

Through Fire

By

Samantha Foss

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of

Samantha Foss presented on May 6, 2022

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Prof. Allyson Loomis, Chair

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Prof. B.J. Hollars

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Dr. Melissa Bonstead-Bruns

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Mary Hoffman, Dean of Graduate Studies

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The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, 2022  
Under the Supervision of Professor Allyson Loomis

Let this serve as a content warning for this project: I discuss in detail the emotional and sexual abuse I experienced in previous intimate relationships. I am not the first person to write about intimate partner violence and consent and I won't be the last, but that is why it is important to continue the conversation. This piece could have a broad audience, but those raised as female may feel a greater connection to the material as it relates to societal expectations for our relationships with others. From the time we are merely months old, individuals who are assigned female at birth (AFAB) are taught to ignore their needs and perform in certain ways to gain approval and validation from external sources. We are taught our value comes from serving and caring for others. While this does not necessarily mean that everyone who is AFAB will be in a controlling or abusive relationship, many will recognize the powerlessness to claim our "no" in relationships.

I chose to incorporate poetry throughout this piece to serve as emotional and narrative checkpoints. When I began processing my trauma, poetry was often the safest way for me to address what I was feeling or remembering about those experiences. Initially addressing the trauma through poetry allowed me to feel comfortable enough to

write the essays included in this piece. My hope is that you will find themes addressed in the poems explored in more detail through the essays.

The first two essays focus on two different abusive relationships with two years dividing the end of first and the start of second. Both essays follow a primarily chronological order of events to demonstrate the evolution of the relationships. In the third essay, I examine some of the thought patterns that kept me in unhappy situations and the ways I've reorganized my thoughts to begin undoing the people-pleasing habits I've practiced throughout my life. As I'm merely months into this practice, this essay is not an exhaustive examination of unlearning these habits, though I do believe this third essay could lead to a larger project dedicated to extensive exploration of the ways women learn what makes them valuable members of society and how to unlearn those prescriptive life goals and search for our real, individual value.

I've chosen to change or exclude many of the names in this project. Not only did I want to maintain privacy for myself and my friends, but I did not want to feel that I had to contact my abusers and notify them of their presence in this project.

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Allyson Loomis (Signature)

Date

## DEDICATION

I am so grateful to the women around me who lent me their strength, their outrage, and their courage when I didn't have any left. Friends, family, coworkers, my therapist; I would have been lost for much longer had it not been for their gentle understanding and support.

To resilience, to courage, to perseverance, to vulnerability, and to those in my life who inspire these qualities.

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## Contemplating End at the Beginning

Sangria words fall from the geologist's lips holding rocks

Explaining "you lick them to see what they're made of"

Sweet and tangy words

Red ripe juicy pieces of fruit

easy to swallow

Glass after glass words pour out

Phrases drop

*thud splash*

Rocks on Rialto Beach.

"I love you...

...could be with you forever...

But *I love you...*"

*Thud*

*Thud*

*SPLASH*

The bright orange cat in its evergreen backpack floats down the beach admiring the couple

drunk on the newness of each other

Repeating over and over and over and over and over and over

"too sweet...too enjoyable...too easy to drink"

Rocks jumping up wringing themselves out

to pour Sangria down the throats of

those staring at the sky to quench their thirst

But the wine was cheap and the fruit was so old

Even the fruit flies have left

And we're breaking

Teeth on rocks that you lick to see what they're made of

## When Poetry Class Needs a Trigger Warning

Reading Me Too stories—  
 So many people share these details  
     I can't begin to recognize.

Bedroom, check.  
 Kissing, check.  
     Touching...ch-check...  
     Hands moving...  
 STOP. THIS ISN'T OKAY.  
     I'm not okay with this.  
 I'm not okay.

No, you didn't do anything wrong,  
     but everything you're doing is wrong.

It's me too. I think? Maybe?  
     Yeah... It is. Me too.

It was the one before you—yes, the poet—  
     And it wasn't violent or aggressive.  
     It was careless abuse. Like she didn't  
     realize I was there.

Oblivious to the pain she caused.  
     At least I hope she was.  
 But how can you not notice your  
     partner burying her  
     face in the mattress to avoid what  
     is happening? To pretend  
     the person she trusts isn't  
     doing this.

Chest tight, check.  
 Short of breath, check.  
 Panic attacks daily, check.  
     I don't want to recognize this.



### **How Do You Miss That?**

I struggled to call my story abuse for a long time. It wasn't aggressive; it wasn't violent. It was at the hands of someone I was willingly dating.

Megan made me feel like she was the only person I could depend on or relate to at that point in my life. When I met Megan, she was still using her deadname and I was dating someone else. My then boyfriend had just finished a degree in geology, and I was starting the second semester of graduate school, preparing to work in the writing center at University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire. Megan had worked in the writing center the year before, so it was easy to lean on her experience and we became friends quickly, often talking about our shared course and the way stories developed through the Transatlantic diaspora. I was impressed by how easily she understood the critical theories from that course and the dialogue she was able to maintain with our professor; I often felt as though I was barely keeping up with their conversations. Megan made it look easy and part of me wanted her to be impressed by my intelligence. I wanted to feel smart enough to have earned my place in our master's program.

As friends, I told Megan about the geologist I was seeing because I felt I was in love with him, and he was living with me. She wouldn't ask follow-up questions and usually led conversations back to our class or her poetry. I can't remember Megan saying anything specifically negative about the geologist, but it seemed like "What do you even talk about?" was always implied. To Megan, an English student and a geologist couldn't possibly have anything in common and she found ways to make it clear that she and I had more in common. She implied that because we were in a master's program and he had a

bachelor's degree in geology, we were somehow superior. Different knowledge is not better knowledge, but it was sometimes difficult to talk to the geologist about my classes.

He would sit at the kitchen table that we had in the living room because the kitchen was barely big enough for two people, while I excitedly explained everything I had talked about in class. When I talked about the British Gothic literature course I was taking, I explained the novel *Northanger Abbey* by Jane Austen and why I love it. Austen wonderfully pokes fun at tropes associated with early gothic literature; her young heroine is prepared for there to be a villainous plot behind nearly every interaction she has while experiencing the social scene in Bath, only to have a relatively normal social season. *Northanger Abbey* deserves far greater recognition than it receives.

I must have made this clear to the geologist because he said, “Why don’t you tell her?”

“What?”

“Tell her you like the book?”

“Who are you talking about?”

“The author—I don’t remember her name. Tell her how much you like her book!”

I stood in the kitchen doorway staring at him for a few heartbeats before I realized he wasn’t joking. We laughed as I explained why that wasn’t possible but agreed it would be awesome to tell Jane Austen why I loved her novel.

I recognize now how pretentious it is to assume everyone is aware of 19<sup>th</sup> century British authors. At the time, knowing Jane Austen lived in the 1800s seemed like universal knowledge and I couldn’t believe he didn’t know this. He was still engaged in

the conversation and happily listening to me babble about literature, but this event placed us worlds apart in my mind.

The next day I told the other writing tutors in the “fishbowl,” library writing center about it because we were all English majors and I thought we could giggle about it. This created the perfect opening for Megan to show me how much more she and I had in common; we could talk about literature and critical theory, or she would talk while I listened. She presented herself as such an authority on the subjects she was interested in that it was easy to let her be the authority. I let Megan have power and authority in my life before she had earned the trust to actually hold that power.

I’ve spent long enough actively trying to forget my history with Megan that I can’t remember specific conversations anymore, just general feelings. I don’t remember how it happened, but I let Megan convince me to take a poetry writing class she was a student advisor for in the spring semester. I had never taken a creative writing course in college and was still in the Critical Theory track for my master’s degree, but I rationalized it by telling myself and others that it made sense for me to take a class about writing poetry because I was going to be taking two literature courses focused on studying different eras and genres of poetry at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

Megan was skilled at making me subtly question things. I allowed myself to think of her asking questions about why I was dating the geologist as concern for a friend’s happiness. She invited me to hang out with her roommates and she told them about the geologist, speaking for me, forcing the idea that I wasn’t a good match with him. I don’t remember what she said at this point, but I let her project us as a terrible match and I

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<sup>1</sup> Ultimately a silver lining to the situation.

couldn't stop it. I sat in their dimly lit living room with my back against a wall, unable to defend my relationship. I wanted to explain why I was dating him and what I liked about him, but I knew Megan wouldn't want to hear it or wouldn't believe it, so I didn't say anything. With Megan in the room, my voice was forced into a corner so she could perform from center stage. I couldn't find the words to explain the way the geologist made me laugh, or the fun we had, or that I loved when he spoke Argentinian slang to me with his Midwest accent.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually, Megan told me she was interested and wanted to date me. It didn't matter that I was still dating someone else or that I might not want to date her; she had the authority. I felt like I had to date her. My feelings for the geologist weren't "white hot" by this time, but I felt forced into ending things with him. While talking to my best friend<sup>3</sup> and my mom about it, I kept trying to rationalize why I was ending things. They were supportive but I wouldn't have listened if they had questioned it more; Megan had too much control.

