

shoulda coulda woulda
Anonymous, Blair School of Music

It started out clear and simple, like most typical high school stories. Brilliant blues, blushing pinks, and elegant greens swished by in layers of chiffon and silk as my best friend tried on gown after gown. She wasn't usually a dress type, but this year's prom was different—she was going with her boyfriend and was absolutely smitten. He seemed to do everything right; he sent her flowers, letters, gifts, jewelry, showered her with praise and affection. I'd never seen her smile more vibrantly.

No one saw it coming when the Boy dumped her a week before prom, leaving my best friend confused and alone with her dress and her two tickets and her tears. At her house on a school night, unable to do anything but sit on the cold floor with her as she sobbed over the letters he had given her, I wondered how everything had looked perfect on the outside.

I wish I had said, "I don't need to know everything."

But I couldn't help wondering what had really happened.

First mistake.

Only a few days later, on a beautiful sunny day, I ran into the Boy after school. Still curious about what had happened with my friend, I started a conversation as we lingered by the building. He laughed at my jokes and complimented me, friendly and polite, even as I steered the topic to his recently ended relationship. Then, mid-sentence, he stopped me, smiling just a bit too widely, and offered me a ride home. When I said I was fine, he persisted. He told me he was headed in that direction anyways and that it would be no problem.

I wish I had said, "I can walk."

But instead I looked into those hopeful eyes, told myself he was being kind, and giggled politely. "Sure, it's too hot today anyways."

Immediately after that ride, the Boy texted me, telling me he had problems with alcohol and sex and serious issues that 16-year-old me was not qualified to deal with. He told me he trusted me.

We hardly knew each other. My best friend was still crying herself to sleep over him. I knew it was wrong, but I pushed the guilt down and told myself he meant well, that he needed my help, that everything would be fine.

I wish I had said, "I'm not the right person to help you."

But instead I texted him a smile and said, "You can talk to me whenever."

Just days later, the Boy told me that he liked me—I was his "favorite" out of seven girls that he had his eyes on, he said. The guilt rose up in my throat again as I thought of my best friend, but

flattered by the attention, I swallowed it down, telling myself that everything would be fine because I didn't like him back. He told me he was a good guy; we could be friends, and he would respect those boundaries.

I wish I had known how wrong that was.

The texts became more frequent, more frantic, more frightening. We talked every day, and the Boy quickly opened up to me about anything and everything. He asked for every detail of my life, got upset when I did not respond within an hour, begged me to talk about my personal issues in return for the issues he had told me. One night, he would not leave me alone until I said I loved him. I knew it was wrong, but I convinced myself that I was being too hard on him; how could I blame him for anything when he struggled with so much? He was my friend. He was a good guy. He deserved this.

I didn't want to hurt him by saying no.

So instead I said, "I love you."

On the outside, my life looked flawless. I slaved over my image as the ideal student: the girl that never messed up, the girl that was always smiling, the girl that everyone loved. People called me Miss Perfect; they saw perfect grades, musical achievements, leadership positions, respect. What more could I want? But even though I gained the love and acceptance of my peers, I felt so incredibly alone. I spent so much time trying to preserve my image that I felt like no one really knew me. And now I had the Boy—someone who was always there, who listened to my problems and cared and put in effort for me. He asked me how my day was. He cheered on my successes. He wrote me sweet letters. He surprised me with cute things he'd bought me. He told me that he would do anything for me. I trusted him. I thought I was happy; I thought he made me happy. Even as "just friends," the exclusivity was almost intoxicating, and I couldn't bear the thought of losing it. But two people who are together only to fix each other just means that the relationship could not exist without problems.

When my few close friends warned me that it wasn't a good idea, that it was moving too fast, that it wouldn't end well, I wish I had said, "You're right."

I wish I had said, "Please help me."

But through my blurring lenses desperate for the Boy's love and attention, I told them to leave me alone.

And when they left, I had no one else except him to depend on.

When the Boy asked for my schedule and started waiting for me outside my classrooms to walk with me, I wish I had said, "I need space."

But I told myself that was rude, laughed politely, and said, "Thanks for the company."

When he looked me up and down in my black lace dress, eyes sliding over every inch of my body as he nodded in approval. When he told me he loved the way my butt looked in shorts. When he kept talking about how he wanted to sleep with me, even when I asked him to stop. When he pressured me to send pictures of myself as a “joke” and became angry when I didn’t comply.

I wish I had said “I need help.”

But instead I reminded myself of all the good things he had done for me and told myself, “He does it because he loves you.”

