

The Stories That I Wrote

He didn't like the stories I wrote.

When I was young and stupid and crazy in love, I'd show him everything. Every story, every idea, every jot note scribbled into the margins of my notebook. It worked with men most of the time: everyone likes a girl who can tell a story. At first I just wanted him to understand. I laid it all out on a page so nearly for him—*this is me*. Everything I wrote. Everything I was.

It took maybe a week to realize it wouldn't work.

So it became a little game I could play with myself. *Maybe this one he'll like. Maybe this one will make him smile. Maybe this one will make him love me*. Doomed romances. Cutting dystopias. Fantasy epics. *Love me. Love me. Love me*. I bled through a pen. I watched him hold my heart, fragile in his strong grasp, and crush it not out of malice but out of carelessness.

Take it. Hold it. Keep it. Love me.

Love me.

Love me.

He proposed two days after our three-year anniversary.

Two days after, because that was the day he *thought* was our three-year anniversary.

I didn't correct him. I smiled when he suggested we go to dinner, acted like I had no clue this was coming when he got down on one knee and proposed after dessert. The ring was two sizes too small. I wore it on my pinky and laced my trembling fingers through his. As he led us out of the little restaurant he looked so proud.

I'm still not sure why he chose that restaurant. I'd never been there before. Whatever significance there was behind the choice was lost on me.

Maybe it was important to him somehow. I couldn't say. It's strange to think, now—all those years...

I don't think we ever really knew each other.

It's not that he was a bad man. He wasn't cruel or unkind. It should've worked. It could've worked. In theory, we fit together. He worked in HR. I wrote copy. We had a nice apartment downtown. Paper dolls, perfect cutout lives. We had all the pieces. That's important.

If I closed my eyes. If I squinted, tilted my head, didn't look too close. I was okay. I was happy. He called me "sweetheart" and "hon." We had three cats. It made sense.

We both worked as much as we could. Writing copy was soul-sucking, of course. But once I wrote what I needed to I was done, and the pay was good, and anyways it made me a better writer. I gained a new appreciation for language. I learned about bold words, action words,

power words. Words to hook a reader in. I learned how some words tasted. How they slithered along your tongue. *Breakthrough. Allure. Guarantee.*

When I wasn't writing copy, I wrote for myself. I liked the freedom. I'd given up on showing him all the small stuff. I decided I'd rather keep it all for me.

We'd been married for four years when I got the idea. I didn't tell him at first. I planned. I drafted. I'd never been so invested in a story before. Sometimes you write to get words down on a page. And sometimes your fingers fly across the keys, an effortless sort of fluency, like you're drawing from some well deep within you. Delicate as a pianist, deliberate as a chess player, and when you finally pull your hands away you're left with something so raw and full of love that it could only be a silver of your heart pressed into the pages.

It took over a year before I was happy with it. I printed the whole thing out—over two hundred sheets of paper, double-sided and bound in a three-ring binder. I found him on the couch.

"What's that?" He asked with an easy grin.

I picked up the TV remote and paused whatever crap was playing. "Something I've been working on."

He picked up the binder. I watched intently as he flipped through the first few pages. His brow was furrowed. I couldn't read him.

Finally, he set the binder down. He hadn't made it far—maybe ten pages in. He met my gaze. It took only four words to hurt me:

"I don't get it."

I kept working on it.

I didn't show him, after that. There was something gutting about knowing that I couldn't share something this important with my husband without his little judgements. He'd laugh when I locked myself in the bedroom for hours on end, tease me when I finally emerged with a stack of dirty dishes and bags under my eyes: "What's got you so distracted?"

I broke down, eventually, and told him I was going to get something published. He humoured me, at first. Why wouldn't he? I was a good wife. Or, at least, a good actress. I did my part. If I maintained the usual balance, we'd be okay. He was only really on edge when my writing started to interfere with his routine.