The day I ended things with the geologist, Megan invited me to her apartment again. I needed a friend because I was conflicted and sad about no longer dating the geologist. Megan was one of my only friends in the city at that time, partially due to her treatment of our classmates. Megan had a habit of talking down to everyone except our professors and always assuming she was correct; our classmates did not put up with this the way I did. My closest friends had moved away from Eau Claire and defending Megan's behavior cost me several friendships with our classmates.

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<sup>2</sup> He had studied abroad in Argentina during his undergraduate career.

<sup>3</sup> The Louise to my Thelma.

When I got to Megan's, we laid on her bed and briefly talked about my relationship being over before talking about classes. Her room was small and could only be classified as a bedroom because the landlord managed to barely fit a window and a closet in the space. There was just enough room to navigate around her bed through the clutter on the floor; her bed was the only space clear enough to sit down. Talking about my relationship ending was apparently Megan's invitation to make a move. I couldn't say "no." Hadn't I broken up with the geologist to date Megan? I wanted her to kiss me, right? I wanted her to want me; there was some part of me that craved the validation of being wanted.

As she pulled my hands to her sides and wrapped one around her penis I started to cry. I don't remember if there was a fitted sheet on Megan's bed but after I started crying, she tried to comfort me by pulling a thick comforter over my jean-clad legs and cuddling up next to me through the heat. I told myself I had only started crying because I was still emotionally raw from the breakup, and I wasn't fully prepared to "get physical" with someone new. A few years of being out of that situation and some perspective allow me to realize I started crying because not only was I emotionally raw, but my choice was taken away from me. Until I ended that relationship, no part of it felt like my choice. Megan was in control, and I didn't know how to push back or find any power.

I had only seen the Manic Pixie Dream Girl<sup>4</sup> and Cool Girl<sup>5</sup> modeled for me in popular media. These tropes showed me how I was expected to behave to get a partner

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<sup>4</sup> The MPDG is the character who comes into a male protagonist's life and through her quirky coolness and energy, magically transforms his life. A great example is Summer from *(500) Days of Summer* and how Tom treats her.

<sup>5</sup> The Cool Girl is the character all the boys are supposed to want to date. The Cool Girl "isn't like other girls," she is a fan of a typically male interest (sports, video games), but she's only cool if she doesn't challenge the fantasy of who she is by making choices only for her happiness.

who would want to stay with me. It was also, in part, the way my parents behaved. My parents are considered “young Boomers” or Boomers II because they were born between 1955 and 1964. I often think of my mom as a rebellious hippie, but all through my 20s I told my mom how to set boundaries with my dad because “if you don’t tell him, how will he know something is wrong?” She turns 62 this year and is finally able to set some boundaries, but even then, it’s not until she’s already reached her breaking point. If my only models for relationships tell me that I need to sacrifice myself and my needs to make my partner happy, how could I have possibly accepted I had any power in my relationships?

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Megan asked me to visit her hometown in January between semesters so we could spend some time together. She drove me around and showed me different landmarks, but we didn’t spend much time with her family. I’m not sure I even remember meeting them. We mostly stayed in her bedroom, equally as cluttered as her room in Eau Claire. She streamed video games on Twitch, and I tried to read without feeling too awkward. We must have talked about the holidays and family, and we talked about upcoming classes but not much more than that. We never discussed what our relationship was but just a few days after this one-night visit, she updated her Facebook profile to show that we were in a relationship. I thought that was what I wanted so I didn’t say anything to her, but it would have been nice to have some say in my own status.<sup>6</sup>

Megan acted as though she was the most “woke” member of the small group of graduate students we were connected to. She did her research so she was well-informed,

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<sup>6</sup> Yes, I could have declined the Facebook relationship request, but I thought I wanted it, so I didn’t fight.

but she presented that knowledge as if it made her superior to our cohort. Megan criticizing one of our White classmates for wearing her hair in dreadlocks was striking the match that burned all of the bridges to our cohort. We were English graduate students working in the writing center together at a liberal arts university—we were all aware of the double standard on hairstyles dependent on the color of one’s skin. Discussing it once could have been seen as reasonable considering the social and political environment building in fall 2016, but Megan wouldn’t let it go. I’m sure in her mind she was the victim because she thought she was educating people about the racist implications of a White person wearing dreadlocks.<sup>7</sup> I think the only reasonable outcome in Megan’s mind would have been for this classmate to say, “wow Megan, you’re so right” and immediately remove her dreadlocks. Not only was Megan burning her bridges, but she gave me the lighter to ignite mine.

I stood in my living room while Megan was streaming video games at the kitchen table and I messaged our classmate on Megan’s behalf to reiterate everything Megan had already said multiple times. Megan thought the message coming from me would make a difference. I thought I could repair some of the damage Megan had done and make things “ok” since we all still worked together in the writing center. Even as I typed the message, it wasn’t my words. It was what Megan wanted me to say, just with a little bit of my inflection. Our classmate was polite but essentially said she wanted nothing to do with me or Megan.<sup>8</sup> An appropriate response given the circumstances. The rest of our cohort wasn’t as blind to Megan’s shitty behavior as I let myself be and I lost a lot of friends.

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<sup>7</sup> Policing bodies is not a very “woke” thing to do.

<sup>8</sup> I did reach out to this classmate after ending things with Megan to apologize. There was no chance of a friendship recovering from that, but she deserved an apology.

My best friends didn't live in the same city so aside from digital communication, Megan became the only person I talked to. She was the person I was closest to in Eau Claire at the time and I needed her to like me. I was sacrificing friends and myself to make her like me, to feel like she wanted me. The need for that external validation, the need to feel worthy of attention, had me completely ignoring every other emotional need I had. I had begun to think the only way for me to feel like a worthwhile member of society was through the external validation of a partner. It felt like if I could say "hey, this person likes me enough to date me," then I must be an all-right person. It didn't really occur to me that the only opinion of my character that truly matters is my own—that just wasn't an option on my multiple-choice key to feeling fulfilled.

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As blind as I was to most of Megan's terrible behavior, I still got pissed at her while we dated. One of the first warm days in the spring of 2017, I convinced—begged—Megan to go for a walk. After being buried in snow for months, I, like many Midwesterners, needed to thaw and relax in the sun. We walked through campus for a little while and Megan asked what my name would be if I weren't a woman.

"My parents told me that had I been born a boy, my name would have been Sawyer Rueben and I've always like that name." The heat from the sun barely warmed my skin but it was good to be outside and moving.

"I've never liked the 'oy' or 'yuh' sound." Megan said, dismissing the name I liked. Her dismissal made me feel like my interests weren't good enough. The things I cared about and liked were trivial because they weren't what Megan deemed acceptable.



My own choices weren't good enough; it was only good enough if Megan had chosen for me.

I didn't immediately ask what her name would have been, but she said, "I know my name would be 'Megan,' with no 'h'." I don't remember if she gave me a reason for being so specific about the spelling, but it was important to her.

As we walked, I told Megan about a family holiday where drinking was involved, and she essentially called my entire family alcoholics. Alcoholism and alcohol dependency are diseases several members of my family have battled and overcome, but that was not part of the discussion of my family holiday. I had tried to tell Megan a fun story about the people who are most important to me, and she insulted all of them.

I wanted to be a good girlfriend, the Cool Girl, so I swallowed my anger and pointed out the apartment I would be renting that June as we passed it. It was a small two-bedroom apartment with horribly outdated wood paneling, but it was the first time I would have a place that was entirely my own with no plans for a roommate. I was already plotting how to turn the second bedroom into a library and office space and told Megan as such.

"But what about me? Where will I stay?" she asked.

At this point, Megan wasn't planning to stay in Eau Claire after her lease ended. She had implied that she would move back to her hometown in Minnesota, but she instead invited herself to live with me. I was hiding how angry and uncomfortable I was and let her plant this idea. She slowly built the idea all spring, hinting every-so-often about living together and maybe in her mind this was her giving me the opportunity to say "no," but that's not how I operate. We never had a clear conversation about living

together. Even if Megan would have plainly asked “Can I move in with you?” I don’t think I would have been able to say “no.” It would have felt like challenging or rejecting her desires and that’s not what the Cool Girl does as a girlfriend.

Megan hinted at the idea of living together until I thought it was something I wanted. I still foolishly assumed Megan would be gone most of the time and just occasionally visit me. It turns out she stayed in that apartment so much she could have been training for the COVID-19 pandemic “shelter at home” orders. She rarely left the second bedroom. She turned my would-be library into her video game streaming room. She would keep the door closed but I still tried to be quiet so I wouldn’t disrupt her live streams. Megan wanted the AC on because that room would get so hot with her computer and lights on, but she would then open the window at night because it was still too warm, defeating the purpose of using AC.

