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ICWNF

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Broken Down

****TRIGGER WARNING***** Themes of sexual assault and suicide

This may be the hardest story I ever wrote. The thought of having to relive the trauma that I endured for almost three years brings about another perspective that I didn't see before. I won't call this a love story because that is not what this is. However, this is a story about self-love and vulnerability.

The person I am today would have stopped talking to him after two weeks. However, I was young, naive, and insecure. It began the second semester of my freshman year. I was sitting in my dorm at CHN late one night with an old friend and I were talking boys, because what else was there to talk about for two eighteen-year-old hormone-driven college girls? My friend Deandra began to rant about her frustrations with Howard boys, "Just when you think you found a decent Howard man, there's already ten other girls in-line."

"Are you really surprised though?? The ratio of boys to girls at this school is so off that this might as well be an all-girls school" I joke at her.

"You see, that's why I be on Tinder... Limitless options," Deandra began to twirl around the room and hop on the bed.

"I don't think I'd ever join a dating app, they seem stupid," I replied.

"Oh they definitely are, but they're so much fun!!" Deandra quickly jumped off the bed and snatched my phone out of my back pocket, "As a matter of fact, we're gonna make you a

profile right neowww!!” I didn’t try to fight it. I just rolled my eyes and let her do her thing. I already had some candidates favorited to be used for different pictures on my profile. I sat back and watched as she meticulously picked the photos and crafted a bio that “isn’t giving too much away, but just the right amount” as she put it.

Deandra began swiping left and right as if she were me and she knew the kind of guys I would like, “he’s cute, he’s out, he’s eh...”

“Oh excuse me, I didn’t realize that we were sharing the damn account,” I snatched the phone away from her and turned my phone off. I was tired of talking about boys for the night and I had an eight a.m. class to get ready for the next morning.

The next day, out of boredom I decided to open up Tinder. There was a guy who wasn’t necessarily the most attractive person to ever walk this earth, but he also wasn’t completely ugly. So just like Deandra said, “he’s eh” and I swiped right. When I swiped right, a blue text box with the words “SUPER LIKED” flashed over his profile meaning that he used his limited amount of special likes on me. I couldn’t say I was impressed, but I was intrigued. Nonetheless, this was my introduction to a boy who would teach me to learn how to love myself and recognize my worth. This was also my introduction to a boy who would take advantage of my insecurities and naivety to break me down to submission. This boy’s name was Andrew.

Andrew immediately had my attention. He responded to my messages quickly, would send sweet messages, and we would fall asleep on the phone together often. Our feelings were increasing immensely for us to have only been talking for a few weeks. It was only a matter of time before we eventually decided to meet in person. The day that we planned on meeting, I had the hardest time functioning. It was hard to breathe, I couldn’t eat anything, and even drinking water made me feel like throwing up.

I rambled on to my roommate about the worst scenarios that could happen, that would probably never happen, “What if he just stops responding to me? What if he leaves me hanging knowing I’m not from here and know nothing about this area?”

I could tell my roommate didn’t care for the banter, “you’re being dramatic. If you really want my opinion, I don’t think you should go see him.” My inner dialogue paused and I turned to her as she continued, “I don’t know what it is, but I just have this gut feeling that something just isn’t right.” My nerves went from bad to worse, but time was flying by and I had to leave. So on January 19, 2020 at 11:40 am. I took one last look in the mirror, made sure my tan cropped sweatshirt was lint free, accessories were straight, no fly-aways were peaking out the top of my head, and proceeded downstairs to my Uber ride towards Andrew’s house.

Once I was in the Uber, I texted him to let him know that I was on the way. Five minutes go by, no response. Ten minutes go by, still no response. *Wow so he really just not gonna respond. I’m boutta be dropped off in some random ass neighborhood, thirty minutes away from campus and I already spent eighteen dollars and eighteen cents on this damn ride and he can’t even bother to...* “buzz buzz.” He finally responded. He tells me that his mom and sister are unexpectedly home, but he’s making me a breakfast sandwich and that the door will be open so I can just walk right in.

