

## A Cruel Blessing

*By Tara Chang-Swanson*

Innocence and how it is lost is a fine line, a tight rope walked by all as we find ourselves hurled through childhood, a blur of discovery and understanding. A teenager is a scorned thing. Usually scowling, owner of cigarettes and a foul mouth. I stepped into this age with open arms, glad to have claim to this title. The line I walked was straight and narrow, with no scratches on my record of innocence and all things good. Jessie was popular. Good looking, loud and cocky. He was all the things that I thought that I wanted. I can remember all the good things from the beginning, the way he would make me laugh, the way all of his friends idolized him, talking about him with a shake of their head and a smile. We went to the movies and sat in darkness, I could taste the salt on my lips from the popcorn oozing with butter, feel the sweat on my palms, and my stomach doing backwards somersaults when he leaned in to speak to me. I came home and sat on the steps outside my house, and felt that anything was possible. I felt happiness bubbling inside of me. I looked upwards and spotted the brightest star, on display for every pair of eyes looking upwards, and made a wish.

This is where a story should end, tied up like a brightly packaged birthday present. But for us this was the beginning.

Our first fight came quickly. We screamed and screamed, over something that did not deserve even a few heated sentences. The anger in the air was tangible, I was shocked that I was capable of such emotion, and I felt the urge to reach out and scoop up my words and push them down into my pocket, forgotten, left to wither and die. We both apologized, and I figured it would never happen again, a slight crack in the surface of our story. Shortly after, his phone calls began. When I was at home, it was a summoning that I felt obligated to answer, an invisible string lifting my hand to the receiver. At dinnertime, my parents would shake their heads, a silent nod of disapproval in response to the shrill command of the phone. I would sit in queasy silence, reading what was being spoken without being said. He wanted to know where I was every second of the day. Before, I had seen myself as an independent person, making my own plans and decisions. But now my existence began to be seen as he and I intertwined as one. There became less of a clear idea of who I was separately; pieces of myself seemed lost, floating in a murky place where I could not find them. He began to get angry if I talked to other guys or people he did not like, suspicious of their intentions. Everyone was always against him, in his mind, wanting him out of my life.

One day we were at his house. He hacked into my computer account, after he convinced me to give him my password. He found what he was looking for, an email from a guy friend. I walked in the room and watched him rise from his seat, slowly and deliberately like a hunter sneaking up on its prey. In that one second the room seemed to become smaller. His hands reached towards me, and for the first time appeared menacing to my eyes. He pushed me into the wall, my back slamming against the sunny yellow paint. I shoved back, and ran outside, barefoot and shaking. He slammed his door and turned the lock. I heard a window opening above me, and my bag dropped neatly in front of me, landing awkwardly upside down, bruised and confused just like me. I was free to leave, but I blamed myself for upsetting him; the ache in my back became numb. I could not walk away seeing as my feet felt like lead. Twenty minutes later, he opened his door, and I walked right back inside.

Always following these fights was hours of his apologies, beautifully spun and full of promises. Layer upon layer of reasons why, and I listened to every single one. Friends had given up asking why we were still together, as the fighting got worse and worse. I thought that no one would be able to understand the reasons behind the attachment. I was scared to admit failure, afraid that giving up on him would mean that I had made a mistake, to lose hope in something that I still believed in so greatly. I felt like I was in too deep, left to float in the deep end of a great dark pool, not quite touching the bottom, but getting closer, my breathing shallow and labored, barely keeping my head above the water. To the outside world I appeared mostly the same, everyday I put on a mask, and stepped into the world. When I was alone, I retreated, exhausted by another fight that was different but the same, finally letting myself be weak. It was like a magnet pulling me along, I found myself stuck with no choice of getting away, letting the fear of abandoning him keep me from leaving.

We were sitting in a park, the ground soft and moist, and the sounds of a

street fair close by. The air was warm and light and the wind lifted my hair off the back of my neck, we were getting along. I was laughing at something he had said, and it was one of the moments that kept me hooked in, when I saw glimpses of what I knew was goodness inside of him. The problem was that these moments were fleeting. Settling for only a second, filling my mind with possibility, and then gone, like a flash of a memory from when you were young. The argument at the park was petty, weary and familiar to my ears. It erupted, and we lashed out at each other screaming and screaming until we reached the peak. I reached out and slapped him straight across his cheek. I had never hit him. The stinging sound shocked both of us, the imprint of my fingers slashed across his face, his mouth hooked into a shape of surprise. He called me every rude word he knew, and I focused on the way he rocked back and fourth, his whole body tense and wound up, a tightly wired clock ready to spring, with his fists clenched closely to his sides. He left and I sat back down, holding my offending hand, wondering if this was the end. It wasn't.

As our relationship got worse, our words that we used became more creative and threatening. Love was used as an excuse for almost everything; he was not able to let me leave because he loved me too much. He would grip my upper arms, leaving a small trail of bruises, telling me that he would not let me go, he loved me too much. He couldn't let me go to a party without him, he would worry, and he loved me too much to leave me alone. He told me that if we broke up he would have nothing left, that I was everything to him, that I was the only person who understood him. I was overwhelmed with the emotion behind this four-letter word. Love was something that I believed we had, it was the reason why we were still together, the glue that kept us from tearing completely. If I left him what would he have left? What would he do without me? I did not have the strength to find out the answer to these questions.

