

Listen

By Sophie Corbissero

For all survivors who fought tirelessly to find peace and comfort.

For all victims who never received the help they needed.

And for myself, who at twenty thought she would never escape the cycle.

March 2024

As a senior in college, I've spent more money on self-help books such as *Why Does He Do That?* and *It's My Life Now* than I have on all of my textbooks for the last two semesters. In the past year, I've spent more time going through 500 days' worth of pictures, texts, and videos than I have sleeping or eating. In January of 2023, my entire world was seemingly flipped on its axis, leaving me more vulnerable and lost than ever before. That's the thing about abuse and trauma. They don't wait for preparation. They sneak up on you, often in the shape of someone you love. I still don't know exactly when I realized that's what happened; that what I experienced was abuse. At first, I struggled to call it that, and most of my memory has dissipated from the initial healing process, despite it only being a year ago.

What I do remember is this: the pure adrenaline that coursed through my body when walking out on him and our relationship. The ringing of the signaling tone that played twenty times over as I kept calling my mom to tell her, "He scares me," to stop myself from going back this time. Going to my best friend's house the night of the breakup and telling her, "It's for the better." The combination of fear and validation I felt when two separate therapists told me I should look into getting a protection order against him. Being able to openly admit that he had strangled me, without being told it was deserved. The disgust I felt when the magistrate working my case asked me why I would go back to him if he were harming me, suggesting that maybe he wasn't.

If you're wondering the same thing, I don't blame you. Maybe it's a lack of education. A willful ignorance. A tinge of distrust towards me as an author and a person. Whatever your reasoning, I hold no resentment against you. There comes a time in every survivor's healing journey when they realize they don't care who does and doesn't believe them. Telling you that one in every three women in America will experience intimate partner violence won't change your mind. Reading statistics on the long-term effects of strangulation won't shock you to your core. But humor me for a moment. Allow my experience to be a glimpse into what a relationship like this can look like. Allow me to serve as the face of one of those one in three women. As a student, a sister, a daughter, a friend, a survivor— a person.

I stayed because I had never experienced healthy love in a relationship. I stayed because I thought he meant what he said when he promised me he would get help. I stayed because I thought the way he spoke to me was just his accent, making him sound rude. I stayed because his treatment felt familiar. I stayed because I loved him. I stayed because I was convinced it was my fault. I stayed because I couldn't bring myself to leave.

I am more than a number, I am more than a statistic, I am more than my story, and I am sure as fuck more than a survivor. But these are also all things that make me who I am. I share

these intimate details with you to serve as a glimpse into a portion of my life. No ulterior motive. No life lesson. No happy ending. Just a twenty-two-year-old girl attempting to process her experience by making it the topic of her thesis.

November 2021

My legs lie strewn across the brown plaid couch and over Wade's lap. His house is always cold, which is a great excuse for me to borrow some of his hoodies. Today I decided to wear my favorite one of his— a worn-in powder blue and eggshell crew neck that is four sizes too big for me. The *Gremlins* quietly play throughout the room, and I can't help but giggle at the outlandish jokes being made on screen. It has been two months of this. Spending every day and night at Wade's house, getting to know one another after a mutual friend of ours introduced us to each other through Greek life.

Wade's hands run carelessly up and down my lower legs while he intently watches the movie. His head turns towards me, and I am met with a toothy smile. I giggle as he moves my legs off his and starts crawling toward my face. His hands lightly trace my sides as he inches closer, and a snort escapes my mouth. He knows how just the slightest touch can make me laugh. I've never been with someone who makes me feel so comfortable around them, and I'm glad I can experience this with him.

Our faces are inches apart. I love it when I get to be this close to his face. It may sound wrong, but for every man I've dated before him, I could find something I didn't like about them. I don't know what it is about Wade, but I can't seem to find a single fault in him, physically and as a soul. His right hand cups my cheek, and his bright green eyes dart between my mouth and eyes. As if I could disappear under too much pressure, he places a gentle kiss against my lips with a grin.

"Have any plans in mind for tonight?" Wade questions, his Boston accent breaking through. Even though he's been in Ohio for three years, his accent has only slightly lessened.

"Not that I'm aware of," I say, twisting his dark curls between my fingers. "Unless you have something in mind."

"Hmm, well, lucky for you, I was thinking about getting dinner at Benchmark tonight."

I slightly sit up, "Benchmark? Are you sure? I mean, that place is really expensive, Wade."

“I know, but I want to do something nice for you. I thought we could go sit on the hill and look at the stars after. Didn’t you say that was your ideal date? Maybe you could even read me some of the writing you’ve been working on.”

I feel my face getting hot and dimples forming on my cheeks. His eyes stay locked on mine, gleaming with hope and comfort. *He was so gentle until he wasn’t.*

“That sounds great, Wade. I’d love to.”

As time passes, it becomes increasingly more difficult to remember any positives from our relationship. That’s normal, people tell me. After the first few months together, each loving and gentle memory I had with him became clouded by the fight we had leading up to it.

Dinner dates at Biaggi’s, where we laughed more than we ate, are forever stained by the car rides home where he’d say I was the dumbest person he’d ever met. The nights he twirled me around his living room, giggling as we allowed the music to take control of our bodies, have been replaced with memories of him telling me he wished he could bash my skull into the wall. Meaningful dates, full of stargazing and deep talks about the universe, are muddled by the explosive arguments that prompted the special moments.