We usually rotated between who would make dinner. If he wasn't up to it, I'd step in for him. Just once I asked him to do it because I wanted to finish a round of editing. He came home with takeout in hand and watched me at the computer for a few moments.

“I don’t get why you’re so worked up about this,” he said. Plastic rustled. The air smelled like grease.

I didn’t bother to answer him.

“I mean, do you really think...” he hesitated. He wasn’t actually reconsidering his words—he just wanted to seem like he was. Like he cared enough to walk on eggshells. “Do you really think this is going to go anywhere?”

I shrugged.

“It’s just a really sad story.”

He’d read maybe a dozen pages.

“It’s depressing.”

“Okay.”

“People don’t like sad stories.”

“I like sad stories.”

I heard him sigh as he walked away.

He made comments. The one about my story being too “depressing” was pretty common. He called it obscure, redundant, irrelevant. Didn’t like the way I wrote. Didn’t like the tone I set.

And maybe most infuriating of all:

“Why are you writing about a bunch of lesbians?”

“Hm?” I looked up at him as he stared at the binder.

“Why are you writing about a bunch of lesbians? It’s not like you’re a lesbian.” He grinned, and I think I could’ve punched his teeth in.

Instead, I kept my attention focused on my writing. “I’m bi. You know that.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. Humoured. “But you married *me*. You like men.”

“And women.”

“But why do you have to write about it?”

I laughed. I’m not sure why. I think it was my only safe option. “Because I want to, and clearly you don’t get it so it’s abundantly clear that my writing’s not for you.”

A beat.

“You don’t have to get so worked up about it,” he mumbled to himself eventually. “Jesus Christ.”

I smiled triumphantly.

“I wanna self-publish.”

I'd been working on the book—the *manuscript*, as I'd started calling it to sound more professional—for around five years, and was happy enough with what I'd done that I was ready to release it. After a few too many rejections, though, I decided to abandon mainstream publishing. And I didn't want to roll the dice with an indie publisher.

So I was left with self-publishing.

Which would've been fine by me. I like being in charge. Except that self-publishing, from editing to formatting to cover art, costs quite a bit of money, if you want to do it right. And finances, unfortunately, are a joint affair in marriage

"Fine," he replied absently.

"It'll cost money."

That caught his attention. His gaze snapped towards me. "How much money?"

"If I actually want a fighting chance at this..." I pursed my lips and looked him dead in the eyes. "Around two grand."

He laughed.

I didn't.

His laughter died out quickly. "No."

"Yeah."

"Jesus Christ, you—you can't be serious." He dragged a hand down his face. "That's kind of a lot of money to throw away."

"To throw away—" I bit back the colourful stream of insults at the tip of my tongue. "I'm not *throwing it away*."

He raised an eyebrow. "Yes you are," he replied plainly. "I looked it up, you know. For you. The odds of successful self-publishing? Not what you want them to be. Especially not with your..." My husband was scared to say 'lesbians.' "...whole genre. This is a lot. It's a risk." His expression softened, if only momentarily. "I don't want this to hurt you."

"Since when have you given a shit about that?" I blurted out before I could stop myself. I felt the acid lacing the words as I spit them out. "I want to take these risks. I believe in this. I'm not gonna get hurt by the industry—you're the one hurting me."

Shock, at first. That's the emotion I saw painted across his features. Then incredulousness, anger, before it faded into resignation. "Fine," he said eventually. "Fine. You know what? Spend the fucking money. Why'd you even bother to ask me? You were going to do what you wanted either way."

The breath left my lungs.

I know, technically, that it was a victory. But it felt a lot more like a loss.

“Why’d you marry me?”

His voice was plaintive, eyes wide and watery, voice slurred. I sighed as I wrapped my arm around his waist and helped him over to the couch. “I’m gonna get you some water,” I told him.

“Wait,” he said, grabbing my wrist as I tried to walk past him. “Tell me.”

Petulant. Childlike. I did *not* like my husband when he was drunk.

I shot him a razor-thin smile. I felt like being cruel. “You don’t really want an answer.”

