

Daniel by Gloria Pitsikoulis

I stood there perplexed by the exterior of the building, not because it was magnificent or that it was extravagantly different than it had been before. It was because it hadn't changed at all. The green roofing that shown little sign of wear successfully withstood the sun in the summer, the chill in the fall, the snow in the winter, and the rain in the spring. The dark brick pillars that was newly built when I had began my first year there, was covered in an array of sharpies, and chewed up gum that was caked spontaneously around the four sides of it as if people could hide the fact that they had stuck it on there. I couldn't help but instinctively scoff at the idea; at the idea that nothing changed since I had been gone.

Walking into the building I saw that the entrance was decorated with balloons, and I assumed they were probably bought at the dollar store that was conveniently three minutes away. A large banner saying: Welcome Class of 2002! greeted me and smacked me metaphorically in the face. I knew how old I was, but I just realized how old I felt. My expensive dress was suddenly beginning to twist and turn in ways they weren't suppose to. My naturally curly hair was beginning to feel to big for my body and I just felt like hopping on a plane back to Chicago. I felt discouraged by this whole ordeal and wondered if anyone would even know if I were to leave. I wondered if he would even notice if I didn't show up to this dreaded thing.

A small table stood outside of the office doors that a woman was sitting handing out nametags and fake smiling to everyone that sauntered in. The woman flashed me a smile and gave me an up and down inspection. I am sure she was trying to see if I had gained any unnecessary weight or had any plastic surgery already even though we were still in our 20s. Her name was Lindsey Jones, a girl who got around more than once or twice in high school. She

always had platinum blonde hair that seemed to wash out her pale face and ten years later her tresses appeared almost white. Lindsey remained the topic of most conversations during school. Whenever we had discussed STDS in health class, people couldn't help but associate her with them.

"Hey Lena!" Lindsey said with a show of her perfectly white teeth and placing her hand in my line of vision. She wanted to flash her clean-cut two-karat engagement ring that looked every bit as flashy as her hair. Any man would be lucky to have her.

"Hi Lindsey." I ignored the giant rock on her finger and swiped my nametag that lay amongst many others. I stifled a chuckle when I saw her stare at me. She was probably thinking I was just as cynical as I was in high school. "Bye Lindsey." I suppose I was.

I listened to my brand new high heels clatter boisterously against the terrazzo floors. The surface was unnecessarily over designed and the shoes I was wearing were unnecessarily loud. I clutched my bedazzled clutch between my underarm and side and walked swiftly towards the gymnasium. As I made it to the gym I felt myself stop abruptly and lose the ability to walk. I shuddered thinking about who was already there and worse what they would do when they saw me. Suddenly my overdramatic tendencies took hold and I let them sweep me away.

"Screw the negativity," I muttered quietly under my breath. "You can do this."

I pushed the pessimism away one final time and pushed open the doors to gym. I suddenly felt like a prisoner of war that got blindsided by bad flashbacks. I remembered the horror that was P.E. class and the memory of face planting on the glossy hardwood floor. The paramedics had to rush me to the hospital and I needed reconstructive surgery on the right side of my face. The doctors had never seen anything like it. I still had a small indented area that would never heal properly all because I tripped on a rogue shoelace.

“Oh my stars! Lena!” a stout woman with long dirty blonde hair yelled and ran over to me with a giant grin. Josie Norton. She was the liar of our little clique and the most insecure, which is hard to differentiate when you’re in a group full of high school girls. The superlative she won in high school was kindest. It was the most ironic thing in our senior yearbook.

“Josie.... hey,” I responded with a small smile, but my excitement wasn’t as apparent as hers was. She was acting like we were in the hallways again, talking about boys and how attractive the Backstreet Boys were.

“How have you been?”

“Good. How about you?” I asked innately and she put her hands on her protruding belly and chortled. I mentally slapped myself. She was pregnant and I couldn’t even tell.

“It’s my second. I am due next month and it’s going to be a little girl!” Josie grabbed my hand and placed it on her stomach. I awkwardly rubbed it like anyone else would and secretly pleaded it wouldn’t kick.

“That’s great. Congratulations,” I took my hand off her belly and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Me and Andrew are very lucky. You remember Andrew?”

“Andrew Bodenski?” I said with my eyebrows doing what they had always done. They wrinkled into a judgmental expression and suddenly made my entire face look like it had been blinded by a bad glare.

“Yes ma’am. I was so in love with him, remember? He finally saw the error in his ways after we graduated.” Josie explained while grabbing an appetizer from a tray that a server was carrying around. She plunged the chicken tender in her mouth and devoured it like a starving hyena.

“Well I am happy for you guys. You deserve each other.” I spoke with sincerity.

“Thank you Lena. I knew I missed you!”