I find myself questioning whether any gentle experience with him was real— if I even know what merciful love looks like. I determined that every aspect of the man I thought loved me was fake. The only real thing about him seems to be his rage.

June 2022

The back screen door creaks open, then slams shut. Large feet sporting black Jordans appear at the top of the steps—the rest of the body stays hidden. My eyes dart over to the metallic digital clock in front of the television. Red numbers project **3:12 PM**, and a bitter cacophony of bile and saliva plays against my taste buds. *He left for work at eight. He shouldn’t be back until four. Why is he here? Did I do something?* Our puppy, Gizmo, bolts from across the basement and onto my lap, shivering in his curly brown coat as if it were -15°. I stroke his back, focusing on each mahogany ringlet, the hairs moving like a wave over his small body.

Each step thuds down the stairs with a heavier weight than the next, and resentment and disgust seem to seep out of his shoes and spill onto the carpet. There are nine steps. I know this like I know there are two copies of *Jesus of Nazareth* that his grandmother gave him under the television. Like I know there are four holes in the walls of his basement’s living room. Like I know there are twelve total bears on his Grateful Dead poster. Like I know there are eight missing panels of fake brick on the wall across from the back door.

I hear Wade's final step. His presence stimulates the pressure of five tons against my chest: a feeling I never knew existed until meeting him, that I became all too familiar with. An ache forms in my lower back from the hard floor beneath me, and I shift my weight against the matted rug. Moving to the couch would be more comfortable, but it would mean engaging with him. Recently, I have been trying to stay silent and docile in hopes that it will limit ridicule.

"I'm fucking done," Wade grunts, walking past me and to his bedroom.

Gizmo cocks his head up at me, flowing waves of comfort into my heart through his shimmering hazel eyes. I stroke his shaky football-sized body, but I think my hand is shaking even more than he is—that his body isn't shaking at all, only I am.

Breaking glass pierces my ears from the other room and stops my heart. I lift my hand from Gizmo's back and unconsciously bring it to my chest, waiting to feel a heartbeat again. The stabbing against my organs builds as my heart starts to beat again, this time, twice the pace and strength. A pang shoots down my right arm, and any saliva in my mouth has dried and left it sticky with worry. Another bang comes from two rooms away—the familiar crunching of drywall breaking against a fist. Gizmo gets up to hide in his kennel, leaving me to fight my own battle.

This was a common practice for us. Wade would come in angry, most times about nothing in particular, and I'd try to stay as neutral as possible to gauge his next actions. He is the type of person who could watch a mother playing with her newborn baby and still find a way to call her a whore. It wasn't always like this. I couldn't tell you when everything changed—when he turned from attentive and doting to belligerent and venomous. It was so gradual and meticulously planned that I didn't notice it at first. I thought the outbursts were just mood swings. I figured the lack of emotional intelligence stemmed from his father's behaviors toward him as a child. I tried so hard to be understanding and patient with his emotions that I lost sight of my safety in thralls to my love for him.

"I'm going to *fail* my class. Why the fuck are you just sitting there?"

I lift my head. The black Champion crewneck he sports is more wrinkled than he would normally allow himself to wear. His gray Nike sweatpants look too small for his long legs. His right hand is red and pulsating, but not bleeding. He reeks of contempt and desperation all at once. I just want to help him.

"Tell me what happened. Let's see what we can do."

Spite-filled eyes bore deeper into my skull. With one eyebrow raised and his mouth agape, he inches closer to me.

“Why are you on the ground? You’re not a prisoner. There’s a couch right behind you.”

“I was just playing with Gizmo so I—”

Wade kicks the wall beside me.

“Are you deaf? I said I’m going to *fail*. Get the fuck up. *Now*.” He hisses down at me, his tall frame seeming more like a shadow than a recognizable person. I place one unsteady hand on the floor beside me and start to lift myself from my seated position.

“Stop taking so long,” he says as he digs his fingers into my right arm and yanks me up mid-air. “Why can’t you just listen?”

I wrap my arms around myself, and Wade starts pacing around the living room. “There’s nothing that can fix this. I’m screwed no matter what.”

I unintentionally put space between us, stepping a few feet to the right to get out of his orbit, allowing my body to take care of what my heart can’t. Small winces are sent down my spine with each gnaw I take against the inside of my cheek. Metallic saliva swishes over my tongue and down my throat as I attempt to swallow the saltiness of it all.

“I already told my mom this stupid-ass professor doesn’t accept late work. It’s a fucking summer class, why would late work matter?” he exhales on his third lap around the room. A tinge of hope spreads through my chest. *It’s just a late assignment. This can be fixed. I can fix this.*

I release the breath of air I had been holding and feel the weight release from my body. “No, no, it’s ok. We can definitely fix this. Just email your professor and explain—”

Wade’s head twists in my direction, and within four strides, he is in front of my face. Rapidly, his hand comes towards my chest. The force of a head-on collision slams against my diaphragm, and any remaining air escapes me in an involuntary grunt. The back of my head smacks against the wall and embeds tiny pieces of vinyl into my scalp. Waves crash onto the shores of my eardrums, and a fisherman’s net gets caught in my throat, eliciting a guttural groan. Wade’s hand stays pressed firmly against my chest as I look up at him, tears and sweat doing a treacherous dance down my face. A gasp comes from my mouth as I suck in all of the air I had been missing these past few seconds, and I can feel blood coursing through my body once again.

