

Breathe In, Breathe Out, Stay



People, George Hunter

By Velina Derilova

“The way I see it,” Jen said after a long pause, “he’s just got another.”

“What,” I said frowning.

“Another *woman*,” she said.

“Thanks, Jen! I figured as much.” She’s never been too smart, my Jen. “Tell me what to do.”

My husband of nine years had a big, fat secret. Getting calls he didn’t answer if I was there, working late, barely talking. It had been going on for weeks.

“Kick him out! Immediately.”

Jen, excellent at giving decisive advice she’d never follow. If she practiced what she preached, she’d be a scuba diving instructor in Belize, dating a guy ten years her junior. She was stuck in a miserable marriage and a job she hated instead.

“No, really, I’m telling you: pack his stuff. That’s right. Don’t throw it on the street. That’d be melodramatic.”

I burst out laughing. What could be the most devastating time of my life and there it was – my 41-year-old body heaving with laughter! Jen was laughing along. I loved her for that and I've loved her since fourth grade. She took me by the hand as we were leaving our favorite café that afternoon and gave me what seemed like the longest hug I'd ever got.

I knew I had to act. Confronting him was what I needed to do. Now, it's not that I was desperately in love with him. I was a big girl and had long before handled the realization that eternal love was the biggest nonsense any couple could buy into.

We were partners, friends—occasionally—and that was it. Something else made me want to drop dead in the middle of the street and ruin the evening for at least a dozen passersby in the process: I was losing something that rightly belonged to me. He was my man! He was the one who picked me up after I'd had too much to drink at my boss's monthly cocktail parties; he was the guy OK with us not having babies because I wasn't mother material. He married me and now he wanted out.

By nine that evening I was already sunk in the couch with a bottle of wine by my side, waiting for him. I had one of my best evening dresses on, nails and hair done. Yes, my guilty pleasure: looking stunning in times of emotional turmoil. It seems sick, but it helps me keep my thoughts off of how I actually feel. I find it sobering, therapeutic. Having taken the afternoon off to see Jen and cry on her shoulder, I thought I might as well get myself into the proper break-up mood by feeling gorgeous. Wasn't that a sight! A middle-aged woman – all dolled up, watching reality TV and gulping down a glass after glass.

I finally heard his car in the driveway. When he opened the door, I felt like a complete stranger was about to enter my house. Who was that man?

"Hey," he said as he dropped his satchel on the floor and took his coat off. I didn't answer. He didn't seem to care.

"God, I stink," he said and went straight into the kitchen without looking at me. I heard him open the fridge. He came back with a small bottle of apple juice and started for the stairs.

"I think I'll take a shower before dinner if that's fine with you," his back turned at me. "Oh, and by the way, you've accidentally used my toothbrush instead of yours again this morning. You know how much I hate that, right?"

He was moody. Well, so was I.

"No," I snapped.

He finally faced me.

"No, it's not OK if you shower before dinner and I couldn't care less if I used your toothbrush by mistake this morning."

"You've been drinking," he said glancing at the bottle. "And why are you dressed up?"

"Let me be the one asking the questions," I hissed. "OK?"

He stared at me, the unopened bottle of juice in his left hand.

"How long exactly you thought it would be before I found out?"

He was silent. "And even more importantly," I went on, "what happens next?"

He came down the stairs and put the juice on the coffee table.

"Listen," he started.

"I'm listening," I said.

"We do need to talk. I just don't think tonight is the right time."

"It's as good as any time. Come on, let's get this over with. Why don't you just say it, loser?"

He had never hit me. He didn't hit me that night either, but I felt he wanted to.

"You're drunk," he managed after regaining himself. "Go to bed, we'll talk in the morning." He started for the stairs again.

I wasn't giving up that easy. "Come back and talk to me!"

He hesitated for a moment but didn't stop.

"Did you hear what I just said?" I snatched the glass of wine from the coffee table and threw it against the wall. It shattered with a loud crack, leaving a red, star-shaped splash where it landed.

Before I knew it, he had grabbed me by the elbow and was dragging me upstairs.

"Let me go! Let me go!" I was borderline hysterical, screaming at the top of my lungs. "How could you do this to me, how could you?!" I felt a throbbing pain as he tightened his grip of my arm.

"You, you, you! Always you," he snarled.

I tried to free my arm and break his grip using the weight of my entire body as he pulled me towards the bathroom on the second floor. It was no use. He kicked the door open and pushed me inside. In what seemed the split of a second, I heard him turn the key in the lock and take it out; then his steps as he went down the stairs and outside to his car. He drove off.