Now, I had to take a minute to process what I just read. This boy, who I never met in person before, tells me that his mom and sister, who were supposedly going to be out shopping all day, are going to be home when I get there and that I can just walk right in the house... Now if one of my friends told me this story, I would think that they were about to get kidnapped. But I figured that I could trust him because we had already been speaking for several weeks. I did find it odd that I would be meeting his mom and sister the same day that I meet him for the first time.

I was already in the Uber that I paid for with my hard-earned money so at that point there was no turning back.

Eventually, I arrive in front of a brick, four-story house with a vibrant fresh cut green lawn laid out in front of the house. I text Andrew to let him know that I arrived and he reiterates that I can just come in. *Well why can't he step out the house and greet me? I got too much social anxiety to be walking into some random boy's house like this. Man whatever let's just go, you already here...* I step out of the white Nissan Sentra and begin to walk up the driveway. I walk up the driveway and sure enough, the door is wide open. There's not even a screen door, anything could fly up in there. I lightly knock on the door before stepping inside.

When I entered the house, the first thing I saw was the wooden staircase straight ahead that led to what I thought was the second floor. I turned to the right and there was a random pillar that separated the entryway from the kitchen/dinning room. I saw his mom and sister sitting in the dining room on their phones. I tried to hide my nerves and the fact that I'm seeing them before I see him for the first time. As I walked over to greet his mom and sister, the rest of the kitchen was revealed. There he was standing at the black electric stove making me food.

"Oh, hey," he says nonchalantly as if he wasn't expecting me. I take a seat at the dining room table in between his mom and sister as he finishes cooking. The first thing I noticed about him was his height... now I'm about 5'7", 5'8" so I know I'm on the taller side. Nonetheless, he was definitely on the shorter side. He had short arms, short legs, a long torso, and a big forehead, but I guess he was kind of cute. I was already there and I wasn't about to just walk out on him in front of his mom and sister.

Andrew proceeds to grab two paper plates and puts the bacon egg and cheese sandwiches that he made on them. He begins to walk towards the staircase and says, "I'm gonna go downstairs" and walks away.

I look at his mom and sister confused and ask, "Was I supposed to follow him or something?" We all laugh at how obviously nervous he is. As I get up, I thought about how he said he's going downstairs. *Downstairs?? How many levels are there in this house?* I head towards the staircase at the entry way and to the left of the staircase, there's another set of stairs that leads downstairs. I walk down the creaking steps and contemplate taking my shoes off seeing that there's carpet. He has his shoes on so I figure it's fine. He was sitting in this spacious living room on a big grey couch that could easily seat at least ten people. I sit down next to him and he doesn't even look at me. He hands me my plate and turns on the Aaron Hernandez documentary on Netflix.

I try to grab his attention, "hey."

"Hey," he responds as he slightly glances at me before quickly turning his attention back to the tv.

"Damn, I got you so nervous that you can't even look at me, huh?" I jokingly say trying to lighten the mood.

"I'm not nervous I'm just thrown off by my mom and sister being here," he replies shakingly.

"Yeah sure, that must be why yo voice is so shaky too," I tease.

"Man whatever, I was thinking we could go to the mall and walk around," he suggests.

I had to find a birthday present for my roommate anyways so I figured I could also do that while we're there. "Yeah sure, when do you want to go?" I ask. I realized I hadn't really

touched the sandwich he made me. It didn't look appetizing and the butterflies in my stomach wouldn't let me get anything down anyways. He also microwaved the egg rather than frying it and it tasted exactly like what you think a microwaved egg would taste like...

He noticed me poking at the sandwich and not really eating it. "Well if you're done I can wrap that up for you and we can head out," he offered. I nod my head and follow him back upstairs. He wraps the sandwich in foil and we wave bye to his mom and sister before heading out.

I don't remember a thing from the moment we left the house to the moment we left the mall. But I do wish I could also forget what happened after we left the mall. He checks his phone to see his mom's and sister's location. "Damn, they're still home," he says under his breath.

"Huh?" I ask.

"Nothing, I just thought my mom and sister would have left by now. You wanna go to a park?"

"Why does it matter if they're home or not, but yeah a park sounds cool." I envisioned us swinging on swings and just laughing while talking about life.

