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Mikhayla Dunaj

Western Michigan University, mikhayla.e.dunaj@wmich.edu

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They’re Not Crying Wolf, an Essay
Mikhayla Dunaj

As we loaded into the maroon minivan, he didn’t try to hide his expression. My boyfriend at the time made it clear that he wasn’t happy I had come to support him.

“It’s your fault that we lost. I always play badly when you come.”

I nodded, hoping his familiar rage like a white cap would subside into an ankle high tidal wave. His anger had that pattern, but I ignored it riding the wave every time he was upset, nearly drowning in the impact zone.

As I peered out the window, I felt his cold fingertips lace into mine. I was thankful I hadn’t taken too much heat—this time. I turned to smile at him, but met a cold stare.

“I’m sorry.”

Reciting my usual half-hearted, “You’re fine, babe,” I sincerely believed the disagreement was over—until his vengeful fist made contact with my left shoulder. Three times.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He used a mocking tone this time.

I began to question my conversation with his parents only hours before when we had dropped him off. From the front seat, his dad asked if I thought we had a good relationship, but his mom didn’t beat around the bush—she told me I should break up with him.

At the time, I played the noble roles of both comforter and confidant, insisting things were fine between their son and me while excusing his behavior. Looking back, I wish I would have pounced on the opportunity to leave when I had the chance. That was the night I first accepted I was in an abusive relationship.

How did you let this happen, Mikhayla? Did you do this to him?

At 14, I had ideas of what a good relationship entailed — respect and friendship being among those. According to Merriam-
Webster, friendship is “the kindness and help given to someone, a state of mutual trust and support between two beings.” I sincerely believed we had that. I thought I had chosen a man who loved God and saw me as beautiful. But that night, I realized we didn’t: I hadn’t. I couldn’t trust him not to hurt me, yell at me, blame me. We played tag when it came to support, but I always seemed to be it.

Domestic abuse, as described by the Department of Justice, is “any pattern of physical, sexual, or emotional behavior that one partner uses to gain advantage in a relationship.” I wasn’t aware of this definition at the time, but it described our relationship perfectly. My first love did not consist of hand holding at the beach watching sunsets. My first love was “playful” punches that were disguised as a game of Slug Bug, being called a bitch and many other names on a “good day,” and squeezing in “romantic” garage makeout sessions that left me feeling used—wanting to shed my sinning skin.

This is the part of the story where I wish I could tell you that I broke up with him. That I went home, got out of the car, and didn’t talk to him again. What a nice ending—I wish it were mine. When his parents dropped me off, I told him I loved him, forced a hug, and went inside. I laid in bed waiting for a text, praying it would read, “I shouldn’t treat you that way.” It never came, and with barely any words, he convinced me that I didn’t want to end the relationship.

Loneliness was my biggest fear. I decided I would rather stay in this unhealthy relationship than be single—regardless of what he thought I was worth. I know I am not the only one to make this mistake.

When you hear about abusive relationships, you look for body bruises. But without the temporary black and blue marks, do you understand that some punches bruise beyond the skin and into the soul? When you’re told that someone was sexually abused, you wonder how old they were when they were raped. But
rape isn’t the only act of sexual abuse. Have you ever considered that kissing every day for 367 days can lead someone to fearing intimacy? When you hear of “emotional abuse,” do you realize that there are trigger words that trap victims in their own minds with no intentions of setting them free?

No, I am not my own hero. I don’t look to myself for strength. I was not raped, or beaten until I bled. Because of this, I was afraid to speak up. I thought maybe it was a test of strength—the building of my tolerance. But I was wrong.

It has been nearly five years since he broke up with me and I am finally coming to terms with loving myself despite the emotional scars he left behind. I refused to trust any man for two years because of a boy. I still flinch whenever playful punches are thrown—and when anyone raises their voice, I still hear my ex telling me I’m worthless. My current boyfriend has no sure way of telling if a kiss will trigger me into thinking I’m just an object.

No, I was not raped, or beaten black and blue, but I am still a victim of abuse.