She continued to ask a few questions about what I had been up to the past ten years and I answered with short responses. She asked: Where do I live? I live in Chicago. What do I do? I am a veterinarian. Am I married? No. Any children? Not that I know of. I said the last one with a small laugh and I sensed she didn't like the joke. She eventually got bored with my life and went to find other girls who were married with children. I shrugged my shoulders and sat at the nearest fold out chair. She wasn't the reason I was at this stupid thing. It had been ten years since I had stepped foot in this old gym that reeked of sweat and back then I had thought it was going to be my last, but an invitation to the reunion arrived and I was taken aback by it. I had hoped that he would be here.

He was not just an ex boyfriend, the kind that you thought was special, but cheated on you and you mentally put him on your hit list. No, not like that. He was *the* ex boyfriend. He was the one that I would regretfully carry around with me without even trying to. I never understood how someone so selfish and erratic as him could ever make sense with someone so caustic and sensible as me.

I remember the first night he kissed me. We were sprawled across the floor of his dimly lit bedroom. The entire night was a hazy blur, partly because we decided to steal some of his parent's wine and over indulge ourselves. I remembered vividly, the moment he grabbed a strand of my brown hair through his nimble fingers and twisted it loosely.

“Have you ever been kissed?” he asked, his breathe smelled of Chianti and bad decisions.

“Only a thousand times,” I joked back, attempting to lighten the mood. He knew the answer. He knew I had never kissed a boy before.

“Don’t lie to me Lena.” He sounded so serious for a boy of merely fifteen. His light blonde hair shimmered under the gleam of the television in his room.

“Don’t ask stupid questions then,” I hissed looking away from him. I could never stay mad at him, but occasionally he could be an irritant.

“I’m sorry,” he said placing his warm coarse palm over the back of my hand and squeezed it tightly. His hands were never soft and much of it was because he spent hours and hours bending his fingers and hands at will to an old acoustic guitar. He played it so melodically it was a shame that he had a chronic case of stage fright. He saved all of his playing for me.

“I know you are,” I said so matter of factly. He inched himself closer to me and suddenly his lips were the closest they had ever been before. He blue eyes, glossy and inebriated, looked into my relatively tipsy hazel eyes and paralyzed me. His mouth stained red leaned into me and he pressed them to my discolored lips. His left hand held my face delicately and apart of me melted into his grasp. I felt like I was losing a battle premeditatedly. He had already won me over long before that night. He attained my affections the first day I saw him.

I circled the gymnasium floor a few times and stopped to talk to a few of my old classmates. The open bar was an absolute necessity to have some of the conversations I had to have. Everyone discussed the same kind of success, and I rolled my eyes at their definition of it. They came to a unanimous decision that it was becoming soccer moms and coaches. They would take little Sarah to ballet, little Johnny to football, and still manage to have time to spend the evening with their significant other.

“Vodka tonic please,” I sighed to the bartender who found my expression comical and I shot him a hateful scowl.

“Rough reunion?”

“You have no idea.” I took the drink and sipped it cautiously. I wouldn’t want anyone starting rumors about me being an alcoholic vet with no husband. I guess it would be half true.

I looked around one last time. The dance floor was in full swing and the DJ brought out the strobe lights. I shook my head and chuckled. I was going to let myself have five more minutes and if he didn’t show I was going to leave and never look back.

“Lena?” a warm voice asked from behind me and I clutched the cold glass a little too tightly and turned around to see him. His face hadn’t aged a day and even if it had, I don’t think it would have mattered. He was just as striking.

“Hey,” I let the single salutation roll off my tongue.

“You are a sight for sore eyes,” he walked closer to me, his left hand tucked in his suit pocket and the other holding a Heineken bottle by the neck. The label already half ripped off.

“So I have heard all night.” I took the last sip of my drink and placed it on the bar. I tucked my hair behind my ear and left a tip in the jar sitting on the counter. We glanced at an empty table, walked together to it, and sat down.

“Did you already talk to everyone?” he asked looking around, waving casually to people he seemed to see on a regular basis.

“Yeah, I guess I am not much for socializing tonight.” I clarified and he burst into a fit of laughter and I felt my eyebrows furrow at him.

“Sorry, I just, I mean when have you ever been much for socializing?” he admitted and I felt my face relax.

“I can’t even argue with you. It has been ten years since I have seen you and you are already correcting me.” I spat out. I hated that about him, he was always right. He nodded at me emphatically and then stopped abruptly.

“Technically nine years and nine months since we have seen each other, but whose counting.” he confessed.

“Apparently not you,” I smiled at him. He smiled back with his beautiful mismatched teeth and looked away to avoid drawn out glances.

We sat for a while, talking and occasionally laughing hysterically. He had become a teacher at a private school not too far from our old high school. He taught Geometry to snobby rich kids and got paid handsomely. He lived in an old house off Quail Oak Drive that he was attempting to renovate. His parents had retired and moved to Florida the year before and he said they asked about me constantly. I felt a small pang in my stomach. His parents were like a second family to me when I was growing up.