"No reason." I ignored how annoyed he was by his family being home. Besides, I've always enjoyed being outdoors and parks make me happy, so I thought that it would be fun.

He pulls into the parking lot of a recreation center. This wasn't necessarily a park, but in a way, I guess it was. "I'm honestly feeling pretty sleepy, I'm gonna take a nap in the back." Andrew proceeds to step out of the car and get in the back seat. I stay in the front passenger seat confused. He stares at me from the back seat and asks, "Are you coming?" Now I'm even more so confused. *Kinda weird that he wants to just sleep back there? Are we not gonna get out or...?*

I shrug away my confusion and join him in the backseat. I rest my head on his lap and stare at the sky through the sunroof of his car. I feel at peace watching the clear blue sky and trying to create an image out of all different clouds that pass by. He caressed his hand up and down the side of my torso. I feel myself smirk and doze off. As I'm dozing off, I feel him start to move his hand toward my face. He grabs my chin and pulls me up. He starts to kiss me. I'm not quite sure if I actually like this or want to continue but I go along with it anyway. I hear him unzip his zipper and he pulls me up. He grabs my right hand and places it over his zipper. He pulls my face and continues to kiss me. It's broad daylight and the sky is picture perfect. But the ambience in this car is dark and cloudy. I don't want to be in here with him anymore. Everytime I tried to just go back, looking at the sky, and pretend I was somewhere else, he would pull me back once again.

I tried to steer his focus onto something else. "Is your mom and sister still home?" I couldn't think of anything else to say or what else to do and that was the first thing that popped in my head. It worked for the moment.

He checked his phone to see their location. "Yea they're gone, let's go." Andrew got out and back into the driver's seat.

So did he not actually want to go to the park? I couldn't help but to ponder. As we drove back to his house, I started to plan out my next steps. *Maybe I should call my Uber when we get close to his house so that by the time we get there, my ride will be waiting and I can just leave.* But I didn't call the Uber, I ended up right back in his house, up the staircase in the entryway, sitting on the edge of his bed doing things I did not want to do. Eventually I found a way to get to the bathroom to text my friends to call me so that I could use them as an excuse to leave.

I have no recollection of the drive back to my dorm on campus. I remember my roommate and friends asking me how the day went and I told them about all the good parts. I painted a perfect narrative of how I wish the day went. My friends smiled from ear to ear listening to this fantasy straight out of a romance novel. The story I curated was so convincing, that I began to believe it myself. So I texted him that night to let him know I made it home safe.

I continued to go on dates with Andrew. He didn't assault me the other times like he did the first time. As crazy as it sounds, I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and forget it ever happened.

I left for Ohio for spring break to visit my grandparents. There was uncertainty about the state of the world as Covid continued to take more and more lives. Howard announced that everyone had to move out of their dorms. I was left with no choice but to drive six hours down to DC to move my stuff out of my dorm. I saw Andrew one last time before we split ways for an amount of time that neither of us could have predicted. In that moment, I was convinced that I actually liked him.

I flew back home to California where I lived out the pandemic. Andrew and I would spend all hours of the day on the phone together. We would watch shows and movies, have dinner dates, talk about everything, and even just be silent on the phone. He would constantly compliment how I looked even though I stopped taking care of my hair and didn't even care about wearing a bonnet at night because I knew I wasn't going out anytime soon. He made me feel beautiful even at my worst. He admired every aspect of me and would tell me that I deserve to see myself the way he sees me. So on March 15, 2020, when he asked me to be his girlfriend, I said yes.

He continued to compliment me every day and make me feel worthy of being loved. He would say how much he missed me and how he couldn't wait to see me. He literally couldn't wait to see me. At the peak of the pandemic, he decided to sneak out of his house and fly across the country to come visit me. He didn't tell his mom until he was on the plane. Despite his mom's initial disappointment and anger towards his actions, she was genuinely happy for him. I showed him around my city, where I went to school, my favorite places to eat at, and welcomed him into my family. Everyone loved him: my sisters, my parents, my grandma, even my dog. Maybe I even loved him as well.