“Didn’t you hear me? He doesn’t accept late work. You need to *listen*,” he shouts with the same wrath his father had for him.

“You’re hurting— you... You’re hurting me, Wade.”

Loud footsteps from upstairs echo above our heads as two of Wade’s frat brothers make their way through the kitchen, just nine feet above us. As they approach the back door, I hear them pause for a moment. Neither Wade nor I moves, and I am still being pressed against the wall, unsure if I’m imagining the wetness on the back of my head or if it is blood from the impact. They make their way down four steps to exit the door directly in front of us, and I pray that they will turn back to stop this. *What are you doing? Get your hands off of her! Wade, you need to calm down.*

But that doesn’t happen. His roommates turn to one another, whisper something inaudible, and head back out the door, leaving me alone with the monster I love. Wade backs a few inches from my face but keeps his hand firm against my body, “I wasn’t trying to hurt you.”

The already overflowing water from my eyes starts to run like the Maumee River. My brow furrows in a mixture of anger and sorrow, and my fingers tingle.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” he says again, this time with softness in his words. A false remorse in his eyes. “I really didn’t. God, I didn’t, I’m so sorry.” His hand releases from my chest and reaches around to my back, pulling my body into his. A cocktail of coffee and lavender permeates my nostrils as he pulls me tighter against him. The same hand that once pressed me against the wall, the same hand that injured me, now strokes the back of my bruised and potentially bloody head. The pain starts to dwindle the longer he holds me here, and a few sobs escape my dried and cracked lips.

I wanted to say, “Nothing gives you the right to put your hands on me.” To scream, “Get the fuck off me, Wade.” I wanted to stand up for myself— to get myself out of this situation. Looking back now, there are so many things I would have done differently. I would have told my friends. I would have asked his roommates for help. I would have run out of his back door and never looked back. But like most people in abusive relationships, I didn’t want the relationship to end, just the abuse. Many victims still love their perpetrators. I know I did. I would have done anything to stop his rage. Anything to be healthily loved by him.

I default to, “Please don’t do that again. It scares me.”

“I won’t,” he says, kissing the top of my scalp, “I promise, I won’t. I love you, Sophie.”

I slowly lift my head from his chest and look back at the wall, seeing two new panels missing. Shifting my weight, I feel small shards of sharp vinyl pressing against the heel of my left foot. *There are ten missing panels on the fake brick wall.*

I know that this house will forever be haunted by these moments. I just hope it isn't also haunted by me.

July 2022

"It's not fucking funny, Sophie."

"I never said it was," I say with a mouth full of a chicken sandwich.

Wade's eyes grow dark and narrow as he glares down at the bag in my lap.

Life is far from perfect with him, but it is bearable, and I love him. It's mainly little things. Like the other day, when he took my phone from me so I couldn't use my map. I'm not the best with directions, and instead of helping me, he made me drive around aimlessly for twenty minutes before screaming that I'm stupid for not knowing how to get home. I can count on one hand how many times he's pushed me into walls and punched holes next to me. He's a bit controlling— I'm not allowed to shower without him, and I have to stand for thirty minutes before getting into bed with him to let the lotion on me dry down first. I can only hang out with my friends without an argument if it's a sorority-sanctioned event. It's not ok, and I know that, but the pain isn't anything I'm not able to handle. It's nothing we can't get past. He just needs help.

I reach further into the Rally's bag and pull out a hot dog with a grin on my face. It is 12:10 AM, and we've been drinking for the past seven hours. The only thing that's been on my mind for the last five has been getting food. Within the same second the hot dog leaves the bag, Wade reaches down and throws it against the wall beside us. I rarely know what Wade is mad about when fights start. I stopped feeling the need to ask what he is upset about recently, as this has become a pattern. His accusations and threats will explain it all anyway. I sit there in silence for a minute before giving a half-chuckle.

"I'm sorry, did you want that?" I question.

"God, you're like a fucking toddler, I swear. How are you going to sit in my house with that smug look on your face and act like you aren't a fucking whore?"

"What?" I can feel the chicken sandwich crawl back up my throat as this is said. I've never done anything disloyal throughout our entire relationship, even when he threatened to have

sex with someone else. I start replaying the past 24 hours in my head to try to understand what upset him.

One thing you must understand about Wade is that no matter who you were to him, he was able to make you feel like you were wrong. Like you were the problem. For over half of a 12-hour car ride, Wade tried to convince me that *Noah's Ark* comes from the New Testament and not the Old. That I was uneducated and needed to not speak on things I had no knowledge of. This went on until I decided to look it up myself when pulling over to get gas. Instead of apologizing for being wrong, he started a new fight about me not trusting his word and searching for the answer behind his back.

"Come on, Sophie. Are you really gonna play the innocent act? You're a fucking whore. Were you not just flirting with Ryan in front of my face? Because I know that's what I saw."

Wade has made some outlandish allegations before, but this makes my mind do backflips. Just twenty minutes prior, Wade, his roommates, and I all stood on the rainy sidewalk deciding if we were done for the night or going out to the bars. When his friend Ryan showed up, I said, "Hey, I hope you've had a good Fourth of July!"