Megan stayed up late streaming video games on Twitch and sometimes working on or reading poetry, as she was finishing her master’s in creative writing. She slept late and I didn’t want to disturb her, so I went on long walks around Eau Claire; long enough to listen to the entire *Rent* soundtrack before returning to the apartment. I had a path I followed so often I could practically walk it with my eyes closed. I can still see every house and yard of the Third Ward. I know what the river smelled like as I crossed the footbridge, leaving campus to walk the bike trail past the courthouse. I can feel the sun and sweat as I crossed another bridge into Phoenix Park where people waded in the river. Before returning to the dark apartment, I would stop by Ramone’s for ice cream only to have Megan ask why I didn’t bring her anything.

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No aspect of my sex life with Megan was for my pleasure. She was interested in FemDom and wanted me to be her Domme while she performed a more stereotypically submissive and feminine role. It felt like she wanted me to insult myself, in a way. I'm not a dominant person; I am a quiet, reserved person and I don't know what made Megan, or me, think I could be a Domme. I turned to Reddit forums to seek advice because I had no idea what I was doing. Turns out our particular situation is sometimes called "topping from the bottom," meaning Megan was still in charge and I was faking all attempts to be dominant for her pleasure (it's a very toxic relationship model). I did receive kudos from some of the submissive partners who replied to my question but none of the advice told me how I could become confident enough to actually be a Domme. Megan had, perhaps unintentionally, robbed me of all of my confidence.

The first time Megan asked me to wear a strap-on we weren't officially dating yet and I was still trying to rationalize that I wanted to be with her. It wasn't as empowering as I had imagined it would be. We were in the bedroom of the apartment Megan rented with a towel on the bed where she laid down. I didn't know what I was doing; Megan did very little to help me prepare for what was happening and there was no aftercare to process the experience. Not to mention, I got zero pleasure and Megan still wanted a hand-job afterwards.

Megan was never interested in or comfortable penetrating, but she wanted to be penetrated and demeaned during the more performative FemDom experiences we shared. I had only dated comparatively vanilla cis men before this relationship, and I preferred that sex life. Megan's idea of giving me pleasure was oral. She overstated that she was good at oral after one of her previous partners had told her she was good. It didn't matter

if I was uncomfortable or uninterested; Megan would plead and guilt me into participating so she could get off and then try to reciprocate to feel like she had made the experience equal for us. There may not have been a gun held to my head forcing me to participate in these sexual acts, but it was emotional blackmail.

Megan wasn't violent or overtly aggressive, but what she did was still abuse. I did not feel I had the option to say "no" to any physical advances or experiences. Logically, I had the capability to say "no" to anything Megan said or did. Emotionally, I couldn't. Nothing in my history or my social education made me feel as though I had the right to say "no" and set boundaries. Every message I had received growing up was to sacrifice my comfort or happiness for my partner and that was reinforced countless times. Every time I ignored one of my boundaries to please my partner and they were satisfied, that interaction told me that I needed to keep performing that way. Every time I ignored my discomfort and faked pleasure to satisfy Megan regarding her sexual performance, her pride was the proof I needed to continue behaving the way I was.

I can't count the times I closed my eyes and waited for everything to end, faking enthusiasm because that was what I needed to do to survive the situation. I was acting the part of happy girlfriend because "that's what I was supposed to do" even though it felt like I was dying inside with every touch. While we were dating, Megan and I did discuss my preference for "traditional sex," but she wasn't comfortable with that because it caused too much body dysmorphia for her. I didn't want to force her to do something she wasn't comfortable with, so we very briefly discussed me dating a cis man for the sex. During this conversation, Megan also asked what it would mean for our relationship if

she transitioned. I told her it wouldn't matter; she was the person I was dating regardless of gender.<sup>9</sup>

Megan and I had this discussion in the bedroom not being used to stream video games, while wood paneling glowed in the afternoon sun. We sat on the corner of the bed nearest the bedroom door, so it was easier for one of us to get up and leave.

A week or so later, in the same spot, Megan sat in the middle of the foot of the bed, and I laid almost on the corner by the door. I had made the bed after Megan had woken up late in the day.

Megan was saying "Please? Come on..." forcing her voice to come out breathy in what she must have thought was a sexy tone.

Silence. I avoided eye contact.

"Just a little bit? Come on. I want you to touch me." Megan pled.

Continued silence as I began turning my face into the blankets on the bed.

"Please? It will feel so good." She was oblivious to my discomfort. At least I hope she was oblivious and not outright ignoring me as she pulled my hand to her crotch, and I buried my face in the mattress.

Silence is not consent. Coercion, pressure, and guilt trips do not equal consent. I still repeat this mantra years later, so I don't blame myself for letting this happen. Megan didn't acknowledge my discomfort. I didn't say "no," and it's not my fault this happened. I never said "yes."

I buried my face in the mattress while Megan wrapped my hand around herself and started the hand-job. She finished without acknowledging my body was frozen and

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<sup>9</sup> I hadn't accepted my bisexuality at this point, but I did start to acknowledge it around this time.

that I couldn't look at her. Her pleasure and her pride in herself were the only things that seemed to matter to her. I didn't matter as person, I bent to her wishes and worked too hard to make her happy before taking care of myself. I was an easy target for controlling personalities.

Why couldn't I have been stronger in that moment? Why did I let Megan beg and guilt me into doing something I didn't want to do? Maybe I hoped Megan would have been perceptive and aware of her partner's reactions so she would have seen how uncomfortable I was. If she could see my discomfort, she wouldn't have forced it to happen, right? Maybe I was just scared of confrontation and shattering my Cool Girl persona. Megan reduced my role in our "relationship" to a hand. I wasn't an individual any longer, I was whatever she wanted to make me.

This realization is what gave me the strength to ends things in June 2017. Apparently, I was all right with the emotional abuse and manipulation but being reduced to a hand was where I drew the line. I realize that Megan had to have been ignoring my discomfort for months before that incident. Maybe she rationalized that if I were truly uncomfortable, I would say something because she was blindsided when I asked her to move out. My performance of the people-pleasing, ego-fanning girlfriend came to end, and Megan couldn't understand why.

I didn't immediately remove her from my social media platforms because I didn't want to seem dramatic.<sup>10</sup> Megan attempted to reach out for several weeks and it felt like she was testing her hold on me to squash me back into an unhealthy relationship.

Eventually I confronted her about the abuse, and she was "woke" enough to not question

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<sup>10</sup> I was afraid of being seen as an overly emotional woman. How messed up is that? Sacrificing my peace of mind so the world wouldn't think I'm a human with emotions.

my experience. I didn't have to explain what it meant that I didn't consent, she didn't argue, she actually apologized. It took years for me to understand what a small miracle it is for an abuser to accept accountability and apologize for their actions. Even now it's hard for me to call what happened with Megan sexual abuse. It has been easier for me to accept what happened to me if I call it emotional abuse and physical manipulation, but a different name doesn't change what happened.

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It took me more than four years and more trauma before I stopped blaming myself for what happened. I kept thinking that I let myself be put in that situation; I ignored the red flags and let Megan call the shots. I didn't want to acknowledge the concern or dislike from my friends and family. I thought that if I could make her happy, Megan would put in the same effort to make me happy, a mistake I've made in more than one relationship. I had blamed myself for not "correcting" Megan's behavior because I felt there was a part of her that genuinely wanted to be a good person. The abuse wasn't from a place of malice, but it still happened.

I let Megan control me because I thought that's what it took to be a good girlfriend. Sacrificing my comfort, never challenging my partner, and celebrating their interests over mine is how I learned to behave in relationships. From the way I dressed, for my partners enjoyment over my comfort, to letting them have control over my life. I had never seen a positive example of a woman having control over her life and setting boundaries. Those women weren't Cool Girls; they were selfish and deserved to be miserable and alone.<sup>11</sup> The ultimate goal in life, I had been led to believe, was to find a

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<sup>11</sup> I've never seen a woman who is actually miserable when she's putting herself first and choosing to be alone in real life.

relationship that allowed you to build a family you could serve for the rest of your life. I had enough feminist influence growing up to logically know that wasn't true for everyone and we have the right to choose, but I felt like I would be a failure if I didn't achieve the idealized white picket fence life in some way. I couldn't imagine an outcome where I didn't build that life and until recently, every time a relationship ended it felt like a failure.

I thought that if I worked hard enough, if I compromised enough to make my partner happy, Megan would put the same thought, consideration, and work into making me happy. I thought if I tried harder, ignored more boundaries I didn't even know I had, I could make the relationship work and build my idealized future. It doesn't ever turn out that way, does it? If you're always compromising to make your partner happy, you never receive what you really need from a relationship.



**Rumpelstiltskin**

“I’ll be—  
I’ll give you  
Everything you need

“You just have to  
Promise me  
Everything

“I only want your name  
Your femininity  
Your obedience

“I’ll pop in to check  
On you—tell you how  
My life is going

“Your life doesn’t matter  
To me—but you have  
To know about mine”

Your golden words  
Are still straw  
And end up in  
Flames and shit.  
And I, supposedly, won.

**Starry-eyed Surprise**

(After Vincent van Gogh's "Starry Night")

We'll be chasing  
brushstrokes and  
wondering how something so  
beautiful  
comes from so  
much pain.

Lovely strokes  
exist in exquisite  
loneliness  
and we swim  
in stardust  
cherishing the  
art of pain.