“You’re so...” he let go of my wrist to gesticulate vaguely. “Angry.”

“The term’s ambitious, sweetheart,” I corrected, deadpan. I paced over to the kitchen, got him his glass of water, and wrapped his fingers around the cup. “And you might wanna rethink how you spend your Saturday nights.”

“You always dodge the important questions,” he muttered accusingly, taking a sip of water.

“Because I know you wouldn’t like the answers.”

“Sure.”

I rolled my eyes at him. Couldn’t let go of his question. Why did I marry him? What were we supposed to be?

Maybe I married him for the little things we shared that convinced me we’d be okay. Neither of us wanted kids. Neither of us liked crowds. Neither of us really talked to our families. We seemed cut from the same cloth. Maybe I married him because I’d had my heart broken by the love of my life the week before I met him and I knew I’d never love like that again, so I settled for the first person I met after. Or maybe I married him because it was so, so easy.

But I couldn’t say any of this to my husband.

So I stood up, made him a snack, and set it on the coffee table in front of him. Tried to remind myself that I loved this man as I pulled a blanket over his shoulders and he smiled sleepily up at me. I made it to the bedroom, where I fell asleep alone on our king-sized bed.

After eleven years, six months, and seventeen days of marriage, he left me.

He had to be the one to leave, even though ultimately I was the one who wanted it. I’d never known how to walk away, and I don’t think it was in his nature, either, but he did it.

Three months later, my book came out.

“*A Fragile Thing*, by Cameron Jackson, is a groundbreaking novel about old love, new love, and the growing pains that come with each. This story follows Tracy DiLaurentis, a newly widowed mother who finds a stack of love letters written to her late husband while she’s cleaning out the attic. In reaching out to the woman who wrote the letters, Tracy sets off a string

of events she never would've thought possible and finds herself lost in betrayal, heartbreak, and dangerous secrets that should've stayed buried. As Tracy grows closer to the woman her husband once loved, only one thing is clear to her: nothing she knew about him was true."

I remember how it felt to hold a physical copy of my book in my hands, to trace my hands over the beautifully embossed cover and realize that I was holding a shard of my soul.

It didn't take long for the book to take off. I knew it would. I saw it make its way through book clubs and reader communities, top charts, earn glowing review after glowing review. Interview requests. Live readings. New York Times Bestseller. Reader Spotlights. It was one of those books that swept the world, and my name was on the cover.

He called me one day—eight months after he left. I picked up, sitting on what used to be our bed. Boxes lined the walls I was moving soon.

"So I heard that book of yours is doing pretty good."

I smiled. "Yeah, it is."

A long silence stretched over the phone. It felt familiar. Almost comforting. Long silences were normal for us.

"I read it," he said finally.

"And?"

His chuckle was breathy and distorted through the speaker. "I still don't really get it," he admitted. "But. Good writing."

Something bloomed in my chest, sweet and delicate. Something almost like hope but just a bit too late.

"I'm glad you think so."

He sucked in a breath the way he did whenever he was bracing himself. "Do you wish things turned out differently?" He asked.

There should've been some kind of hesitation to my answer, some indicator that any part of our relationship had been born of love instead of convenience, poor timing, and desperation. But the answer slipped past my lips quickly.

"No."

Another gentle laugh. Resigned. "I figured."

"You know me too well," I teased.

"Somehow I don't think that's true."

I cracked a grin.

We spent the rest of the night catching up, him in his bed, me in mine. All those years married, and I think that was the best conversation we ever had. Funny how things work out.

I hung up, eventually. My life had become jam-packed. I liked the clutter, but I wouldn't have minded the freedom of knowing I could stay up all night because I didn't have anything to do tomorrow. Nothing in me ached for him. But still, he'd taken up space in my life.

We didn't talk again after that. We'd said everything that needed to be said.

Maybe I'd never loved him, and maybe he'd never loved me.

But maybe that was okay.

I was better off, in the end.