"I just said hello to him? Seriously, I'm not doing this right now. I'm drunk, you're drunk, just give it up. I didn't flirt with him, and we both know that." I'm not sure where my new confidence is coming from, as I rarely stand up to Wade, but I'm proud of myself for it.

The left corner of Wade's mouth twitches, and his eyebrows contort. Each vein on his arms protrudes and pulses, and I feel his resentment radiating. It's suffocating.

"Own up to it."

"This is so fucking dumb, Wade." I protest.

Before I can react, his hovering body bends down, and his right knee rests against the couch beside me. He wraps his right hand around my throat, and my eyes widen and start to well up. The air in my body escapes with no return in sight. I try to allow his eyes to meet mine, to try and find some compassion or regret in them, but there is nothing other than pure repugnance.

"You're gonna fucking listen to me when I'm speaking to you."

With eyes narrowed, he keeps a steady pressure on my neck, incrementally getting tighter. Any time the pressure loosens, it immediately comes back tenfold as he remembers what

made him angry in the first place. My limbs feel pulled to the ground, and my eyes start to flutter. I don't know what to do. I don't want to hurt him, but I worry he won't stop hurting me.

Instinctually, intrinsically, I use the last of my strength to claw at his neck. Pieces of grayed skin get caught underneath my fingernails as I try to claw my way free. My legs flail in a sad attempt to kick him, which is virtually impossible from my position under his body. The harder and deeper I scratch, the more pressure he releases, until his hands are fully off my throat.

“What the FUCK, Wade? What in God's name makes you think you can put your fucking hands on me? What is WRONG with you?” I attempt to scream through vocal cords that were just strangled. I can't even tell how much of it was decipherable from the piercing ringing that is whooshing between my ears.

When I was in this relationship, I had no clue it was abusive. I thought we were toxic—maybe unhealthy, but abusive? No. Wade would never do that to me, I'd tell myself. I believed he was difficult and mean and had his outbursts, but I didn't see anything he did as abusive. Even this act of attempted murder. I knew it was wrong for my partner to put his hands on me, but he was drunk, his emotions were high, and I wasn't listening. Excuse after excuse, he continued to get away with his behavior, partially because I let him. Because I was trying to convince myself he was a good person, more than I was protecting myself.

My vision is still bouncing when I stand up and try to push him. I throw my hands in his direction and attempt to slap his arms to back him up, but I don't have enough energy to win. Two large hands grab my shoulders, and I am quickly thrown down to the floor. My left elbow smacks against the wooden coffee table, scraping off a large stretch of skin. I can feel his rage blanket my body as he stands over me, watching me lie on the floor. I grip the edge of the wood to stabilize myself and shakily rise from the ground.

I shoot a confused glare at him, still searching for an ounce of emotion other than contempt. I try to make two strides towards the steps before Wade takes his arms and wraps them around me, shushing in my ear to try and calm me down. I protest a combination of *stop* and *get off of me* as I try to push him away.

“Sophie, stop it. I'm sorry, ok? I was just trying to get you to listen because you were laughing. I don't think I hurt you that bad. You just need to calm down; you're not acting sane. *I'm* hurting now because you're acting like I meant for this to happen.”

Maybe he didn't. Maybe it really was all a mistake. I *was* laughing. I wasn't paying attention. I didn't ask why he was upset. I wasn't taking him seriously. All of that may be true,

but I know I can't stay here right now, and the more upset I act, the more he's going to watch over me. I need to get out of this house.

"Ok..." I start. "Ok. You're right. I know you didn't mean to hurt me. I'll calm down." I try to come up with the fastest excuse I can: "Can you just grab me some water?"

Wade hesitates, his grip loosening.

"We've been getting drunk all day, and now my throat hurts. *I just want some water.*"

He releases the breath he was holding in and starts walking towards the basement's kitchen. I know I don't have much time. The bottles of water are just on the floor, and I have ten seconds to make it out. My legs move me without my brain telling them to, and before I realize it, I am running out his back door. I can hear Wade behind me, yelling for me to stop as he follows.

It feels like I have been running for fifteen minutes by the time I make it to my car across the street. I quickly get in through the driver's side and slam the door shut, locking all other doors in the car behind me. Wade meets the car and yanks the passenger door handle in the very second I hit the lock button, successfully keeping him at a distance from me. His hands are pressed against the passenger window, and he crooks his neck trying to see me through the glass like a character out of Scary Stories To Tell In The Dark.

"Sophie, stop it and let me in the car. I swear to God, open the door right now or this is gonna get bad."

In a fit of fear, anger, and intoxication, I turn my key in the ignition and allow the headlights to illuminate the street. Wade pushes himself off the grey side door and makes his way in front of my car, his hands pressed against the hood.

Multiple times in our relationship, I was drunkenly forced into a car and sent home with equal amounts of liquor and blood coursing through my veins. It's not something I like to admit, and although I never hurt anyone, I can still feel the blood of what could have been dripping from my fingers. The thought I could have unintentionally hurt someone still makes me nauseous to this day. Those 2 AM fights where he would scream that I was a whore for smiling at the bartender, or a bitch for saying hello to my friends before I said it to him. When he would haphazardly throw my belongings into a bag and tell me to get the fuck out of his house. Where I would beg to sleep on the couch so I didn't have to drive while drunk, only for him to kick me out anyway.