The manic creativity  
brings generations  
joy and beauty  
but how can you see  
only the end  
product, only the light  
without acknowledging  
how much  
hurt made something  
so enduring.

How can you love  
just the happiness  
in a person  
and not the  
darkness?

**Not a Wolf**

Not a wolf in sheep's clothing  
A feral sheep dog, maybe  
    Knowing how to behave  
    Most of the time  
Putting on a good show

You're not a wolf and  
    You're not listening  
    You hear the scolds as you nip  
But boundaries don't apply to feral appetites

We know to stay away from wolves  
    Wild animals are dangerous  
    But feral dogs still look like  
They could be safe and saved and loved into  
    A trustworthy companion

Maybe some dogs can  
Maybe you were too focused  
    On what you wanted  
You blame me and want me to  
    Take responsibility  
    For being bitten  
While I slept and tried to sleep

Because I didn't hit the dog  
    As it approached me  
Because the dog ignored me saying  
    "Stay, I don't want to play"

Because a feral dog will satisfy  
    It's needs first  
And not understand the human  
    Fear after it's gluttoned itself

## **Disengaging from Questionable Partners**

Whether from my own romanticization of life, social expectations, or the influence of various media outlets, I always imagined myself being married with children by the time I was in my late 20s. I did not imagine I would be recovering from the end of an engagement when I was 28. I so desperately wanted to start the phase of my life where I had just one dependable partner and we could build a life together that I jumped into relationships without looking.

After the loss of control from dating Megan, I wanted something stable and safe. For two years I dated someone who had waited six years for me to be willing to date him. He was wonderful to me. He was one of my best friends. He switched jobs and moved for me when I started the position that is now my career. One drunken evening he got down on one knee and promised he would propose to me. We talked about songs we would play at our wedding and names for our children.

He would have done anything for me and compromised on everything to make me happy. I began to worry he may have built me up to be a Manic Pixie Dream Girl who could fix everything he thought was wrong in his life. I loved him but I wasn't in love with him. And we weren't honestly happy the last few months we were together. We wanted different things and I lost my best friend when I decided I wouldn't compromise and wouldn't let him compromise anymore.

I knew the relationship was ending months before we “officially” ended things, so I didn't waste time looking for another relationship. After learning that then presidential candidate Mayor Pete Buttigieg and his husband Chasten had met using the app Hinge,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The dating app designed to be deleted. ™

it seemed like the best option. I certainly wasn't going to put myself through the hell of Tinder again. I didn't want a hook-up app, I wanted to find a relationship; Pete and Chasten made me confident in my chances using Hinge.

There is, of course, no dating app that will protect you from being ghosted when a (presumably) straight, cis man realizes he's not getting an easy hook-up from you (a cis, straight-presenting woman). There's also no way for a dating app to screen out the potential perverts, such as one man in his 30s who taught high school and seemed far too excited that I looked much younger than 26, my age at the time. The safest outcome is that you message someone for a week or two and realize there's no real spark, so you mutually ghost each other.

Craig was different from the start. I wasn't swooning at his profile, but he had a photo of him playing with his nephew that tugged at my heartstrings. I hoped that because he had included a photo with his nephew that meant he would understand how important family is. The first few days of messaging weren't extraordinary, but Craig seemed to actually want to know me better. We exchanged phone numbers and had a call date that lasted nearly two hours and only ended because Craig needed to sleep more before his night shift. Craig was a healthcare provider with insomnia and sleep was critical for him.

Lots of quiet giggling and nerves were in those first couple of phone calls. I don't remember most of what was said in those initial calls, but we talked about them later in our relationship.

Craig had told me in one of those calls, “I wanted to be an inventor or an NPR interviewer when I was a kid.” His stories about “inventing” things with his friends were adorable. When he asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I rambled.

“When I was little, I wrote a list of what I wanted to be and read it to my mom for her to translate, because I couldn’t actually write yet, and she put it in a photo album, so we still have this piece of paper. Apparently, I told her I wanted to be a firefighter, a forest ranger, a nurse, a teacher, and a mom.” Craig later told me that this roundabout answer is how he knew I wanted kids. I couldn’t actually admit that though, we hadn’t even had a real date yet. Every message I had received from movies, shows, or dating advice columns told me (straight) men are afraid of commitment and telling a man you want kids on a first date is guaranteed to scare him off and ensure he never answers your calls or texts.<sup>13</sup>

The phone dates went well, and I was starting to fall. He drove to my town so we could have dinner after I finished work. As I pulled up to the restaurant, I saw him walk in and all I could think was “fuck, I really like him.” I knew I was either going to be crushed or he would be “the one.” It was the certainty every rom com I had devoured assured me I would feel.

Shy and quiet were the safest options for the first few dates. If I don’t expose too much of my personality, he won’t have a reason to not like me, right? I had to hide parts of myself until I knew what his idea of the Cool Girl was so I could share the parts of myself that would make me into his dream girl, while ignoring whether or not he was my dream partner. The only thing I remember saying during dinner was in response to him

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<sup>13</sup> Tina Fey demonstrates this in the opening minutes of “Baby Mama” in an exaggerated, comedic way.

wiggling his ears. “Oh my god, that makes me so happy! That’s something I will be telling my best friend about later.”

We went for a walk in a park along the lake in town and sat on a bench with the sunset to our backs. The conversation was halting, thanks to yours truly. Craig thought I was bored and judging him; I was just trying not to make a fool of myself. As we sat in this public park, Craig offered to give me a shoulder massage, so he would have an excuse to put his arm around me.

After he finally kissed me, I sounded much cooler than I felt when I said, “I wondered when you were going to do that.”

After a light make-out session, Craig asked what was on my mind.

“I’m just hoping you’re not a player.” Craig’s utter disbelief told me I had shown my hand too soon and he would know I was falling for him.<sup>14</sup> He would know he had the power, not that he seemed conniving enough act on that power.

We started dating at the end of July 2019 and very early in August, he called me while I was on a break at work to ask if he could call me his girlfriend when he talked about me with other people. You already know I said “yes,” and I was over the moon giddy. It felt like I had won the lottery. I don’t think I kept it to myself for long; I probably texted my mom and my best friend, Louise, before telling my coworkers that afternoon. You would have thought I had been asked to prom by the homecoming king for my annoying excitement. The next time we saw each other, we took a screenshot of our conversation from Hinge before we each deleted the app.

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<sup>14</sup> He most definitely wasn’t a player, but he did end up being an expert at gaslighting me.

The Covid-19 pandemic and work-from-home practices were a challenge, as they were for everyone, but Craig proposed to me in November 2020 while we were visiting Louise in Colorado so she could be part of this milestone.<sup>15</sup>

“What the fuck? Are you serious?” I thought he was kidding at first.

Probably not what you want to hear when you’re down on one knee in front of the person you love. I eventually said “yes” and then couldn’t form words beyond “oh my god.” My friends and family liked Craig, my nieces seemed to love him, and we had talked about eventually getting married, but we didn’t even live together at the time.<sup>16</sup> Just days before he proposed, he had told me he didn’t believe in soul mates or finding “the one.” Craig thought you simply found someone who was close enough to perfect for you and essentially settle. I didn’t think our relationship was ready for an engagement and I couldn’t wrap my head around it; it didn’t seem real. I told myself it didn’t feel real because I was simply so happy about it, the way rom coms portray the female protagonist in disbelief that her life is working out exactly as she wants.

When I tried to make it feel real by making wedding plans, it was like pulling teeth to get Craig to participate. He didn’t care about setting a date; he didn’t care about our wedding party, so long as it was small; he wouldn’t discuss anything related to the wedding. People kept telling me that men just don’t care about the details of their wedding, they just want it to happen.<sup>17</sup> But it didn’t seem like Craig even wanted it to get married. He became distant that winter and every time I saw him, he seemed tense and unhappy. It felt as though Craig found a way to minimize the significance or belittle me

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<sup>15</sup> She had requested to be part of my proposal in our early 20s and I had told Craig this at some point.

<sup>16</sup> We never actually lived together.

<sup>17</sup> After listening to a coworker talk about her fiancé making plans for them, I know this is a lie told to reassure women and excuse men from taking responsibility for a significant amount of planning.



for every other comment I made. If I tried to be flirtier, thinking he would enjoy it, he would get angry because it wasn't the right kind of flirting. So, I made myself smaller and quieter, retreating into myself to avoid striking a nerve and aggravating him. By March 2021, it felt like I couldn't say anything because nothing I said was right. When I tried explaining how his behavior made me feel, he brushed it off, like he didn't hear me. If he did listen, he would become defensive or say he was just tired from working 12-hour night shifts.

Every time I confronted Craig about his teasing not being funny but actually being hurtful, he would push back and say, "I just want someone who can take a joke, y'know, give-and-take." It became my fault that I was offended and that he felt like he was walking on eggshells. Never mind that I had told him from very early on that his kind of "teasing" was hurtful.

