the other side of the school and it’s like five blocks away and since it’s raining do you think you could drive me over to it? **Babe?**” I accentuated this last word with a dramatic swat to his behind.

He stuttered for a moment and glanced back at Emily. She looked furious. I grinned sweetly. “Please?”

“Yeah, hang on a second,” he muttered and turned to walk back to her.

Flames burned in her eyes as he explained the new situation to her. The same flames burned in my stomach, but all that could be found on my face was sweet, expectant eyes for him and a gloating, smirking grin for her.

We all turned to walk to his car. I still had not said a word to her. They walked painfully slow behind me. I strutted determinedly to the car and stood waiting by the passenger door.

“Listen,” she said, “I think I’m just gonna wait for my mom to get me.”

He looked at her in distress. “Are you sure?” he asked blankly.

“Yeah, uh, she’s already on her way.”

I ignored this encounter and hopped in once he unlocked the door. Neither of us said anything until he had stopped next to my car.

“You played great today. I’m sure glad I got to see you play, since I left my track meet early to come watch!”

He muttered a “thanks” without looking at me. I rolled my eyes and hopped out.

“She’s going through a lot, and so am I, and we’re really the only ones who understand each other.”

“Um, then how about you go date her?” I asked.

“Hana, you know I love you.”

Bullshit.
He started to cry. I sighed. I used to cry too when he cried, but it got me nowhere. He told me it was selfish to cry since I “don’t even understand what he’s going through.”

For the next six months or so, I continued to put up with his silly nonsense. After I teased him for buying a peacoat and a pair of Toms, I put up with him calling me a foul, vulgar name that made the hair on the back of my neck rise during class. I put up with him when he bought Diablo 3 the week before prom so he didn’t have any money to buy our dinner. I put up with him telling me, “The only reason I bought you a corsage was so I wouldn’t have to hear you bitch about it all night.”

I put up with him regularly making me late for class because he had something to cry about in the parking lot after one of our fights. I put up with him screaming that I “betrayed him,” because I dared to seek counsel from one of my guy friends about a life issue.

I put up with finding out that he and Emily had kissed during one of our short “breaks,” several months after it happened. I put up with months of being grounded by my parents for my lying and sneaky behavior to cover up most of the shitstorm that was our relationship.

I put up with it all because he said he needed me. He said that he would kill himself if I left him. And he would cling to me, wipe his salty tears across my chest, shake me, throw me, and sob himself hoarse if I so much as suggest we try “moving on.”

So I stayed. For a year and a half, I stayed.

I’m not sure what finally caused me to decide to leave. I think I had seen just one too many tears. Every time he cried, I would pat him on the back and mutter, “There, there.” As soon as he looked away or wiped his eyes, I would sigh deeply and roll my eyes into the back of my head. I was nearly as proficient at the eye roll as my mother.

I knew I had to do it. I called up a friend and cried for the first time in several months. I knew I had to do it, but I didn’t know how.

“Just call him so he can’t hurt you,” he said. “Hana, it only takes thirty seconds of bravery. Tell him you’re done and hang up.
Don’t stay on the phone and let him play your emotions.”

So I did that. When I hung up, he was sobbing. “Hana, please no. We can work this out.”

Within ten minutes there was a knock on my front door. Apparently, he had run to my house. My parents were already in bed but, like an idiot, I opened the door.

He cried. He sobbed. He flung himself onto the ground, face first. I stood there, numb and disbelieving. I was shocked that I wasn’t sobbing too. But I felt so calm and steady knowing that it would eventually all be over.

Apparently I didn’t look sympathetic enough, so he crawled across the ground and reached up and grabbed my sweatpants. His hands wrapped around my legs like a shark’s jaw, tearing and gnawing and ripping me. I kicked him off.

It was not the first time I used physical force to remove him from me, but it was the first time it worked. He lay back on the ground sobbing and screaming. My dad appeared on the porch as if he suddenly sprouted from the rotting wooden boards.

“This is the most pathetic thing I’ve ever seen.”

To my surprise, he sounded more bewildered than angry.

“You get off my property and away from my daughter before I have to come down there and escort you away. Do you understand?”

I stood with my mouth gaping open. I wasn’t quite absorbing what was going on. He glanced at me and I knowingly went back in the house. I somehow found my way to my bed and sat there for what felt like several hours or maybe several days. It was probably only a minute or two.

“I took care of him,” he said. “I’m going to bed.”

That was my father’s shining moment of glory. He had always told me what he’d do to a boy who’d mistreated his daughter. I had always dreaded the moment my father would return from dealing with a boy saying, “I took care of it.” But at that moment, I had never been more grateful to have him as my father.

For the next several weeks, I woke up every morning fearing that I would walk outside and find a dead boy in my driveway. Thank God that was not the case.
However, I would come home to find presents, flowers, and notes sitting on my porch or around the back of the house taped to my window.

He even left a pair of Nike Free Run shoes he had promised me for two birthdays and a Christmas (not that I had received anything for any of those occasions). Although they were gorgeous and fit perfectly, my mother made me return them.

One night when my dad was gone, my mom knocked on my bedroom door to inform me that someone had arrived with a photograph, his guitar, and an original song. “There’s my damned song,” I thought. She sent him away. I never got to hear my song.

I had to block his number from my phone, as I was receiving over ten calls and twenty texts daily.

Now I look back on that time and laugh, at least a little. Not that it was funny by any means. In fact, quite the contrary. I mostly laugh at the ridiculous backwards logic I used to justify staying with him. Sometimes, I blame it on the fact I was young and stupid. I don’t really have any other excuse—my parents were always the perfect portrait of a healthy relationship. They taught me my whole life about respecting myself and finding someone who respects me even more.

Concerned family and friends had confronted me over the months to question just why I was still with him. They said that he didn’t treat me right. I told them that I was doing just fine, thank you, and that it wasn’t nearly as bad as it apparently seemed. My parents, though, never directly told me what they thought of him.

Later, I asked my mom why she never confronted me. She said she didn’t want me to push her away even further, because she knew that would only have made me run to him more.

I asked myself the same question. I couldn’t think of a good answer. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter why I stayed. It only matters that I stayed.

When I was seventeen years old, I found myself drowning in the ocean. He sucked me in like an undertow tide and I was out in the open ocean without a lifeline before I realized that I couldn’t feel the sand under my toes any more. He was out there too. He was drowning too. He splashed and gurgled, and pulled me down into the
waters with him. I thought I could save him but the whole time he
was killing me.

When I finally emerged, I found myself face first in the sand,
coughing and sputtering with my lungs full of water. I was exhausted
after fighting the breaker waves for so long.

Now I am not afraid of the ocean, but I am much more
careful when wading in. I’ve coughed up all the water.

Occasionally, I’ll find some sand still stuck behind my ear or
between my toes. I just brush it off and continue with my day.