From that point on, we rotated visiting each other for about a month at a time while the pandemic continued. We made our long distance relationship work and everyone was in awe about it. However, when it was my turn to visit him, there was a shift. I flew out to see him in Maryland October 2020. During my first week being there, he decided to take me to one of his favorite restaurants, Iron Age.

During the drive over to the restaurant, he was telling me how he was talking about me to his friends and coworkers. He told me how he sent a picture to one of them. Naturally, I wanted to see what picture he sent of me and make sure that he wasn't out here embarrassing me. Without hesitation, he pulled up the conversation and handed me his phone. I was pleasantly surprised to see that he had sent a great picture.

I'm not sure what it was, but something in me made me scroll through the conversation. My heart suddenly dropped. The same woman who he was bragging about me to was the same woman who he invited over to his house at three in the morning two days before I flew out to see him. The message "*I wish we cuddled a little more*" replayed in my head. I read it over and over at least ten times to make sure that I was reading it right.

“What the fuck is this?” I finally let out.

He turned to me and saw the conversation that I had just read, “what is what? Let me see.” He grabbed the phone from my hand and started dramatically scrolling up and down the conversation like the messages would just disappear.

“Why the fuck you scrolling away from the messages that I pointed out?” I snatched his phone again despite his efforts to stop me. I scrolled back to the exact messages, held the phone in his face, read the messages aloud, and said, “now Imma ask again, what the fuck is this?” He couldn’t even stare at me.

He kept his head down. After a few moments of silence, he had the audacity to say, “do you still want to go eat?” I stared at him in disbelief. I contemplated just walking back to his house. I spent about \$300 on a plane ticket and sacrificed a month of my time where I could be making money just to visit a boy who was inviting other women to his house at three in the morning.

Once we got to his house, his mom had asked why we were back so early, but I didn’t hear her. I was only focused on walking up the staircase in the entryway, and into the guest room where I was staying. I bawled my eyes out like never before. I could feel my eyes begin to pop out of their sockets. My eyebags puffed up so much you’d think I had eye-balloons. Water marks stained my face. I couldn’t stop shaking and replaying the messages in my head over and over again. *What could I have done better? What was I not doing enough of? How could I have let this happen to me?*

He came in the room with his head down. He started crying and uncontrollably yelling. His mom came in the room, but I couldn’t speak or explain what had just taken place. I ended up taking a walk with her just to clear my head. She expressed to me how much he really does love

me, but his ADHD makes him act impulsively. “It’s not an excuse, but it’s a reason,” as she would put it. I’m not quite sure what it was about the conversation, but by the time we returned to the house, I was in a completely different state of mind. I went up to his room to find him laying in bed sleeping. *I started to comfort him. I began to reassure him.* I told him, “for the sake of my peace and not losing myself, I’ll forgive you this time, but next time, I’m gone.” Unfortunately, it wasn’t the last time.

While working on regaining my trust, he gave me the password to his phone. I grew a habit of going through his phone. Almost every single time I did, I found something that should have made me leave. I discovered that while I was showing him around my hometown, opening up a piece of me, he was sending pictures of these special places to other women and telling them how he wanted to bring them there some day.

Every other season I caught him flirting with other women, lying to me about hanging out with friends when in reality he was hanging out with other women, speaking inappropriately with other women, etc. I was so broken that at one point, I even said to myself *at least he hasn’t done anything physical with them...* or so I thought. His phone also revealed that the night before I drove from Ohio to grab my belongings from my dorm, he had another girl in his bed. He had given me an STD and he swore that he couldn’t have passed it to me because he wasn’t sleeping with anyone else. Yet there was the truth right in his phone when I saw a picture of him laying in bed with a girl in his Snapchat gallery.

I was ashamed to tell any of my friends or family so I kept the infidelity to myself and I suffered alone. I felt like I had no one to talk to. Perhaps that is why I stayed with him as long as I did. Once the pandemic restrictions lifted and students were allowed back on campus. I got my first apartment and started to build my individuality. Once my lease ended, I moved into the

guest room at his mom's house. Our relationship was truly at a great point. I had no doubts about what he was doing or who he was with. But like the saying goes, "nothing good lasts forever." I still had trouble forgetting about the past and the broken trust. It was evident that my trust for him would never be what it used to, but something in me kept trying to make it work.