He always seemed to key into the things I was already sensitive about and make me feel worse, while simultaneously making it my fault. On one occasion in the summer of 2021 after we were both fully vaccinated against COVID-19, we planned a date to a brewery and a bookstore and I spent extra time doing my makeup since it was finally safe to be in public again. When I asked Craig what he thought, he told me he didn't care because all makeup looks like clown makeup to him.<sup>18</sup> A very painful, indirect insult to my appearance and something I put a lot of effort into.

Louise and I attempted multiple fitness challenges together to help keep each other accountable as we kickstarted fitness routines. When I attempted the Hot Girl Summer Sculpt diet and exercise program from Blogilates, Craig made snide remarks

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<sup>18</sup> Louise and her boyfriend later compared me to young Molly Ringwald in the photo I sent them, so I know I looked good.

about everything from the name to the menu of the diet. I wanted to look like I took care of my body and feel good about myself. It seemed like Craig didn't take me or my attempts seriously, almost like he expected me to fail. Instead of feeling supported, I felt stupid for trying and gave up 10 days into the program. I'm not a fitness fanatic, but I tried multiple times to start a workout routine while Craig and I were together. I thought if I could be more physically fit, I would feel better, and he would be nicer and happier. I wanted to take care of myself, but he made me feel like I was going to fail anyway, so why should I even try in the first place?

Craig was a very active person and I'm simply not. He was rarely comfortable sitting still, even just to watch a movie. I am very comfortable spending a winter evening knitting and watching Netflix. It was perhaps worse while we were dating because I was on the antidepressant Sertraline and had reached a zombie stage. I wasn't depressed and I wasn't feeling huge downturns, but I wasn't feeling positives either.<sup>19</sup> I wasn't feeling much of anything, least of all excitement to be active. I was simply existing.

For all of Craig's confidence and superiority in understanding all-things medical, he didn't seem to try to understand what side effects I might have been feeling from Sertraline. When I made efforts to be more physically active and take care of myself, it was met with his brand of "teasing," and it didn't seem worth it if it wasn't going to be good enough for him.

His "jokes" made me feel horrible about myself. I tried to be the partner he wanted and tried to change my behavior when he would finally tell me what was

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<sup>19</sup> When I was first on this SSRI, I was suicidal and needed the strong leveling powers it had. Sertraline is used to manage both anxiety and depression, and I started taking it again weeks before the pandemic hit because of anxiety and seasonal depression.

bothering him. Starting around March 2021, Craig told me he wanted better communication but couldn't, or wouldn't, tell me when something was bothering him until he was pissed off to the point of nearly exploding. He wanted me to be more engaged with him when he was visiting but would spend time scrolling through his phone instead of engaging in conversation. He wanted to get out and do things but never had recommendations for things to do.<sup>20</sup> In the middle of winter, I don't want to be outside in the cold, but my recommendations for things to do at home weren't good enough for him either.

We were so unhappy. I tried to be livelier and more flirtatious because that's what he said he wanted, but apparently my behavior wasn't right because it just made him angry. All I wanted was to make him happy. The things he wanted from me seemed to require so many changes on my part, but he didn't even seem to try to reciprocate.

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Very early in our courtship, we had been out for a drink and made a bet about the name of a song playing. Loser had to perform a strip tease for the other person, and I lost. I've never been very comfortable with overt performative sexuality, but I used to be able to carry myself with confidence if I was in control. Craig wasn't going to let me out of the bet—he wanted a show. I was shaking with nerves and his response was “find the right song” as if having the right music would make it easier for me to be performatively sexual in a way I wasn't comfortable with. Craig only stopped saying “just try, just do it” when I was almost crying from embarrassment. As we sat on my bed and I buried my face in a pillow, he said “I'm guessing the mood is killed for the night?”

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<sup>20</sup> Plus, going out and interacting with people in the middle of a pandemic? Before anyone had any vaccines and maybe half wore a mask correctly? Seriously??

We had been dating less than two months and I felt like I had made such a fool of myself. I had disappointed the guy I was crazy about because I was too much of a coward to dance around and take my clothes off and now—now I was too upset with myself to even pretend to be interested in having sex. Craig didn't push the matter that evening thankfully, but he did give me a pair of earrings. Admittedly lovely earrings that I wore for months. He had planned to give them to me anyway, but it seemed like the reasoning he was testing out was "if I make her upset, I'll give her a gift and that will fix it." He didn't get laid that night and I felt guilty that I couldn't give him what he wanted. I foolishly felt like I owed him this performance or at least sex because I so desperately wanted him to think I was the Cool Girl who could handle anything. My sexuality and sexualness ended up feeling like an underlying issue throughout our entire relationship.

First my lack of sexual confidence seemed to be an issue to me. Later, my low sex drive due to Sertraline became an issue for him.<sup>21</sup> Somewhere in the middle, my bisexuality and limited experience dating women became a general issue, as Megan is the only woman I've had a relationship with. Craig was one of the first people I let in, regarding my bisexuality. He didn't have an issue with it, but he did turn it into a fetish. The first winter we dated, we played a drinking game called Truth or Drink and he started asking questions about my experience with women.<sup>22</sup> We were still using alcohol as a crutch to have conversations about past relationships and he asked whether I would want to have sex with a woman. I had told him about Megan and vaguely alluded to the abuse-that-I-couldn't-call-abuse-yet, but the implication was whether I would have sex with a

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<sup>21</sup> While it's widely acknowledged that cis men may have trouble orgasming while on an antidepressant, it's hardly ever acknowledged that women also experience low sex drive while taking antidepressants.

<sup>22</sup> A self-explanatory game, but you can find videos on YouTube from the channel CUT if you're curious.

cis woman. For Craig, there was a distinction between cis women and transwomen that seemed to invalidate my ex-relationship with a woman.

“Maybe but not while I’m in a relationship with you.”

“Are you sure? I feel like it’s something you should explore.” He insisted many times that it was something *I* needed more experience with.

“I don’t think I would be confident enough to and the only way it would happen while we’re dating is if it’s in a threesome.” Stupid. SO STUPID. I said this because I wanted Craig to think I was a Cool Girl, but I also hadn’t told many people about my queerness and I wasn’t comfortable openly pursuing women at that time. Craig seemed to think it was an invite for a threesome. I’m fairly confident saying I’m a strictly monogamous person and I didn’t want to bring someone else into our bedroom, especially so early in our relationship.<sup>23</sup> A few months later, before we were engaged, Craig told me one of his coworkers asked him if she could have a threesome with us. He told me months after she had asked him, and after she had sent me a friend request on Facebook, but he couldn’t understand why it bothered me. After all, nothing happened and he “pretty much ignored the question.”

Being asked for a threesome seems like interesting enough news to share with your partner, don’t you think? When I explained that I wasn’t comfortable with a threesome he became defensive.

“I only mentioned it because I want to help you explore your sexuality.” Liar.

“If having a threesome is about me exploring my sexuality, would you be okay with me having sex with another man?” Can you guess what he said?

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<sup>23</sup> Nothing against those practicing Ethical Non-Monogamy and polyamory, it’s just not my thing.

My sexuality wasn't a real concern for him at all. I was so angry and offended that he had kept this from me but also because it felt like he was trying to use me for his pleasure. Instead of confronting him while this anger was coursing through me, I just stopped talking. I had been taught, both directly and indirectly through example, that I shouldn't let my anger out. Things said in anger are often remembered with regret, so I shut down and didn't tell him how hurt I was that his "advocacy" for me to explore my sexuality felt like it was only to serve him. A threesome was his fantasy, not mine. My sexuality just allowed him to push the fetish. I never shared how much he had hurt me in that moment, but he at least never mentioned a threesome again.

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In spring 2021, as I was trying to excitedly make wedding plans, Craig told Louise that he was frustrated I wasn't more excited to see him when he came to visit. She didn't "tattle" on him; she told him he needed to talk to me about it because that's what couples should do. She told me about the conversation weeks later when I was venting to her about Craig and it became clear to her that he hadn't talked to me. It quickly became a habit for him to go to Louise or my mom with relationship frustrations, hoping or expecting them to confront me on his behalf so he wouldn't have to start the conversation. Towards the end of our relationship, when we were in couples counseling, he would talk about wanting better communication, but it never felt like he was making an effort to communicate. He complained about me scrolling through my phone when we were together, but Louise was the one to tell me about it.

“She doesn’t seem to even care that I drove there after a 12-hour shift to see her.” Because of course it was I was the only one to ever sit on my phone in the evening and he was the only one who could be tired.

He stopped asking me to visit after we had been dating for a few months; if I went to see him it was because his mom, who lived in the same city, wanted to see me. I had asked him to move in, and he got an apartment that was closer but still hour away. Then he was mad because he felt like I didn’t acknowledge that it was a big deal for him to switch jobs and move. Of course, I heard about this months after the resentment had begun to fester. We were engaged and, I thought, starting to plan the rest of our lives but he had no interest in living together.

Craig discussed this with Louise and told her, “Well maybe I would be more willing to move in if she acted excited to see me instead of just expecting me to be there.” Apparently expecting my fiancé to be at home when I came home was too much. Did he want me to be groveling on my knees, grateful he deigned to visit me after he proposed? I thought he wanted to take steps toward building a future together, complete with mundane routines, but apparently that didn’t fan his ego enough.