I was breathless and shaking, my head spinning. I felt filthy so I took off the black silk dress and got into the bath. The warm, scented water helped me relax. I tried to think. Who was that man? I wanted to call Jen real bad and I craved another glass of wine. All I could actually do, though, was wait. I spread a few towels near the shower cabin and fell into a light, irregular doze.

The click of the key woke me up. He came in and sat on the closed toilet seat looking a hundred years old, dark circles under his eyes. I sat up against the wall and waited.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know what got into me."

"What time is it," I asked.

"Six thirty."

"Jesus." My head was killing me.

"Come downstairs. I'll make coffee."

I decided to see where this would go.

"I'll be right down," I said.

As I was brushing my teeth, I imagined burning the house to the ground with him inside. If I hadn't been hangover, maybe I would have done it. When I went downstairs, there were two steaming cups of coffee at the kitchen counter. He'd changed into clean clothes and was sitting at the table. I took a chair opposite him and started sipping.

"I don't really know how to say this," he began.

"I bet."

"Hear me out, please. You wanted to know the truth so let me speak."

Something in his eyes made me shut up.

"I'll say it this one time – there's no other woman. No matter what you thought was going on or what you believe you saw me do or feel, it's not like that."

"Go on," I said.

"It's not that I don't think you'll understand. I guess you will, eventually. But it's one of those things that hurt everyone involved. Denial always hurts."

"Oh, my God!" My hand flew to my mouth. How hadn't I seen it? Why did I think there had to be another *woman*? This was different.

"No, no, no," he read through me and reached for my hand. I pulled it back.

"Listen to me, just listen."

I tried to blink my confusion away. It didn't work.

"I'm afraid it's more complicated," he said. "That's why I beg you to listen to what I have to say. Hear me out. Would you do it for me, baby?"

He hadn't called me that in months. I nodded I would.

"I've always felt something was off about me. Didn't know what it was exactly, but I knew it was there." He paused to see if I was going to listen. I was.

"You know I've lived away from my folks since I was nine so I didn't really have a grasp on the concept until I was in my mid twenties."

His folks? I had no idea where he was going. They were natives from the Navajo tribe and lived on a reservation in Arizona. I'd seen them a total of three times. Yes, my husband was native too, but besides its physical manifestations this fact had never made any difference. He was sent to live with his white uncle in California. They weren't close and he thought the way they lived silly.

"A couple of years after I'd finished college, I could no longer fight this side to me. So I instinctively sensed I had to go back home and look for answers. It turned out the right thing to do."

I was all ears now.

"This was when I learned about the two spirits." *About what?*

"It has nothing to do with witchcraft or savage rituals," he went on. "Many tribes, including the Navajos, believe that the masculine and feminine together are sometimes reflected so completely in the body of one person that it's as if they have two spirits."

He had me speechless. I thought I was going to be sick.

"Are you OK," he asked.

"What do you mean the masculine and feminine together? You're either a man or a woman!" I was losing it. "What are you?"

"That's what most people don't understand," he said. "Almost everyone diverges from the typical male and female qualities. They just happen to be equally pronounced within some of us."

"So you're basically telling me you're bisexual," I said.

"It has little to do with sexuality. It's more about the way you function in society. Gay, lesbian, bisexual. They don't describe what we are. Our tradition is based on the spiritual."

So he was already a part of *a tradition*.

"Look, I totally understand it's almost impossible to grasp. It's because the western schools of thought oversimplify it."

I didn't know what to say and just looked at him blankly. Only a month before my life had been normal.

"The way I think about it is like a stick that has male on one end and female on the other. Sexuality or gender is the same stick but you have opposite ends."

I strained all my senses to follow what he was saying.

"But if you take those two ends and bend them together so you form a circle, then you end up with the possibility of an infinite number of points along that circle. People change during different times in their lives. You're not trapped into only one way of thinking or only one way of being."

"What do you want from me," I asked, my frustration escalating. "I just don't get it. Where's my role in all this? Do you simply ask for my permission to wear skirts whenever you feel like it and screw other men?"

He laughed nervously.

"You again. Always you. Do you think it's easy for me? Don't you wonder why it's surfacing now? I've been fighting it for over a decade."

"Yes, why now," I asked.

"I came across this organization's website a couple of months ago. The Two Spirit Society. I've been going to their gatherings. Workshops, they call them. We meet every week."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Six weeks."

It made sense.

"So what do you do there? Hold your hands and dance in a circle to celebrate the richness of your spirituality?"