“Tell them I say hello please.” I said tilting my head to the side, another one of the things I would do without noticing. It would normally happen when I felt bad about something, so it hindered me from ever telling a lie.

“Will do.” he replied. “What about you, let's hear where Lena Parker has been for the past 10 years.”

“Chicago, I work in a veterinarian clinic there.” I said. “I am still starting out, but I figure with my 10 year plan I should be owning my own practice very soon.”

His eyes lit up with admiration. He was my ex boyfriend, but before any of that he was my best friend.

Late nights we would stay up, lie on my old tattered blanket, and discuss our futures. At thirteen he wanted to be a musician. I urged him to pursue such an impossible feat with confidence.

“I think that is brilliant, you could be the next Paul McCartney.” I teased him. He thought the Beatles were vastly overrated and he playfully shoved me off the blanket. I knew it was coming, but couldn’t miss out on an opportunity at physical contact.

“Not funny Lena,” he said lying on his stomach, his face in the pillow so his words sounded muffled.

At thirteen, I had only wanted to rescue animals. It stemmed from many different things, but the root of it all was when I was six and I saved a fallen robin from one of the fern plants hanging from our porch. The robin wept for his mom and I did the same thing. His wing was limp and my mother, with urgency, rushed it to the vet without hesitation. I watched the veterinarian work his magic and fix such a small, feeble thing. He wrapped his wing in gauze and the set him in a small cage to rest.

“Without you, he wouldn’t be here.” The veterinarian said patting my shoulder and leaving the room. He had left me with this high expectation that I was meant to save things. It was a calling.

“You did what you had always wanted, I am so proud of you.” his words seemed to encapsulate every recognition I had ever needed.

I sat against the rough metal chair and attempted to remember every feature of his face. His blonde hair was still spontaneously sticking in every direction and his nose looped and curved at the end like a fishhook. His eyebrows, thick and concentrated, kept rising and creasing in interest at me. I mentally took note of his disheveled clothes. His suit jacket was flung over the seat and his sleeves were already rolled up past his forearms. His tie was loosened and hanging from his neck. It was bright blue, and matched his penetrating eyes.

“Would you like to dance?” he asked me and I shook my head immediately. The last time I danced I probably ended up on America’s funniest home videos and won unknowingly.

“In case you don’t remember, I cannot dance. My repertoire goes from Macarena to chicken dance, outside of that, I am a disoriented mess.” I said in defiance and he groaned loudly and stood up from his seat.

“Lena, dance with me.” he protested. He was the only one who could convince me to set foot on that dance floor. “I promise I won’t let you look stupid.”

“That’s comforting.” I retorted and he rolled his eyes at me. He pulled me up at my reluctance and dragged me to the floor where everyone was looking at me with a surprising expression. They knew I couldn’t dance and were probably pulling out whatever smart phone they had to record the embarrassing disaster.

I placed one hand on his shoulder and squeezed it gently. I felt the warmth of his skin radiate through the shirt. I slid my other hand in his and interlaced our fingers. His hands were still as coarse as they had used to be and I gripped tightly to him. I felt his other hand find my waist and press me closer. I looked up at him and felt my face grow red.

“Are you blushing?” he asked me and I disregarded him and his blatancy and we began dancing.

“No, it is hot in here, thank you.” I said covering my tracks.

“Can you remember the last time we danced?” he whispered in my ear and I felt my body jolt at his breathe against my face.

“Yeah, the night before...” I said with my voice fading out. I laid my head against his shirt. Part of the reason why I didn’t dance was because of that.

The last time we danced we were facing the beginning of the end. We had finished high school, we walked across stage, we received our diploma, and that was that. I remember sitting in the itching forest green gown and looking rows and rows ahead of me at him and not believing that after this, we would be leaving each other in a few weeks.

“We will talk on the phone everyday, and email,” he told me constantly when my acceptance letter from John Hopkins came. “We will be fine.” he then would kiss my cheek and would change the subject.

I had believed him and hoped that our two and a half years together would cement that we were suppose to be together, but the night before my flight he had other plans for us. He held me close as we danced together in his dark bedroom. He had cooked me dinner, it was burnt and practically tasteless, but it was the thought that counted. He surprised me by turning on the old mix cd I had made him for our two year anniversary and grabbed my hand.

We were attempting to forget that tomorrow we weren't going to be spend every second together anymore. I remember the exact moment I turned to look and beam at him for the wonderful night, but he was frowning at me with watery eyes.

“What's wrong?” I asked nervously. Thinking that maybe he was just going to say how much he was going to miss me.

“I think, I think that we... I think we need to take a break Lena.” his lips quivered as he spoke. I felt like the color in my cheeks disappeared.