Nothing I did felt good enough. Even wanting to wear pajamas to bed seemed like an issue. I have cute pajamas, I like my pajamas, I’m comfortable sleeping in pajamas, but Craig was annoyed by them. When it was warm enough in May, I started sleeping without pajamas to show him I was making an effort to please him.

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I knew we were having issues, but I thought we were still planning on a June 2022 wedding. I was confident we could work through the issues we were having, so I

kept working through wedding plans. I talked to my parents and Craig's mom about wedding plans when they all visited on Mother's Day weekend in May 2021, which was also to celebrate me turning 28. Craig avoided the wedding conversations and I assumed it was because he was doing the "uninterested man" thing, leaving the planning to the "womenfolk." I had previously asked my brother to officiate the ceremony and he had agreed, so my mom and I talked about all of the embarrassing and sentimental jokes he and his friends could try to work into the ceremony.<sup>24</sup> My parents and Craig stayed for the night, and everyone went home happy enough on Sunday morning.

A week later, the weekend of May 16, Craig was visiting again. We had a nice dinner and some drinks at home before watching something on YouTube or Hulu for a couple of hours. He had been working night shifts that week and I highly value my sleep, so I went upstairs to bed before him. I assumed he would sleep on the couch if he didn't come upstairs, as had become our pattern when he was changing his sleep schedule. If he did come upstairs, he was usually considerate about trying not to wake me up, or he wouldn't come upstairs until almost 5 a.m. and I was close to waking up anyway.

This particular Saturday night, he came upstairs and intentionally woke me up trying to kiss me. I playfully batted him away and said, "let me sleep for another 20 minutes," not knowing what time it was. He didn't stop trying to initiate sex when I rolled over to put my back to him, so I went to the bathroom for a little distance, expecting him to calm down and get the hint. When I came back and looked at my phone, I realized it was only 2:30 in the morning.

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<sup>24</sup> All his friends treated me like a little sister growing up and they are still some of my favorite people.



I hadn't worn pajamas to bed, but I thought he would understand that I wasn't interested in sex since I had asked for more sleep and walked away. I laid down in bed with my back to him, planning to go back to sleep. I thought he would let me because none of my behavior indicated I was interested in having sex.

Craig got up on his knees, pulled me onto my back, pushed my knees apart, and forced his penis inside me. And I froze. At some point he flipped me onto my stomach and my brain started working again but I couldn't make myself fake interest. I was just frozen as he did what he wanted.

I couldn't control my body until he pulled me on top of him, and then I did what I had to so he would finish, and it would be over. When he was done, I said something about having an upset stomach and needing to get something in it. I went to the bathroom downstairs and sat in shock, unable to even cry. Apparently, I sat there long enough for Craig to come looking for me, though it felt like seconds. He asked how I was feeling, and I mumbled something about my stomach as I poured myself a glass of oat milk. I couldn't think, I could barely make myself breath as I drank the oat milk without looking at Craig.

I tried to confront him about what had happened the next morning. Craig deflected and started talking about the things I had been doing wrong in our relationship. For weeks he thought I was upset because he had interfered with my sleep. He thought that's all he had done wrong.

Louise was the first person I said anything to, and we discussed it via messages in SnapChat the Sunday after it happened. SnapChat message notifications don't have a "preview text" on your phone's lock screen and our conversation was set to delete

messages after 24 hours. I knew Craig wouldn't know what we were talking about if he picked up my phone.<sup>25</sup> I needed someone to help me process what was happening, but I didn't talk to anyone else about it for weeks. My stomach was in knots, and I mostly tried not to think about what had happened because we were about to celebrate Memorial Day at my parent's farm.

On our 2.5-hour drive, I asked him if we could ask my childhood best friend to play violin at our wedding. We were going to have a small wedding party, but she means so much to me I wanted her to be part of the wedding, plus she's an amazing musician. Craig agreed.

When we were on the farm, my mom and I started talking about how to set up the yard for the wedding. I walked Craig around the yard and started explaining the layout, "the DJ could set up over here by the barn, the bar could be next to the grill pit and garden." I wanted to focus on the wedding because I was convinced if we could move forward with wedding plans that everything would be all right. Our relationship could be saved, I would still be the Cool Girl, and maybe he would take responsibility for his shitty behavior and apologize. We asked my friend if she would play at the wedding during a slightly intoxicated game of cornhole and she agreed; it felt like we were on track and finding something normal again.

Craig drove us back to my house the next day and then went back to his apartment. That night, he texted me asking if I had talked to my mom.<sup>26</sup>

Me: I let her know we made it back but I didn't call her, why?

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<sup>25</sup> As things got worse between us, he did pick up my phone and saw preview text from conversations with Louise where she was rightfully calling him an ass, which resulted in a fight.

<sup>26</sup> This text conversation is to the best of my memory. I've deleted every form of contact I ever had with Craig, so I can't include the conversation verbatim, otherwise I certainly would.

Craig: No reason just wondering

Me: All right, how's your evening?

Craig: Good.

Craig: I think we need to slow down on the wedding plans. We have a lot of stuff to work through.

Stunned, sick-to-my-stomach, confused silence as I stared at my phone, trying not to scream or cry.

Me: What do you mean?

Craig: We just aren't in a good place and I've been thinking for a while that we should slow down on the plans. I don't want your parents spending a ton of money when we're not on solid ground.

My mom had mentioned having a load of dirt brought to their backyard to fill a ditch and prevent people from tripping or breaking an ankle at the wedding, but that's not necessarily a "ton of money." Craig later explained he felt like our issues were speed bumps and we would get past them, but we should stop making wedding plans until we were on solid ground again. At the time I was crushed. If these things were speed bumps he was confident we could work through, why would plans for a wedding a year away need to stop? Especially if he was sure the wedding would still happen.<sup>27</sup> How had I messed up my Cool Girl role so badly that he wanted to stop making wedding plans?

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<sup>27</sup> Hindsight is always 20/20 and I am now very glad the only money I spent towards the wedding was on a pair of shoes.

Also, why couldn't he have had this conversation in person at any point over the weekend? "I didn't want you to be upset around your family." Right, okay, sure. He was just afraid I would cause a scene, which isn't really within the scope of my personality, but he also didn't want to be the bad guy. So instead, he let me talk about the wedding all weekend. Then he texted me about slowing down wedding plans to avoid seeing my reaction. I sent my mom and Louise screenshots of the conversation because I needed to share the proof of what he was saying. I felt like I was being rejected and I couldn't understand what I had done wrong to make him act that way. The idea to slow down wedding plans should have come from me, but somehow, I had done something to make him want to stop plans.

It turns out he had texted my mom about "slowing down plans" first. She called him out and asked, "Have you talked to Sam about this yet? If not, you need to because she and I talk about everything, and I will tell her." While I'm fairly certain he wanted my mom to be the one to tell me so he could avoid the confrontation, he did text me about it when my mom refused to do his dirty work. I think it was at the end of that week that I told my mom he had "crossed a line of consent."

For a few weeks, maybe months, I couldn't allow myself to acknowledge that what Craig had done was rape. I didn't want that to be true; I didn't want my story to be that my fiancé raped me. I think the first time I actually spoke the words was while talking to my brother, Tony.

My parents host a Foss family reunion the first Saturday of August every year. The celebration starts on Friday night and ends with the determined few limping home on Sunday morning. Saturday kicks off with Bloody Mary's, mimosas, and Irish coffee

around 8 a.m. and continues in that fashion through a huge picnic and well into the night. In 2021, my mom, my brother, and I were the last ones standing. We spend so much of the day running around serving everyone else that we don't actually get to talk to each other until everyone else has crawled to bed.

We were ending the night talking and laughing in the old milk-house-turned-miniature-Irish pub. Tony left to refill his drink or get water and my mom asked me something about Craig. By the time Tony came back to the table, I was sobbing.

"Tell Tony what you told me," my mom said, her hand on my shoulder.

My face was mostly in my hands as I choked out, "Craig raped me." Over my sobs I could hear Tony's controlled breathing. Blessedly, he didn't react beyond that. He didn't demand answers, I don't know if he said anything for a long time. He just let me cry, even if all of his protective instincts were telling him to kick Craig's ass.

Craig and I tried couples counseling for a while after that, trying to sort through my trauma and his dissatisfaction and the general lack of communication. When talking to our counselor, I still carefully said "Craig crossed a line of consent." I don't think I ever said it was rape in front of Craig; even if I had he would have denied that's what it was. Throughout our attempt at counselling, there was a lot of denial of reality from me and so much gaslighting from Craig. He wanted me to take responsibility for what had happened.

"You want me to say it's my fault that you did what you did?"

"No, it's not about fault. I just wish you could see how your actions are responsible for what happened." Isn't that assigning fault? Craig always distanced himself from the event, whether consciously or not. He would always say "what

happened to Sam” or “how Sam feels about the situation” but never “what I did to Sam.” He didn’t take responsibility or accept accountability.