"Sorry to disappoint you. We talk." He looked away. "I'm finally beginning to understand who I am. Don't you get it?"

I didn't. Not really. What happened next? Did I walk away or throw him out? Did I just break down and cry?

"I think that's enough now." I got up. "I'll call in sick. I want some time alone so I need to know if you're going to be around today."

"No, I'm going to work."

"Good."

I went to the fridge and started fixing breakfast. I didn't quite feel like eating but I had to do something, *anything*. I heard him go upstairs to get ready. He came back as I was already biting into my tuna fish sandwich.

"Listen. I know it's probably too early for this but I'd really appreciate it if you came with me tonight."

"Came where," I said.

"To one of the workshops. It starts 7:30."

"Excuse me?" I was stunned. Did he actually say that?

"You're still my wife no matter what might be storming through your mind right now. You're the closest person I have."

"I'm not sure who do you take me for," I said as coldly as I could. "Do you think I'm a machine you can program to do whatever's best for you?"

"I'll give you the address in case you change your mind."

He took a sticky note from the kitchen counter and wrote it down.

"I'll see you later." He closed the door behind him and the sound of it pierced right through me. I had never felt as lonely as I did on that Thursday morning. I looked at the little piece of paper and wanted to destroy it with my stare.

For me, it all boiled down to whose stuff I was going to pack—his or mine. I decided I'd settle for mine. I simply couldn't stay in that house. But I needed to switch off my system first. I was exhausted. I went upstairs and crawled into bed. As always when I struggle with some sort of iternal pain, I fell into a deep, heavy sleep.

I woke up not feeling too much better. It took me a few moments to realize that this had actually happened. In fact, it was all beginning to happen. I looked at the alarm clock on the nightstand—five pm. I had slept through the whole day. If I wanted to leave that night, I needed to start packing. But first, I needed Jen's useless advice.

"*He's what*," she almost screamed on the phone.

"Yeah, I bet this beats the affair idea."

"Oh, man." She paused looking for the right words. "Maybe poison him?"

This cracked me up.

"No, honey, seriously. Do you think he still loves you," she asked.

"Um, I've no idea. We didn't get to *that*."

"Right, okay," she went on, "I think you should go."

"Here we go." I rolled my eyes. "Are you for real?"

"Go and see what they're doing. You first have to see. And *then* maybe poison him." I put the phone down. No way.

I pulled out the two identical massive suitcases I hadn't used for years and started filling them with most of my earthly possessions. It took me awhile. I didn't realise I had so many pairs of sandals, flip-flops, second-hand jeans, gloves. And the photo albums! There were half a dozen of them. I knew it was probably a bad idea but I couldn't resist. I started looking at them. Flipping through the pages with pictures taken right before we digitalized the entire planet, I wondered why there were so few of us together.

I stopped my eyes on one in particular and rememberd that day vividly. It was seven or eight years before. I had just lost my mother and was having a real rough time. The picture was taken in Mexico during a short holiday we'd had. We weren't smiling in

the picture. In fact, I didn't want to be in it at all. One could tell by simply looking at me. Even though the ridiculous sombrero I was wearing covered the bigger part of my face, its sulky expression still stood out. I was looking straight into the camera. He had his left arm around my shoulder, a bottle of beer in his right hand. Earlier that day he'd decided to stay with me instead of going to a soccer game with a bunch of guys. It wasn't a big deal to anyone who didn't know us, but I knew better. He loves soccer. Soccer is his religion. I didn't think losing my mom really resonated with him. He'd never been close to her or to his own mother. I didn't believe he had a drop of understanding for what I was going through. When I told him that he gave me a look that made me regret what I'd just said.

It was right there, in the depth of his eyes—it actually hurt him that I was hurt by my mom's loss. It was that pure, unadulterated compassion for a human being who is suffering; the genuine feeling of sympathy you have for someone who's in pain. You know you can't help them. You're not the one who caused the pain. It's simply about circumstances; it's life as it is with its cruel, indiscriminating ways. But you're there, you don't leave. You know that staying is the right thing to do.

I went downstairs to take my coat. It was almost seven o'clock. After five minutes I was in a taxi, saying hi to a fat, middle-aged man who could easily pass for Santa at Christmas time.

"Where to," he said chewing a gum.

I looked at his beard and took out the sticky note to see the address.

"Got it. It's the most beautiful fall I've seen in years," he said starting the engine. "Don't you think it's glorious?"

I hadn't noticed. I looked through the window.

"Yes, it certainly is."