“Don't you dare joke about that,” I felt a lone knot in my stomach. I couldn't tell if it was from the dry chicken or his blatant honesty.

“I can't hold you back Lena, and you know that is exactly what I would do.” he whispered in my ear. He was supposed to be selfish.

“God damn you,”

I always thought about what would have happened if he didn't break up with me in that shadowy room that smelled of his cologne. The very bedroom where we had our first kiss, our first fight, every intense moment, and the room where our story ended suddenly. He said farewell to me and gave me a final kiss. That was the end.

“I will never forgive myself,” he said with a hint of regret in his saccharine voice and I felt like everything and everyone around us disappeared. The gymnasium suddenly turned into his old room and we were dancing to that old mix again. I was wearing that purple sundress I wore on our last night together and he was wearing his best Ralph Lauren Polo I bought him for Christmas and we were 17 years old again.

“For what?”

“Letting you go Lena,” he continued. “I let you go and just let myself believe that it was the right thing to do, but I regret it everyday.”

I heard it every night in my dreams. I listened to him say these things all the time, but never did I expect to hear him say it in reality. I let a smile appear on my face and he did too.

“I—” I began to tell him I still loved him and was interrupted, interrupted by a woman's voice. He pulled away from me and looked at her with a smile.

“Honey, sorry I am late.” a petite blonde ran up to him and kissed him square on the lips. The lips I was fixated on for most of the evening. She was wearing a short pink dress and her hair cut short in a bob, the mom haircut. “Jess just wouldn't get to sleep and the babysitter was running late.”

“Oh, its okay.” he said scratching his head tensely and wrapping his arm around her waist. I couldn’t believe how stupid I had been. I suddenly glanced down and saw it. The proof was sitting on his finger. A small gold band had snapped me in two and left me alone in agony.

“Oh darn, where are my manners. Who is this babe?” she said looking at me and I wouldn’t let the melancholic expression show. I forced a sheepish grin and stuck my hand out.

“I am Lena Parker, we were old classmates,” I tasted the bitterness in my mouth when I said classmates. We were more than that. We were always going to be.

“Nice to meet you Lena. I am Jane, this guy’s wife,” she said jokingly pointing at him.

I didn’t look at her when she said it. I felt like if I had she would know. She would know that I was here for him and only him.

“Well that’s, that’s just great. Congratulations.” somehow I managed to choke out. Her attitude seemed sweet and simple, just like her name.

“Thank you.”

“It was so nice to meet you Jane, and great to see you...” I tried to say his name, but I couldn’t. I shook her hand a final time and glanced at him. He gazed at me with a despondent expression that I couldn’t read. “I have a flight to catch.” I lied. He knew my flight left in the morning, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Nice to meet you to hun,” Jane said and I made my way to the exit swiftly, feeling the tears well up in my eyes.

“She seemed nice.” I heard Jane say to him as he watched me walk away from him a final time.

I fled quickly. I kicked off my shoes and attempted to escape even quicker than the heels would let me. I made my way to the parking lot, which had a single light illuminating it. It flickered and faded in and out just like the hope of him and me.

“Do you think we’ll get married?” he asked me. My head was on his stomach, and my long hair strewn across his shirt covering the letters that spelt out our school name.

We were lying in my bedroom. Unlike his, windows surrounded mine and let the sun flood in to drown us.

“Yeah, a spring wedding,” I murmured with a knowing expression. “We will get married in the park.” I said it with such confidence, and he knew I probably had thought about it before.

“I like that.” he had said lifting me up to him as if I was as light as a feather. We were merely seventeen discussing the contents of our future. Surrounded by SAT prep books and college applications, I felt the conversation was comforting.

“How many kids will we have?” I probed, perching my body on his and he looked up and back down at me with a knowing expression.

“Four,”

“Ambitious.” I said with my eyebrows raised at him. “Expecting me to be a stay at home mother with postpartum depression?”

“Absolutely, you will cook, clean, and raise our four beautiful children.” he continued. “I will work a nine to five and go out with the buddies at night. I will return home nice and drunk.”

“Oh shut up.” I returned to my previous position and laid back down on his stomach. He began brushing the hair out of my face and tucking it behind my ear.

“Yes ma’am.” he said laughing.

“Daniel?”

“Hm?” he said in a whisper, his eyes closed as if he were concentrating.

“Do you really believe all of that will happen?” I asked more seriously. I hoped he would immediately respond with a swift yes, but he opened his eyes and peered at me.

“I hope so.”

“Me to Daniel.” I returned to lying on his stomach and closing my eyes.

Driving home from the reunion, I got lost in a daydream where we had our spring wedding in the park. We had our four beautiful children. We laid in the bed everyday and talked about how right we had been to predict such an amazing life together. We had it all. I had it all. I had him. I had Daniel.