I didn't know what to do. He was trying to keep me there and make sure I didn't tell anyone. I didn't understand it at the time. I wasn't going to tell anyone in the first place; I just needed time away from him to feel safe. I truly believed that even though things could get bad between us, he would never intentionally hurt me. I believed that it was a bad day— a bad week, a bad year. That our relationship and his anger were something I could help him with. That leaving the relationship was abandoning the person who loved me when he needed me most.

I throw the gear shifter into reverse and start backing my car down the residential street. Wade runs at my car, keeping pace as I drive in reverse. I slam on the brakes, pausing to collect my thoughts. My eyes scan the area, taking in every obstacle in its way. To my left, there are trash cans lining the curb. To my right, there are parked cars. Wade bangs on the car hood. I close my eyes, trying to block out the muffled sounds. *Breathe in, hold for four, and breathe out.*

“How are you gonna get out of here, Sophie? There's nowhere to go!”

In a panic, I switch the gear from reverse to drive and swerve around him, hitting a curb and a trash can as I swerve back into the road. I drive two minutes down North Main Street to get to the bowling alley's parking lot so I can collect myself. Piercing wails escape my shaky lips as I try to process what I just experienced. For the first time in our relationship, I sent a truly honest text to a friend.

Me: Wade just put his hands on me. 12:47 AM

Me: He choked me and grabbed my face cause he was angry. 12:47 AM

Me: And kept pushing me and wouldn't let me leave. 12:47 AM

Me: My fucking throat hurts. He choked me hard. 12:47 AM

I drop my phone into my lap and bring tremored hands to my face as I allow a guttural scream to escape my diaphragm.

I didn't know what to do. As stupid and childish as it may sound, I didn't want to lose him— but I knew I couldn't keep experiencing his wrath. Sending those texts was not only my first step towards leaving but also my first cry for help. Unfortunately, the friend I decided to say this to already knew about Wade's antics. I needed help, but I wanted it from someone who also didn't find his behavior *that* bad. Someone who wouldn't judge me when I ultimately chose to stay with him.

Vanessa: Please come back Soph 12:59 AM

Vanessa: Where are you 12:59 AM

In my head, I was always great at making Wade feel guilty, and he was great at taking accountability for his vile actions. I was able to point out his unhealthy behaviors and get genuine responses for the things he'd done. I was skilled at standing up for myself, and he always listened and understood. He was much nicer to me there than he was in real life.

January 2023

January was the month of Vicks VapoRub and Instant Rice. By the second week of the month, I found myself with a diagnosis of a sinus infection, an upper respiratory infection, an ear infection, and strep throat all at once. Aside from winter break, it was the first time in three months that I wasn't ridiculed or threatened for wanting to sleep at my own house. The illnesses made me feel free. My thoughts started to become my own again— for three whole nights, I didn't have to do everything on someone else's schedule.

I did my homework instead of watching him play video games. I called my friends instead of being a bystander to his conversations with his roommates. I woke up at 10 AM without the fear of being berated for sleeping in “too long.” It was the gentle reminder I needed of what life could be like without Wade in it. On day three of my concoction of illnesses, Wade asked me to come over for lunch. The distance made me more inclined to say yes. Being away made me think things were getting better because we couldn't fight. So I went. I helped him make lunch— kielbasa and rice. A fight started over rice. I was having a breakdown over rice. Our relationship ended over rice. That's what he would tell you at least. That everything blew up over a box of rice, and to an extent, it did.

The box of 10-minute Instant Rice sits atop the fake granite countertop. I slide through the kitchen as I grab measuring cups and water to make the side dish. *Put equal amounts of water and rice in the pot. BOIL water and rice, reduce heat to medium. Cover and simmer for 10 minutes or until water is absorbed, then fluff.* I move from the sink to the stove to place the pot of rice and water onto the burner. Wade shoots a disgusted look my way.

“Oh my God— what are you *doing*? Are you fucking dumb? You have to boil the water first!”

My head shifts between the pot and Wade's face two times before landing on him. Each vein in his neck is pulsating, and the knuckles of his right hand are milky. I look back at the pot, and then at the box of rice in my hand.

“Read the box, Wade.”

“What?”

I hand the box to him and show him the instructions. “Here, read.” Wade’s spite-filled eyes run over each word on the box, taking in the instructions.

I let out a muffled, “Yeah, exactly.”

Wade slams the box against the countertop and starts tearing it into pieces. “Don’t you dare fucking get an attitude with me, Sophie. No. Now I’m not apologizing, fuck this.”

He storms into the basement, leaving me at the stove alone. The kielbasa he had been frying pops around the pan in its oil and seasoning bath. The water next to it starts coming to a roaring boil, and I make sure to reduce the heat and cover the pot. I tell myself it’s not worth the fight. That even though I know I’m right, dealing with another outburst isn’t worth the satisfaction. Wade stomps heavily on his way back up the steps, refusing to make eye contact with me.

“Look, I shouldn’t have gotten an attitude. I’m sorry,” I say.

“No. I don’t want to apologize, and neither do you, so I’m not doing this. I don’t accept that.”