To Craig, the fact that I was naked meant it was my responsibility. He tried to explain his behavior by saying he was just so tired and horny. He didn’t hear me say I wanted more sleep. I didn’t say “no,” so it must have been fine. If he didn’t hear me say that I wanted more sleep, how would he have heard “no”? Craig seemed to think because he didn’t explicitly hear “no,” that meant “sure, do whatever you want.”

That’s bullshit. Consent is the ongoing, enthusiastic presence of “yes,” not an absence of “no.” Consent is not being begged until you give in or forced into it because you’re frozen and can’t speak. Craig never got that lesson. Many people don’t and that’s why conversations around consent need to change.

Our couple’s counseling was through BetterHelp, so we had an app we used to message with our counselor. The last straw for me was a particularly rough exchange in early September our counselor later described to me as textbook gaslighting.

Craig had asked for clearer communication regarding what I was feeling and thinking, and I tried to give him that. Through our counseling platform I shared several messages that started with “I’m angry because…” or “I’m upset because…” to help Craig understand my perspective. Craig became angry and defensive about the way I was expressing my emotions. It felt like he was saying “Tell me what you’re feeling, but not like that.” My emotions, primarily my anger, challenged his perceived authority and control, further tarnishing my Cool Girl status.

My mom and I were having a “girls’ weekend” in Eau Claire to visit friends while this horrible conversation with Craig was happening in my pocket. All afternoon Craig

wanted me to explain my feelings but didn't like what I said. He kept telling me to take responsibility until I finally stopped answering because he was never going to accept what I was feeling, and I wanted to enjoy my dinner. My brother texted me to casually check on me, as he had been doing for a few weeks by sending memes. That afternoon he sent me one about being carded to buy liquor and how fast your I.D. is checked when your birth year starts with "19." I lightly complained about feeling old and behind on life because my younger coworker had gotten married that spring.<sup>28</sup>

Tony: Don't feel behind. Set your own pace.

Me: I know...but I know I want kids. I think that's why it's been harder to give up on Craig. It feels like I'm giving up on my chance to be a mom but I can't have his kids.

Tony: And I think you shouldn't. Ma wants to stay neutral. But I won't. If you stay with him I won't perform the wedding. If he's willing to do that to you what would he do to kids?

Tony: I don't throw the word around. But I legit hate him.

Tony: You're not even thirty. It's not like there's a clock running out.

Me: Thank you for saying that. It has been hard with ma staying neutral because it feels sometimes like she wants me to stay with him. I'm so angry with him and he won't take responsibility...

Tony: Throw his ass out.

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<sup>28</sup> I keep the conversations with my brother, so I can give you this snippet verbatim.

So, I did. Tony was the first person to actually be that direct in his view on the situation. Louise felt that way and was much less neutral than my mom, but even she was careful to not tell me what to do.<sup>29</sup> I needed the bluntness; I think I needed someone to mirror what I was feeling with a sharper focus. We had both been drinking during that conversation, but I'm glad it made my brother so direct. It was the push I needed, and I ended my relationship with Craig two days later.

It took him a while to retrieve his things from my house. As I collected everything he had left there, I boxed it up and stored it in the garage. A blender, clothes, deodorant, photos of us, his sex toys and restraints. My parents visited that weekend so I wouldn't have to face him alone. As I made coffee and watched my parents drink it that morning, I knew I couldn't face Craig at all. My mom offered to stay behind, sitting on the floor of the living room because I didn't want Craig's old futon in my house, and I didn't have a replacement yet.<sup>30</sup>

I showed my mom the box containing the engagement ring before my dad and I left to look for a couch while my mom stayed behind. It would have been obvious to most people that me not being there meant I didn't want to see or talk to Craig. You would have assumed that my mom would text me when he left (which she did), but Craig felt the need to text "it's safe for you to come back now" after he left. He then continued to message me over the next three months through various social media platforms. In November, a day or two after I deleted Craig from Facebook, I was on vacation with Louise. Craig sent me a friend request and texted to ask if I would call him to talk. When

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<sup>29</sup> She knows that I can be the type of person to do the opposite of what I'm told, and I think she wanted me to get there completely on my own.

<sup>30</sup> He, apparently, didn't want it either. The frame has been in my garage all winter and I contemplate burning it or hacking at it with an ax every other day.



I continued to not answer him, he started interacting with posts on the corporate social media accounts from the company I work for. He knew I would get the notification and see his name because I had grumbled to him about getting those notifications when we were dating.

When I saw his name in the corporate notifications, I immediately messaged the rest of the social media team, explaining I had seen his name but couldn't address it, and they sprang into action.<sup>31</sup> One of them silenced notifications from him so I wouldn't see them, and our team lead offered to block him from the corporate pages. She didn't want him to use those pages to start personal conversations. It never got to that level, that I'm aware of, but it means so much that they were willing to act so quickly to help protect me from those triggering situations.

I haven't heard from Craig since December 2021. I'm writing this while I'm weeks away from living through the first anniversary of him raping me. He gaslit me and made me feel terrible through the entire relationship but I let the dream of a white picket fence future obscure a carnival of red flags. I am strong enough to put myself first, but it took too much for me to reach my breaking point.

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<sup>31</sup> These women are basically superheroes.

## Deprived

I'm zapped, drained,  
     empty  
 Dissolved and spiraling  
 through the bathtub drain—  
 A mixture of water,  
     formerly whole human,  
     and bubble bath  
     before bed—  
 Some of me escapes  
     the drain and  
     simply disappears

## Melatonin

    Meditation  
         My mind in  
         so many knots.  
 Nothing helps me sleep—  
     not when sleeping  
     in this bed makes me  
     relive his hands  
     pushing my knees apart—  
 Putting my mind in knots  
     is the only way to  
 not fall apart in the daylight.

I wish scissors could open  
     these knots—  
     cut away the  
         memories  
     so I could relax—  
 It's a fine line between  
     unwinding and  
     falling to pieces  
     at 2 a.m.

**Snail's Pace**

Dear me—it has been a while  
It's been a while since the  
    gut-punch no-breath stomach-in-a-vice  
    feeling has hit—  
Memories of abuse don't fade fast enough—  
    that shit is hard to get over—  
    but it does evaporate

You will write for the rest of your life and my  
God it will save you!  
Each line a rung on your ladder until you are  
    higher than Icarus would have dared—  
    but you need that!  
You need the sun to melt your walls of ice  
    to let the people who care reach you

You dwell in the past so much and hold onto  
    everything letting the negative bury you—  
    blind you to the light  
You need to stop blinding yourself! I know  
    you're slower to change than a snail  
    riding on the back of a turtle—  
    but there's only so much you can take

## **My Story // Turning 29**

I'm unlearning so many of the behaviors and thought processes I developed while dating Megan and Craig. It was easier to move past what Megan put me through in part because it had been a shorter relationship and my body wasn't so violated, but mostly because Megan acknowledged what she did, and she apologized. She accepted accountability for her actions and it's only without that behavior from Craig that I recognize how validating it was for me to have Megan accept responsibility. While I never want to see or speak to Megan again, I'm not aggressively mad at her; I've found some peace with that part of my story.

I haven't completely found peace with the part of my story Craig featured in. As everyone recovering from trauma will tell you, there are good days and bad days. I'm fortunate enough to be in therapy with a counselor who has helped me focus on the good days.<sup>32</sup> She lets me excitedly babble about writing my thesis, celebrates the small victories with me, and she even helps me stay accountable on my fitness goals and self-care habits. Through talking to her, I've found ways to be vulnerable with myself and forgive myself for not being the perfect Cool Girl.

I've learned how to practice giving myself grace for not being where I thought I would be by this point in my life. I felt like my life blew up and I had lost my chance to create a family. For most of my life I thought I would be married and having kids in my mid-twenties and every relationship I had after turning 23 I approached with the assumption that it would be my last. The closer I got to the imagined deadline of "my mom was married and pregnant by this age," the more pressure I put on myself to make

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<sup>32</sup> We should all talk to a counselor. Therapy is the best.

the relationship work.<sup>33</sup> It seemed like I had to follow the “formula” that worked for my mom because that was my closest model for what life should look like and how I should behave.

When my high school classmates and college friends started getting married in their mid-twenties and I kept having “failed” relationships, I felt so far behind. I’ve always wanted to have a family but I wanted to have kids in my twenties so they would get more time with my parents than I got with my grandparents. I still want my kids to have time to know my parents, but I had to stop putting stress on myself to make it, my “ideal future,” happen by the time I turn 30. It can be foolish to set big life goals you have to achieve by any age, but especially to start a family by 30. There are people who absolutely make it work and that’s wonderful, but quite clearly that isn’t how my life is going to work and I needed to learn how to be comfortable with that.

I’m writing this in the weeks before I turn 29 in May 2022, and while I haven’t completely released the societally gifted (shoved down your throat?) fear of aging, I’m working every day to remind myself that it’s just a number. Leaving a toxic or unhappy relationship does not make me a failure. I do not need to be in a relationship to be happy; I know that’s something we’ve all heard at some point, and we might tell ourselves we believe it. You may have even said things like “Hell yeah, I *am* awesome and kicking ass on my own! I don’t need anyone!” but then secretly craved the validation of a relationship. Because being in a relationship means you are wanted. It means you are doing everything right; you are the Cool Girl. Being in a relationship feels like you belong, even if you end up feeling like you belong to someone else.