My breaking point was during Homecoming of 2022. On the last night of Homecoming, me and my friends were placed in a life threatening situation. It is very possible that I could not be here today. Thanksgiving was approaching and I became very homesick, especially considering that there was a possibility that I could have never seen my family again. I shared all of my fears with Andrew and poured out every detail of my feelings. That same night I began having nightmares so extreme to the point where I fell out the bed. He stopped what he was doing and laid in the bed with me, comforting me. He left my room three or four times to use the bathroom. In the moment, I didn't think anything of it. He came back for the last time and quickly fell asleep, but I lay awake overthinking everything and my purpose in life. It was about four in the morning when I felt a vibration come from his phone. I found myself going through it once again. And here begins the breaking point.

During his trips to the bathroom, he was texting an old coworker on Instagram and sent her \$110 to have sex with her. He was also waiting for her to call him after she got off work at around two in the morning. After he sent the money, she stopped replying to him.

As I read through the messages, I began to replay the events of the night. I fell out of my bed and he came in my room around one in the morning. There was one last message from him at three in the morning: he had sent her eye emojis awaiting her call. Not only that, but he also was texting an old classmate on Snapchat offering to take her out shopping and spoil her.

That's when I knew, this boy did not care about me at all. I just finished telling him that I could be dead and his focus is on other women. I slapped him out of his sleep and mentally decided that I was done with him.

I officially broke up with him a week or two after that event took place. However, because I still lived with him, he made my life miserable and a living hell. He would berate me while I was in the shower, while I was using the bathroom, while I was trying to sleep, while I was working on finals, and basically any chance that he could get. He had harass me about why I was still in "his" house one second, then the next tell me how he has so much faith in us getting back together and that it's a gut feeling. He became more and more obsessed with me. He would ask to use my computer for work but in reality he was using it to go through my photos and Instagram to see if he would find something that could come close to the things that I found in his phone.

Some days I would wake up and he would be standing over me just staring at me. Some mornings he would have his hands balled in a fist, other mornings he would be watching me from the corner of the room with his arms crossed. I no longer felt safe in that house. I would spend hours at libraries and on campus just to avoid being in the same house as him.

I finally told my mom about everything and I wish I had done so sooner. She immediately booked me a hotel to stay at until I was able to find a new place to stay. From the end of November 2022 until mid-January 2023, I was living in a hotel. I was so happy to finally be free from him. But I still wasn't free.

He found a way to hack into my Instagram and Snapchat accounts to text random men I was following. He went to extremes and would say things like, "I know where you're staying, I could easily pull up on you if I wanted to." He continued to harass me and called me multiple

times on the verge of ending his life. Every time he called, I was able to talk him down from doing this irreversible deed until his mom was able to get to him. It took a toll on my mental health listening to some one yell at the top of their lungs how they no longer have a purpose on this earth and life has no meaning knowing that I will no longer be in it. He was basically telling me that I'm the reason why he was choosing to end it all.

After I blocked his number, he reached out to me through my email. After I blocked his email, he reached out to me through my social media accounts. He would find ways to reach out to me through mobile banking apps, old notes that we shared with each other through the Notes app, and through my siblings. Just when I thought I had him blocked on every single app imaginable (even Pinterest), he paid to have another number added to his line. I ignored every call and every text and would tell his mom each time he tried reaching out. Eventually, he stopped bothering me, and I haven't heard from him since early March of 2023.

For the first time since I met him, I didn't blame myself. I stopped taking fault for his actions. I leaned on my family and learned to welcome them into my life and be vulnerable. I despise him, but I also thank him. I thank him for teaching me how to love myself and value my worth. I thank him for being part of the steps that it took to build myself up. I used to spend days crying in the mirror wishing that I looked different, now I spend days staring in the mirror, loving who I am and proud of myself for finally walking away.

I thank him for helping me understand how I want to be treated, how I should be treated, and how to stand on my own. Although I thank him for playing a part in me reaching certain goals and showing me new things, he does not take the credit. He is not the main reason for my accomplishments. I without a doubt have a lot of healing to do, but life is an endless cycle of

growing, falling, and healing. I've learned to embrace and appreciate every moment for what it is.