

THE GHOST OF YOUR hands

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*Disclosure: Names have been changed. Pictured are Shelby Smith + Vincent Sung; they are not the subjects of the story.

I spent most of my childhood feeling less than desirable. In middle school, the opposite sex ignored me because I had no bra straps to snap. When the boys weren't ignoring me, it was because they were teasing me for *not* wearing a training bra. I didn't know how to apply eyeshadow and exclusively wore clothing from Goodwill because I thought I looked "interesting"—which really just meant my family was too poor to afford anything else. I stuck out like a sore, badly dressed thumb. I was angry, sad, and brimming with adolescent angst.

The summer before high school began, my body finally went through the changes I had been longing for; I had blossomed into an A-cup (though I often wore a much bigger bra to fool my classmates—I doubt it worked), my hair had grown out of its unflattering, childlike shag, and I stopped excessively applying black eyeliner—my mom was pleased about that one.

I had emerged from my gawky, adolescent cocoon to reveal a lovely young woman, and my classmates began to take notice. The popular girls invited me to their sleepovers, and boys asked me about my weekend plans. Though I was thrilled with this newfound attention from the opposite sex, I was wary of their intentions. Was this all

just an elaborate hoax? Was I going to end up like the titular character of *Carrie*; wearing a tiara, but drenched in pig's blood?

Like the irresponsible teenager I was, I decided to throw caution to the wind and take advantage of the gifts puberty had bestowed upon me. I spent the majority of my freshman year dating any cute boy who came my way. There was Clay, a virtuoso who played nearly every instrument but was too clingy for my tastes, Tyler, a ne'er do well teenage womanizer who had been a drug addict since the age of fifteen, and Bradley, a meathead football player who tried to insist that I wear his football jersey (I refused—I found it degrading). After what seemed like an endless stream of less-than-bright boys, I was tired of listening to the overwhelming voice of my burgeoning sexuality. I wanted someone who I felt was my equal.

My sophomore year, I met Adam. He was a senior, popular and one of the oldest in his class. He noticed me one Friday evening at a football game and asked me for my phone number while the marching band played our school fight song.

We had our first date at the arcade in our hometown. Adam was a bit shorter than I had remembered, with dishwater blonde hair, a wonky elbow from an old basketball injury, and a penchant for wearing head to toe Nike. While

he wasn't the most polished in appearance, it was common knowledge that his family was very wealthy, and he exuded an air of importance. Adam wasn't good looking by any means, but I thought he was beautiful.

As we played our fourth game of Dance Dance Revolution, I realized that I had found a kindred spirit. Adam was extremely intelligent, and I was impressed that he could keep up with my thousand-mile-a-minute mind—something that the bevy of boys I had previously dated were never able to do. He made me laugh harder than anyone else I had ever met, his biting sense of humor and understanding of non-sequitur was my perfect brand of comedy. When it got late, he walked me home and gave me an innocent hug goodbye. As I watched Adam walk away, it dawned on me that I was absolutely smitten.

In the weeks to come, we fell in love in the crude way only teenagers can, and it was a fucking nightmare.

By the time news of our fledgling relationship had spread, it seemed as if the entire population of our high school was on board. I was repeatedly told how *funny* we both were, how *perfect* we were together. Adam would drive me to school every day in his seventy-thousand-dollar SUV that no high school senior has any reason to own, and my classmates would watch in awe as I walked into school from his prime parking spot directly beside the front door. I felt like royalty—I couldn't believe that someone as wealthy and cool as him would want to be with me.

I don't really remember when things got bad. I had always felt like that was such a stereotypical thing for women in abusive relationships to say. I had thought that if I were in a situation like that, I would be able to leave and never look back. I was wrong.

One moment, I felt like I was on top of the world, and the next, I was buried deep inside of it. I couldn't understand what had changed. Adam went from the sweet, charming young man I had fallen in love with, to someone I didn't recognize. He put me down for all of my decisions. He dictated what I wore. He chose my friends for me. He dangled

his wealth and status over my head. He made sure that I knew how lucky I was to have him, because no one else would want me. Why would they? I was just a weird, poor girl that he had plucked from obscurity. I felt like I was drowning, lungs filled with water, overflowing and preventing me from speaking out. I thought no one would believe me—I was right.