The more I pushed the guilt down, the more it rose in me, threatening to spill out as I fought to keep it concealed. I passively asked him to respect my boundaries, reminding him that we were “just friends,” throwing in some polite giggles so he wouldn’t think I was being mean. He promised me he would work on it. But our conversations were no longer friendly; he wanted more, and as he began to plan our future together, I still couldn’t bring myself to stop him. He spoke of sex, of marriage, of family—we weren’t even dating. The guilt in me began to morph into fear, and I tried being cold to him, thinking he would stop liking me even if I didn’t explicitly reject him. Instead, he became upset with me, telling me that I was being inconsiderate, that he needed me, that losing me would be the worst pain he’d ever felt. I apologized and told him I would be better. After all, if I lost him, I had no one. Nothing. I thought I was nothing without him, worthless without the validation he gave me. He made me feel like I depended on him, like he was the only one who loved me, who understood me. He was my only real friend. He did everything for me. He deserved my love.

Saying yes was better than saying no, right?

So I let him. I let him say he was going to marry me, let him talk about his sexual fantasies, let him be vulnerable with me and let myself be vulnerable with him in return. The more I said yes, the happier he became; he said I was helping to heal him, and he’d never been in a better place. I was happy that I was helping him. Sacrificing my emotional boundaries wasn’t so bad, I thought. I told myself as long as he didn’t push any physical boundaries, it was fine. I thought I was strong enough to deal with it.

But I was living a lie.

When I woke up numb on an overnight bus ride at 3 a.m., pitch dark except for the whites of the eyes staring at me, freezing cold except for the burning hand stroking my fingers—

I pulled back.

But looking into his hopeful face, wanting to please, realizing I could destroy a friendship, I smiled and said, “It’s okay.”

I wish I had said it’s not.

When my mom realized something was wrong, I refused to tell her. I was ashamed and in denial, still clinging to the shattered pieces of the image of the perfect daughter, the image of what I thought I should be.

And then I lashed out at her in defense, all of my bitterness and fear pouring out of me as I accused her of not trusting me, of not loving me. She asked for my phone. I waited, alone, numb and trembling, as her door shut. I knew every word she was going to read, every lie, every disgusting conversation, every “I love you.”

After an eternity, she called me into her room. I braced myself for yelling, for punishment, for anger. I knew I deserved it. But the pain of being hit with every object in that room would have been nothing compared to the pain of what I saw: her tears, glistening in the soft light. I had hurt her. For the first time, I let the guilt that I had hidden for the past eight months rise up and come crashing over me, and as I burst into tears, I finally said, “I’m sorry.” An apology for lying to her and to myself.

That night, I cut ties with the Boy. Firmly, with no polite giggles, with no fine print. I thought that would fix everything. But things didn’t get better. Looking into the mirror at my tear-stained face, remembering where he had looked at me, feeling cold fingerprints where he had touched me, I wanted to tear my skin off. I blamed myself, hated myself. I let it happen. I didn’t say no. I didn’t say stop. I didn’t set boundaries. I told myself I was a horrible, cruel, revolting person, thinking that somehow that would atone for my wrongdoing. Worst of all, as much as I tried not to, I missed him. He knew everything about me, and now he was gone. I was truly alone now, ashamed and hollow, crying empty tears, praying empty prayers as I struggled to forgive.

Forgive who?

I didn’t even know.

I told myself I was overreacting, that there were people in worse situations than mine, that it was fine because I never slept with him. It’s so easy to try to simplify situations into black and white—it’s either a helpless girl being forced screaming into the bedroom, or it’s not. It’s the gray areas that aren’t discussed. I can never get those eight months of my life back, can never take those words back into my mouth, can never get back those pieces of me that I gave to him.

Under different circumstances, maybe my situation would have ended worse than it did. And knowing I didn’t have the strength to say no is terrifying. Knowing I had thought consenting was easier than disappointing is terrifying. I made mistakes; I didn’t confront. I was cold to him in an effort to get him to stop. I was blinded by my need for validation, and I let it go too far. But even if I had said no, would he have stopped persisting? We can never know. It’s these gray areas that make value judgments hard. I’m not here to say that it was all my fault or all his fault or that I can solve the world’s problems because I don’t have any answers. I’m simply here to tell my story in hopes that it might resonate with one person, two people, a hundred people out there, and they will know that they are not alone.

Words are founded on trust. The reader of this story must trust that I am telling the truth. Betraying that trust means that I, the author, have manipulated and wronged the audience. In the same way, the tale I spun for the Boy was empty, only pretty words and broken promises. I wronged him, and I wronged myself. I wish I could say I'm healed. I wish I could say I don't still blame myself. I wish I could say I'm stronger from the experience. I wish my story ended the way it does in movies—with clarity and closure. And maybe someday it will.

But instead, I still wish I could go back and say, "I don't love you."

I wish I had said "stop."

I wish I had said "no."

Shoulda, coulda, woulda.

But I didn't.