Wade pauses in the kitchen, still refusing to make eye contact with me. I want to run across the room and grab him, tell him the constant fighting is stupid. That no matter how much he’s hurting me, I love him and want everything to be ok. I am supposed to move into this house with him in four months officially. By then, all of his roommates will move out, and it will be just the two of us, alone. It scares me to think about what that will look like if things don’t change.

“No, I’m serious. It was unnecessary of me. I’m sorry.”

He turns his head towards me before shaking it side to side with a scoff. “You act like a Goddamn child, you know that?”

The following ten minutes were full of screams on his end and pleas on mine. What exactly was said during that interaction has escaped my memory. I remember begging him to meet me halfway. I remember him telling me I was overdramatic. I remember getting in my car and leaving. I remember coming back within two minutes because I realized I had left my laptop. Because I knew deep down I couldn’t keep doing this anymore. The final nine minutes of our relationship are forever embedded in my brain. Not because those final moments were memorable, but because I have them recorded. Because I wanted to play it back for him when he had calmed down, so he could hear how erratic he was being. Our relationship ended as follows:

“I’m scared of you,” I sob.

“Ok?” He says plainly.

“I am Wade. You’re screaming at me all the time—”

His tone takes a nosedive, and he huffs. “If you don’t want to get screamed at, don’t give me fucking attitude.” He turns on his heels towards my face, an island serving as a blockade between our bodies. Pointing a finger in my face, he spits, “Respect me. You don’t fucking respect me!”

“I immediately apologized.”

“NO, you didn’t!”

“Yes, I DID!” I shriek.

“You didn’t. You did not apologize,” he says, emotionless once again.

“I did! I did apologize, Wade. I apologized for getting an attitude with you the second you came back up those steps. You constantly treat me like I’m fucking stupid. I mean, you just yelled at me over following instructions on a box because YOU don’t know how to make rice and thought I was wrong. And you can’t even apologize for that? That hurts me.”

“Go text my mom about it then.”

I shake my head and slap the island. “What are you *talking* about? Why can’t you just apologize to me? You broke your phone into pieces yesterday over *nothing*. You even told me you smashed it for no reason— just that you were angry. Can’t you see there is a problem?”

He takes a breath. “You always have to tell me how mean I am and how awful I am. Why can’t you ever take any accountability?”

“Wade, just *stop*. I don’t want this. I’m worried about you, I just...I don’t get it. I’m just trying to help you.”

The buzzing of the overhead light fills the heavy air of silence between us. Wade stands with his back turned towards me as he ignores the damage he created while collecting bottles of seasoning from earlier. I stand across from him, waiting for a response, panting through tears.

“You’re really gonna act like this over rice?”

Every nerve ending in my body feels hot and tight. “It’s not over rice. You just screamed at me and called me crazy— and then you *continued* to scream at me for over ten minutes after that. You’ve been nothing but mean to me for the past couple of days, Wade. It’s not over fucking rice; it’s over the way that I’m spoken to and treated.”

Wade turns over his right shoulder to look at me from the stove before giving a disinterested, “What?”

“What aren’t you understanding?” I shriek.

“I don’t understand anything you’re saying. It’s hard to understand when you’re crying.”

Despite knowing this isn’t true, I repeat myself.

“Sophie, what would you do if I started crying when you— what if I started bawling my eyes out after every argument?”

“That’s not what I do, Wade.” I sob.

“Ok, so I’m gonna start bawling my eyes out every time you feel like I’m being mean, or you feel like your feelings are hurt a little bit. I’m gonna cry out of default now. How would you like that?”

“Why are you doing this? I’m trying. I’m still trying.”

The rubbery flop of a spatula against the stove reverberates throughout his kitchen. The buzzing has quieted as a surge of energy switches the heat on, and the only present sound is the sharp inhale and exhale of my sobs. I continue as he stands in silence.

“I’m not standing here saying that you’re this horrible person. I’m telling you I’m worried about you because I don’t know why you do this.”

Wade whips his head toward me and almost growls, “No, you did tell me I’m horrible multiple times.”

“Oh my god.”

“I counted. Four times, Sophie. Four times. I keep a tally now, isn’t that *crazy*?”

“How are you trying to make me the villain in this situation?”

He spins back on his heels toward the cabinets next to the stove and opens a door. The fleeting moments of silence are filled with the clinking of ceramic plates against each other as he puts his dishes away.

“I’m not, I was just correcting your statement. You said you didn’t call me horrible, and I said you did. That’s a factual statement. What the FUCK are you even trying to argue about?”

“I don’t want to argue about anything. I’ve been saying that this whole time.”

Wade faces me once again. “I just don’t see why you have this hierarchy over feelings, dude. His steady tone quickly shifts to a menacing yell, “How come your feelings matter so much more? That’s how I FEEL! VALIDATE THAT!”

I stare at him, allowing him to continue, because any words are better than none at this point.

“I think THAT’S why I’m so angry all the time. Why do YOUR feelings get to be valid but mine don’t?”

“What feelings of yours need to be validated? All you’ve done is scream at me. You are not communicating *anything* with me, you’re just telling me that I’m overdramatic and I’m sensitive.”

The same rage he has exhibited during all our arguments smudged my heart and turned into courage.

“Those are not *feelings*, Wade. Those are opinions.”