I was trapped in a volatile cycle of euphoric highs and earth-shattering lows. After Adam shoved me into a wall, he apologized for an hour and bought me a pair of crystal earrings. When he punched a hole in his bedroom wall an inch away from my face, he took me to the most expensive restaurant in the city. After he held me down on the ground, wrenching my arm behind my back until I was crying in pain, he kissed me gently and presented me with a five-hundred-dollar necklace. Adam's gifts were not only his way of apologizing, but a means of exerting power over me. I had never owned anything near as nice as anything he had given me. I didn't know how to say no to his gifts. I spent nearly every night crying, dreading what Adam would do next, praying that he would miraculously revert back to the boy I'd fallen in love with. I was convinced that his aggression was because of something deeper—that I could make him better if only I loved him harder. He *needed* me.

It reminds me of the old wives' tale about boiling frogs—if you attempt to drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will try to escape. But if you put a frog in a pot of room temperature water and slowly turn up the heat, it won't realize what's going on until it's too late. The frog won't try to escape. All the frog knows is that he loves being in the water. All I knew was that I was in love.

When I finally gathered the courage to leave Adam, he played the role of the perfect, heartbroken boyfriend. He left a huge bouquet of flowers outside my front door and bought me more jewelry. But when I rebuked his efforts, Adam decided to make my life a living hell. He locked me out of my social media profiles—he had required me to give him all of my passwords to make sure I was being faithful. He deleted my followers and made erroneous posts. He spread nasty rumors about me. He turned his friends—my only friends—against me. When I spoke out,





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he insisted it was slander and threatened to sue me. Not that it mattered. To everyone else, Adam seemed so kind and charming. I remember trying to tell a friend about the things Adam had done to me, and she said, “I’m sorry you feel that way, but Adam is my friend and I don’t think he would ever do that.”

I was alone. I was empty. I was absolutely broken.

Looking back, I’m glad Adam decided to be as cruel as he did. When I initially left him, I immediately wished I hadn’t. I was heartbroken because he had convinced me that I left the only man who could ever truly love me. Had Adam realized this and decided to play on these emotions, I’m sure he could have easily won me back. I could have been stuck in our vicious cycle forever. Instead, his brutal attack against me had ruined any of the warm, fuzzy feelings that I had left. Now, the only person I hated more than myself was him.

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Thankfully, Adam graduated soon after this. With him gone, his grip on my life began to lessen. My classmates were quick to move on to the next scandal, but I was still scorned by the people that I had thought were my friends. I felt entirely alone, but I was finally free.

Over the next two years, I managed to make new friends who didn’t go to my high school and didn’t know anything about my past. I met a boy named Vincent and went on to date him for two years. Though we aren’t together now, I am very grateful to him. He was so patient with me. Vincent helped

me understand that things would get better, even when it felt like they wouldn’t.

I still struggle with the aftereffects of being in an abusive relationship at such a tender age. I am extremely wary of charming men. I have trouble accepting gifts of any kind, fearing that there are strings attached. I am quick to close off during arguments, assuming I am always being manipulated or guilt-tripped. Sometimes, when a lover touches me, I feel the ghost of Adam’s hands on my body and recoil. I often wonder what life would be like for me had Adam not come into my life. Would I be happier?

On the other hand, I am grateful that Adam broke me the way he did—piece by piece, I have built myself back together. Because of Adam, I know that I am strong, powerful, and intelligent. I know that I am worthy and deserving of love. I know the warning signs of abusive relationships, and I can tell when other people need help. As much as I wish he had never hurt me, I’m so thankful he did.

If you ever find yourself in an abusive situation, please seek help. I was very fortunate—many people in abusive relationships do not make it out alive. When you feel safe, and you feel ready, tell your story. Write it down. Burn it. Shout it from the rooftops. Don’t give it power over you.

If you or someone you know is in an abusive relationship, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or at www.thehotline.org

