

“That’s when I knew it was bullshit, you don’t treat someone like that and call it love-”
--Journal entry, March 2017.

By Erica M. Hayden

My body trembled with disgust as I viewed myself in the mirror, the cuts on my wrist were fresh and evident, just as the ones under my breasts. The stretch marks on my tubby terracotta stomach blotted around like lightning strikes, my eczema having created discolored patches on my arms and shoulders. I couldn’t find anything about myself to love. How could I, especially if he couldn’t love me enough to be with me?

It was a lesson I would learn in time, like the lesson of forgiving but not forgetting. A painful lesson inscribed in the entries of my journal that remind me of the journey from who I was and yet who I am on the road to becoming.

Being 14 was a rather complex time, transitioning from middle school to high school can be terrifying. I deemed “L” as my best guy friend, I deemed him a brother. We had met in 6th grade when my close friend at the time started dating him. Originally, I found him annoying. As the years passed and we grew older, we changed.

I can’t recall when I became unrecognizable to myself, or my relationship with L changed. We used to text each other every day, whether it was about our classes, our clubs, or what we ate for dinner. Now, the only time I expected L to contact me was late at night, asking for my texts to give him a sexual fix. L used to send me videos of him practicing or learning new songs on his cello. Now, he would send me videos of him getting off to the photos of my bare body.

One day, I got into a fight with my best friend at the time. She used to date L. They had broken up months earlier. She got upset because of my “relationship” with L, even though we made it clear that we would cease our peculiar proposition when either of us would have a partner. She accused me of being the reason L broke up with her, the words “whore” and “homewrecker” dripped with venom from her lips.

I tried to talk to L about my distress, but he waved me off. In my time of need, hurt, and vulnerability, I turned to him in hopes that whatever way we changed he would still be there for me. It was then the hard truth slapped me across the face. He didn’t want me. He only wanted my body.

I didn’t speak to him for a few months after that. Then one night he reached out to me to apologize for his actions. I blindly forgave him, thinking things would be different. Two days later, we were discussing our love lives. As he bragged about the women he picked up during music camp, I chimed in with a guy I was recently talking to. He got upset, claiming that he suffered during the months we didn’t speak. He told me how he had loved me all this time, and that if I believe he truly hurt me, the guy I am talking to will be no different.

I decided that *night* that I had to end it, for good. That night, I cut him out of my life completely. “How do you treat someone that way and call it love?” I thought to myself.

That night, I promised myself to never be used for a man’s desire, and to never let my emotions ever place me in that kind of position ever again. Five years later, my journal would bear evidence that I had not learned my lesson. At least not yet.

*“I was fine remaining his friend- just because I **wanted** it to happen, does not mean I **needed** this to happen.”* –Journal entry, April 2023.

My head was swarming with the events that happened last night, an odd mix of joy and regret filled my body. My reflection shines a spotlight on the purple-red hickey on my neck. I feel nauseous trying to choke down my tears. The thought of having a brand on my body to symbolize my sins degrades me to feel like a cheap hooker. My throat is dry and scratchy, I feel as though I’m suffocating, drowning.

I met “G” through mutual friends, I thought he was odd and attractive at first. I didn’t really expect us to become more than just acquaintances. Solely I began seeing him through group gatherings. That was until we talked every day—even sometimes until dawn. I can’t determine when I truly started having feelings for him, and it didn’t matter because I never wanted to act on my emotions. Not again.

As time progressed, I started losing sleep; trying to wrap my brain around my feelings, and what his feelings might be towards me. *If he likes me, I either lie and claim I don’t feel the same, or tell the truth and tell him I feel the same way*, I thought to myself. *Either way, I risk our friendship, and changing our friend group. I can’t risk that. I don’t want “this” to happen again.* Along with the loss of sleep, I also lost my appetite. I don’t know what to do.

One faithful night, G was sleeping over after attending a party with me. My memory of that night is hazy, but not enough to forget what occurred. His grip on my waist, roamed along my body, him maneuvering us to the bed, all the while his lips were on mine. We didn’t sleep together, but I can’t say that thought didn’t cross my mind.

Honestly, I wish I had forgotten everything, especially after he stopped, and told me he couldn’t give me what I wanted. *But what did I want?*

I wanted to preserve our friendship, to not let my emotions get the best of me. I promised I wouldn’t let this happen again. “No strings attached,” he said. “Keep this between us.” “I’m not in a good place right now.”

The words he said to me still ring in my head to this day.

After everything that’s happened between L and G, the memory of both of them still affects me to this day. However, that doesn’t mean I’ll let it define who I am, and who I strive to be. I forgave L a long time ago. But even now, I can never forget what he did. He took advantage of me, and made me erase a person that I had the potential of becoming. He didn’t love me, he confused love with infatuation.

As for G, I’ve since forgiven him. He truly was and still is my friend. What happened that night, was an accident among friends. I can’t say I fully trust or respect him since that night. But we’re both working on mending the friendship we once had.

As of late, I’m starting to see what I like in my reflection. And my journal bears proof of my continuing evolution and growth in my journey of self-love.

“I’m learning to appreciate myself more, I can easily say I’m still working on it- and myself for that matter. I still have some noticeable flaws in my eyes, but- it’s progress.”

--Journal Entry, July 2023.