“You know... I feel trapped all of the time around you.”

I raise my right hand to my head and tug at the back of my hair, “I’ve wanted to stay at home these past three days, and you’ve begged me to come back, and you’ve begged me to stay. So how exactly do you feel trapped?”

“I don’t know...I think...I think maybe I’m just hoping your brain will mature...”

“What?”

“Like, everything we do, I’m so fucking over it. It’s so immature. I’m over it.”

For the first time, his mask had fully fallen in front of me. No amount of love or care that I had for him was able to erase what I realized at that moment. I couldn’t tell you why I didn’t realize how bad it was until then, but it’s when everything finally hit me. Standing four feet from me, he no longer looked like the man I loved, but like every abusive man I have encountered in my past. He was normally great at talking himself out of situations— manipulating me into feeling like the perpetrator, but he failed this time. It was bound to happen eventually. His facade had slowly started to crack a week before this, when his rage became too strong for any amount of sense.

Multiple “Oh my Gods” escape my mouth as I run out his back door. I hear him saying “What the fuck are you doing?” as I head for the car door. Shaky hands go for the gear shifter as I try to reverse out of his driveway as fast as possible. I know if I don’t leave now and make it stick, I’ll never get out. I’ll be stuck in this cycle forever.

April 2023

We’ve been sitting in conference room 7A preparing for the trial for the last three hours. A comically long wooden table takes up most of the space in the room, further causing the air to blanket and crush me. When Katie, my lawyer, entered the room at 8:04 AM, she told me about the outcome of the police report I made on April 6th against Wade. Despite it being the second time in a week that he broke my temporary protection order, the officer went home without filing his report that night. Like always, Wade and his entitlement were let off. Apparently, that was due to my friend and me reporting that he was in the bar, intimidating me for ten minutes when it was *really seven*. I attempt to loosen the tightening of my jaw at this information, but it seems to be glued shut with no movement in sight.

“Our biggest pieces of evidence are the two police reports you had to file, the text messages where he berates and harasses you, the letters he wrote admitting to the abuse, and the witness you’re providing from the night of July 5th when Wade attacked you.”

My eyes dart to the right side of the table, noticing the folder full of documents that Katie has. The top pages peek out of the manila casing, and I immediately recognize them to be the letters he dropped off after I left him.

Sometimes I feel like I’m being a survivor wrong— especially in moments like this. Of course, there is no right way to be a survivor, but the amalgamation of overlapping emotions I have been experiencing has prompted me to search for *Symptoms of Psychosis* weekly. I feel so

much guilt for the love I still find myself having for him. I mean it when I say he destroyed my life. That he has caused irreparable damage to my body and mind that I will never be able to shake. That I still hear a Boston accent screaming that I'm a child anytime I try to believe myself. It's all true, but so is the love I had. I remind myself daily that two things can be true at once. That it's not my fault I fell in love with an abuser. That I can hate him for his actions towards me, but still wish he were the person I thought I was falling in love with.

I draw a swirl on my notepad like I'm playing a game of M.A.S.H. and try to process what I'm about to experience. I know his attorney is going to question me. Katie prepared me for it all: the accusations, the belittling, the victim-blaming. *Knowing doesn't mean I'm ready for it.*

I don't want to be asked why I stayed through all of the abuse. Why my breaking point was over a verbal argument and not after all of the times he got physical. How I could love someone who hurt me as much as he did, and somehow still found the strength to protect myself from him in the end. These people don't understand what it's like to beg someone to love you properly. They don't know what it's like to be put on a pedestal one day and thrown into a wall the next. They've never had to say between sobs, "Please stop hurting me," and get the response of, "It's because I love you."

Despite this, I never want them to. Having to experience something as painstaking as craving healing from the exact person who hurts you is unbearable. Even when finding the courage to *want* to leave, the only person who could heal my emotional and physical wounds was Wade. He tended to the abrasions he created with such intricacy and care. He'd douse them in a mixture of hydrogen peroxide and "*I'm sorry*" before wrapping them in compliments and stabilizing them with the reminder he loves me. For a long time, no friend, family, or therapist could comfort me in the ways he did. Even if they could, I didn't *want* them to. I wanted him to. I wanted him to stop hurting me and start loving me. I don't wish that experience on anyone—not even these people at the court.

"Sophie," Katie says, grabbing my hands. "Hey, you're shaking." I don't notice the tingling in my fingers and the instability of my hands until she points it out. I quickly pull them back to my lap and continue to stare at the swirl I drew, refusing to make eye contact. A lagoon's worth of tears has been rising behind my eyes, and I fear that if I let them fall, I won't ever stop. I've been trying so hard not to allow this to consume me over the past two months, but it is becoming impossible. Every limb burns and tingles, and my lips feel frost-bitten. I don't remember the last time I took a breath, but holding it feels safer than breathing right now. Even the smallest inhalation may allow the largest sob to escape from my mouth.

"I'm going to leave the room for a minute to swap evidence with his attorney, but I'll be right back," she says before disappearing into the labyrinth of courthouse hallways. Here, I am

left to wonder how I am supposed to find closure in a relationship that he won't let die. Even if I am granted the full order, I know Wade will never allow me to put a definitive end to us. He will always try to watch me. Always try to torment me, control me. No foot distance could stop the rage he has inside of him.