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<sup>33</sup> My mom turned 29 while pregnant with my older brother and she was 26 when my parents got married.

It's hard to break the cycle of seeking external validation. That's more advice you're given but never with the steps to make it happen. There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to being at peace with yourself. It's daily work and small actions and it's different for everyone. Therapy has been incredibly helpful for me because through the rambling I do with my one-person audience, I've found ways to forgive myself for not being perfect. I'm still angry and disgusted when someone else mentions Craig but it's not controlling my life. Instead, I'm celebrating myself for being strong enough to put me first and end a toxic relationship.

Some people try to rush your healing, thinking you should be further along the journey or that you need to let anger go before you're ready. They mean well because they just want to see you happy, but it can be hard to explain that you aren't at that stage yet. Sometimes it feels like you're disappointing them because you want to be further along in your healing journey too and why can't you just get over it? Through lots of tears, I've become comfortable saying I'll never be completely over it. I'm not going to shut down or lock away my grief. I'm going to let it simply exist; it won't control my life but I'm not trying to control my grief either. Each good day gets a little better and each bad day sucks a little bit less as time passes. There are some things that will always feel triggering and frustrating as I'm forced to remember what Craig did but simply existing is no longer triggering like it was in the first months after the rape. Telling people that I'm no longer engaged isn't upsetting or embarrassing anymore, it's freeing.

When I first ended things with Craig in September 2021, I didn't tell many of my coworkers, just the three women I'm closest to because I wanted them to know why I suddenly wasn't mentioning him anymore. I was embarrassed and I didn't want to

explain why things had ended, it felt too raw and I didn't have the words to explain it yet. By Thanksgiving, there were still quite a few people in my department who didn't know but it was easier for me to tell them that I wasn't engaged and intentionally hadn't said anything.<sup>34</sup> It was still embarrassing but not painful. By the time I told another coworker in January that I wasn't with Craig anymore, I felt happy to be saying it. It didn't make me sad or embarrassed; it was such a turning point to realize I actually felt good explaining that I had ended my engagement. I conquered my fear of my vulnerability.<sup>35</sup> I had power again!

I put a quote from Pinterest on the felt letter board I pass every day to remind myself I have power and I'm stronger than my trauma: I survive because the fire inside me burns brighter than the fire around me. So many people have told me since I ended things with Craig that I seem lighter or that I'm glowing. I dimmed my fire without realizing it to make myself into the person I thought I needed to be to keep Craig around. I have fire I didn't realize still existed. It took me months of patience and therapy to rekindle it, but it's there.

In early March 2022, I messaged my closest friends from college something along the lines of: I don't want to jinx it, but I think I'm actually feeling confident again. There isn't a perfect way to describe this feeling returning.

After Craig raped me, I was shattered. People say you enter survival mode after a traumatic event, but it isn't always clear what that looks like. I felt like I was in hyperdrive. I couldn't get out of fight or flight, especially when I was still trying to

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<sup>34</sup> The fact that no one gossiped this information tells you everything you need to know about my coworkers' quality of character and I'm so grateful they are my team.

<sup>35</sup> At least in part.

convince myself to work through it and stay engaged to Craig. Every time I saw him for the next four months was like being mentally assaulted. Every message I received from him in those months was another attack. I had trusted him so completely; I had told him about Megan's abuse and let him see every nook and cranny of who I was. I had let him into the metaphorical stronghold of myself and in an hour, he razed it. It took me four months of sorting through my rubble to find the strength to end the relationship. It took another three months of trying to rebuild with the rubble before I could let go of who I was before Craig.

It wasn't until after a meltdown two days after Christmas that I finally let it go. I was trying to hang a new security camera by my backdoor and dropped one of two small screws into the snow under the steps and I started sobbing.<sup>36</sup> I couldn't stop, I couldn't think, I could barely breathe; I sobbed in the shower until I had nothing left. Louise was blessedly understanding when I asked to reschedule plans so I could be empty and numb for a week. It was the first time I spent New Year's Eve alone in my entire 28 years of life, but I woke up in 2022 finally not feeling sorry for myself. I felt positive and hopeful again. I let go of the rubble I was clinging to and started to build a new stronghold. Well, less of a stronghold and more of a cottage in the woods filled with cats, tea, and baked goods, surrounded by gardens and soft sunlight.

Feeling confident again was like unlocking this cottage for the first time. It felt new but familiar and I want to enjoy every second of it because I'm afraid I'll lose it again. It feels so fragile, this returning confidence, because it was so easy for it to be

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<sup>36</sup> I should note that the cameras were to catch footage of a stalker who had been harassing me throughout the fall and I felt like I couldn't protect myself. December 26 is also my cousin Jenny's birthday; she very suddenly passed away in June 2021 and it was the first holiday season without her. There were a lot of emotions fighting through me that weekend.



taken from me without me noticing until it was too late. My confidence was gone after dating Megan and it didn't start to return until this spring.

The fear of losing my confidence again does make it harder to start dating again, though I am trying in the least intense way possible: casually using dating apps. It's a fairly safe way to put yourself out there. While there's no guarantee that you won't get ghosted or match with someone who makes you uncomfortable, you at least don't have to meet them face-to-face if "the vibes are off." When I told one of my coworkers I was back on dating apps and nervous, she told me she used to go into her dating-app dates reminding herself that the men she met needed to convince her to date them, not the other way around. It sounds so simple, but a first date is basically interviewing someone to see if they could be the ideal candidate for the position of Your Partner. We laughed about needing an elevator pitch for a first date, but her advice was given at the right time and in the right way to resonate with me. Why should I do all the work to convince someone to stay with me? I was finally comfortable simply existing, why would I want to convince someone to date me who didn't complement that comfort?

I'm not wasting my time and energy convincing someone they should be dating me and it's a daily practice as I begin actually dating again. I'm finally comfortable being alone. I'm happy with who I am, and I don't want to undo that work by becoming reliant on the validation that arises from feeling wanted. After talking with someone on a dating app or even taking the risk to go on a date, I ask myself whether that person is going to legitimately add value and meaning to my life or whether they're just satisfying a need to be wanted. Recognizing this also helps me ensure I don't fall back into dangerous people-pleasing habits to force a relationship. I am not upset by thought that a date might not

want to see me again and I'm not letting myself sacrifice any part of who I am to fit someone else's ideal of the Cool Girl. There are no guarantees in life, so why would I want to spend another moment of my time worry about being anything but my favorite version of myself?

Women are taught to crave external validation regardless of the discomfort it causes us, because that was the behavior modeled for us. Our value, we are led to believe, comes from serving a spouse and children. As I grew up, I rarely saw women taking control of their bodies; every choice, from the type and amount of makeup to the clothes worn, was designed to be pleasing to a male romantic interest. Women's magazines are full of advice on how to make a man fall in love with you. Every monthly issue has advice on getting a man's attention or articles about what made famous male actors fall in love and get married. It doesn't matter how many times I was told I could be anything and do anything with my life, the expectation to marry and start a family made it clear that was the only way I would be a valuable member of society.

This assumption on the way my life would have meaning and value is part of why it was so difficult for me to find the voice to say "no" to the way I was being treated by Craig and Megan. I am unlearning the cycle of serving others. Often, women are portrayed as selfish for choosing to pursue their own happiness. It should feel obvious to say that choosing our happiness is not selfish but is, in fact, crucial to our mental health. Yet I spent many years of my life trying to make my partners happy at my expense. I felt as though I lost my value when I wasn't dating someone, so I did everything I could to be the Cool Girl or Manic Pixie Dream Girl my partner wanted. As I become more comfortable with the idea of entering a relationship again, I don't want it to be my sole

focus. I am more than my relationship status, yet I know I have family and friends who will ask me if I'm dating anyone before they congratulate me on my professional growth. Fighting against these forced expectations for female fulfillment is a lifelong battle; I can't let myself get sucked into the cycle and hurt again.

I recently told my therapist that I feel like I walked through fire for the past year. It's a cliché but it was the best analogy I had at the time. To stretch the image a little further, I find power in saying this version of myself was forged in fire. I'm not impervious to pain, but the pain Craig put me through has shown me I have strength and resilience I didn't realize still existed. The pain is not pointless, and my trauma does not define me. The external expectations for my life do not control me. I am finally becoming my favorite self.

**Home**

After *Field Bling* by Ada Limón

Nights when it's warm  
or cool or cold or freezing,  
I walk to the middle  
of the road and lie  
down to stare at  
the stars. I feel the  
pavement grounding me  
as the stars pull  
me from myself.

I call them,  
*friends.*

I call them,  
*home.*

It's been over a year  
since I've considered dying.

It makes me feel  
insignificant.

Like all the  
Light has been  
pulled from my bones  
and is trying,  
so hard to find  
itself again.

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