Time passed quickly; there were more physical fights that would escalate to a slap or a punch, holes in the walls that created surface wounds, piercing right through to blackness. I thought this was

what love was like; you had to go through the suffering to appreciate the good. I could not imagine myself without him, and let this fear dig its sharp fingernails into me until I had nothing but him left, discarding other relationships with friends and shutting out family, sacrificing them with little thought, truly believing that I only needed him to make my life go round. One day at school he would not let me go to class. I tried to step around him; he would push me back, not letting me go. The bright fluorescent lights beat down, the grey walls pressed against us. The squeaky slapping sound of shoes approached; he dropped his hands, and stopped talking. The teacher asked if everything is ok. I nodded once, my throat gravelly and aching, avoiding eye contact. I usually convinced myself that I was fine, but in moments like this I found myself close to unraveling. I turned and quickly walked away, running into class late, and slipped into my seat, knowing that I was being watched from all sides. It happened several times, and I was referred to the counselor's office, where I was met with questions and gentle pushes to help lines and websites. I denied the need for help, faking cheeriness with a weak smile. I became practiced at hiding the marks on my body. If one was spotted, there were always casual stories that I had to fit the particular bruise. It became a sick game in my head, a mental exercise to explain the purple tinted badges of our happy time together.

He was a noose that had been put on my neck, tightening if I tried to move freely, reigning me in if I tried to escape. Several times I tried to break up with him, telling myself that it was the end. It was a lie; I would always go back, knowing what I was walking into, fully aware of the consequences. I was addicted to the drama and the feeling of being loved and cared for so deeply by another person. He would threaten to hurt himself if I left him; and so we stayed together, even though I had completely lost the sense of who I was. I had lost my passions and interests, and my mask was now permanent. I was a shell of my former self, going through the motions, not really existing at all. I never cried, it wouldn't help the situation, and I convinced myself that it would make me feel more pathetic and helpless than I already was. I

would push it down; it would swell, a rumbling of emotion that was caged deep inside of me.

I was reading a magazine in my bedroom. I took the quiz out of habit, not really noticing what it was about until I got to the third question. I looked back at the title; "ARE YOU IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP?" the words jumped at me, screeching in a high-pitched voice in bold lettering. I slowly finished the quiz, adding up my score. I had scored a possible twelve out of twelve and I found myself second-guessing my answers, there was no way that this was true. My insides twisted, and I realized that I was tired of lying to myself. This was me. This was what I had become and it was time to stop. I looked back at the twelve out of twelve, and picked up the phone. I told him I couldn't do it any longer. I was tired of the fights, of lies, of unhappiness. He began to weep. It was a horrible sound. A deep noise that drove into my gut and tore my heart like a paper shredder. He told me he would never be able to face losing me. I began to feel myself being sucked in, losing my control. I hung up the phone, and looked around. Everything around me still looked the same; the only thing that was different was me.

I would avoid him in the halls. I didn't answer his phone calls. The main reason for how long this time had lasted was because I was exhausted. I could not stand someone telling me they loved me more than anything else in this world, and then turning around and telling me how much they hated me, of how worthless I was. I was sick of lying to my parents, of having to wear long sleeved shirts in warm weather. His words no longer had the same meaning as they used to; they were recycled and worn. Everyone has a point where they snap. I had reached mine. That didn't mean that I didn't miss him, because that never changed. I had an ache inside of me that I carried around, a constant war between my mind and my feelings. But I was mending slowly, it was a strange and unfamiliar feeling to be alone, but I began to accept it.

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*1 month later*

I am in class when I am called to the office, a place I have never graced with my presence, I am quiet and never in need of disciplining. I am taken to the sick room. The only object is a meager cot on spindly legs, mummified in a pale white blanket, with a small pillow trapped beneath it. I sit down and it creaks in protest. My counselor walks in the room. She is a tiny woman, taking up barely any physical space, and yet she seems huge to me, her face looming above me, floating from side to side. She takes my hand; her fingers are warm and slender, her silver wedding ring digging into me. I hold my breath. She tells me that Jessie killed himself that morning, and that he left a note addressed to me. She tells me that it is going to be ok, and that it is not my fault. Her lies stack on top of each other but I know the truth. She is doing her job and it is useless. I watch her mouth continue to move, her lips stretching over her coffee stained teeth; her fingers still gripping mine. I hear nothing. I turn my face away from her so she cannot see the relief washing over my face. *What have I done* runs through my brain.

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*Two weeks later*

I run with purpose, a fugitive fleeing to safety. The lump in my throat burns, and I am overcome with nausea. I push open the heavy oak door. I am outside in brilliant

sunshine, a contrast to the darkness flooding my mind. I hear no sound except my breath, short and quick. I fall quickly, tasting gritty cement. I close my eyes and lay motionless. I wish to be any place but here.

I open my eyes to blazing sun. I feel like hours have passed, although I'm sure it has only been minutes. No one has come after me. I am alone. The cement is still cool and I wipe the vomit from my mouth. I look at my arms, almost free of bruises for the first time in a long time. I push myself to a sitting position. I feel something move inside of me, I feel pieces of myself shifting, reshuffling, and I feel raw and scraped. My guilt is never completely gone; I battle it as it comes in waves, knocking me down and then pushing me back up. I don't try to fight the grief and in certain moments when I find myself waiting for the phone to ring, I realize that he is really gone. It overcomes me to a point that I am sometimes amazed that I am still here at all. The relief that I feel is something that I also face everyday, my emotions sometimes too big and too great for me to separate myself. It is now spring. The flowers are beginning to bloom and the kids are getting restless. In my heart I believe that Jessie died to set me free, he let me go because he lacked the courage to do it alive. He could not face the idea of living alone. I stand up and walk back towards the door, to Jessie's funeral with the sun at my back, feeling that I will be ok.