Within minutes, Katie reenters the room with a single piece of paper. A picture of scratch marks on Wade's neck from July 5th. Scratch marks that only existed because his eyes were full to the brim with rage while he strangled me. From the night he claims, "I wasn't trying to choke you, I just wanted to get your attention." The night that he got arrested for drunk driving, trying to find where I ran off to. I wonder what lies he told his lawyer about their existence. I wonder what lies he told himself.

A painstaking hour and a half of preparing goes by before the sergeant comes in and tells us that Wade's attorney would like to talk to Katie. She doesn't come back into the conference room for another thirty minutes.

Gold bangle bracelets jingle against her wrist as she slowly presses the wooden door shut. Rubbing her temples, she starts, "So I talked to his attorney. He is making Wade agree to the restraining order due to how much evidence we have against him."

What feels like a hot air balloon deflating shoots from my mouth. Knowing I don't have to have my life, experiences, and mental health ripped apart in a courtroom brings me a level of peace I didn't know possible since meeting Wade. Katie takes a seat next to me and rolls her neck before continuing.

"I know this is great news for us, so I want you to be excited. But I do want you to know that when we told the magistrate we were coming to an agreement, she outright told us she was planning to rule in Wade's favor before even seeing the evidence."

A surplus of rage shoots through my fingers. The consistent neglect and disregard the court and police have shown for survivors in this city is detrimental. *What would have happened if they didn't agree to the terms? Would the magistrate have realized I was telling the truth with the evidence, or would she have ruled in his favor no matter what?* Hundreds of little lines run across the table to showcase the wood's age— hundreds of years of women suffering at the hands of the person they love. Hundreds of ways to get ignored and dismissed by a court.

I still feel responsible for the abuse I faced because I didn't stop it. Because I didn't leave. I ask myself if I deserved it. Maybe not every time, but three or four of them. I must have said something wrong. I must have downspoken with my voice. He hated that, and I learned it from Mom. *Don't talk to Mom as much; she's making you sound annoying.*

The two months leading up to this moment were spent retraumatizing myself daily to compile evidence to prepare for the accusations that would be made against me. Months were spent remembering every detail of his abuse, not to prove a point, but because my safety depended on it. Relentless night terrors and panic attacks meant nothing to these people. I meant nothing to these people. All I was seen as was another number. Another statistic. Another one in three: looking for refuge and only finding blame.

You may wonder why I'm doing it again. Opening the sealed jars of emotions and memories that live inside my brain for an essay. If I'm being honest, I don't have a set answer for you. I've asked myself the same question every time I sit down to write. *You've already been through enough. Is this even worth it? Will people care about what you have to say?* I don't know. I don't know if you or the person next to you cares about a single word that I wrote on this page, but I don't think it's about that. I think all of this is for me. I think it's all about choice. I never got to choose what happened in my relationship with Wade. He called all of the shots. He made all of the rules. But not anymore. I'm done letting other people dictate what I have to remember and talk about. It's up to me now, and that is more freeing than you could ever imagine.

March 2024

Surviving an abusive relationship is listening to *Cherry Wine* by Hozier twenty-four times a day so you feel less alone. It's putting a desk against your door every night. It's getting re-diagnosed with PTSD. It's the debilitating paranoia that he's going to kill you in broad daylight in the middle of your campus. It's your friends being proud of you for doing basic things like going on a first date. It's shutting down anytime someone slams something, raises their voice, or moves their hands in front of your face. It's anniversaries. It's smells and sounds and feelings and everything in between.

Some days, I will wake up and feel like none of it was real. Like it was all a story I wrote for one of my creative writing classes. On other days, I won't be able to leave my bed out of the fear that he will be hiding in my garage waiting to slit my throat. Healing isn't linear, but neither is feeling like you're a survivor. Sometimes I wonder if there is something rotten inside of me that draws men like Wade into my life. Something that I need to cut out from my innards and give to the dog as a treat. I ask myself if I was destined for this— multiple traumas at such a young age. Maybe it's repentance for a past life. Maybe it's a plan from God. Maybe it's the University I chose. Maybe it's none of those things. Maybe the world is just a fucked up place. Maybe I'm not the problem at all, but abusive people are.

For a long time, I was convinced that the positive comments about growth and change and finding individuality were just optimism. There's a large chance it was. I don't think anyone

in my life knew how to help me move through healing from my abuse— hell, even I didn't. I still don't. That's the thing, I'm still not healed, and I don't know if I ever will be. Wade stole more than I could have ever imagined possible. But somehow, somehow, I am still here today. I look back on March of 2023 and see a version of myself that was broken. I was on the verge of unenrolling for my final year of college; I wanted to move back home to Cleveland— I was going to let him win. But I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't let him determine my future. I had to be the one to break the cycle I had become so accustomed to.

I left so I could relearn how to wake up without having to be in fear. I left so I could have the choice to see my friends. I left so I could get my degree. I left so my future nieces and nephews wouldn't have a shell of a person for an aunt. I left so my mother wouldn't have to see my face on the Channel 3 news as the next domestic violence victim. I left for all of the women's mothers who had to face that reality. I left for every victim and every survivor. I left for my sanity. I left for him. I left for us. I left for love. I left for me.

SOPHIE CORBISSE

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