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Jake

by Madison Irwin

Ilene and I were kindred spirits from the start. We had the kind of friendship where you have one conversation and the Tetris pieces just all seem to click together. She was the person I felt most comfortable around, and we always had the no-boundaries kind of relationship. She was the person I turned to when I wanted to do stupid shit, like at 14, stealing the hanging American flag from her neighbor's house so we could take a selfie with it on 4th of July. The kind of ignorant shit you get out of your system as an adolescent and cringe about in the later years. She was always the one person who knew how to lift me up. Over the years we grew to have an unspoken language of our own. If we went out for coffee, she took charge and ordered my mocha with soy without needing to ask, and when there was a guy who was interrupting on friend time with his idle flirting, we automatically shifted into the "girlfriend" role. We were seamless.

Jake interrupted that fluidity.

Jake was always charming. In high school he was well liked, and often described as "laid-back" and "chill," the kind of guy people tended to gravitate to. So when he and Ilene got together our senior year, I wasn't surprised that she had fallen victim to his charms as well. I say "fallen victim," because Ilene was his victim. He truly wooed her; nothing was ever too much when it came to expenses concerning Ilene. He brought her flowers to school, snuck her off to the beach between classes, played her songs on his guitar, and she ate the attention up. If there was one fatal flaw about Ilene it was that she gave herself freely and wholly to the boys that held her interest at that point in time. This quality only becoming a flaw because of him, because boys like Jake take advantage of girls like Ilene, and they ruin that sweetness, that unbridled joy for companionship.

However, things progressively got worse. He would steal her phone and sift through her Facebook messages, texts, and call her multiple times throughout the day to "check in". If she went out with friends, he would spend the whole night sending her angry text messages calling her a "whore" or a "slut," accusing her of sleeping with some fictional guy at a party. However, the following day after one of his outbursts he would call her to apologize saying things like "baby, I'm so sorry," or, "I was just really drunk; it won't happen again," and always ending the conversation with an "I love you."

While I was away for college, Ilene would call me crying about another one of Jake's incidents and I would always ask her the same question: "Why do you stay with him?" a question all observers of an abusive relationship ask its victims. Her response was always so simple: "I love him." Its easy to ignore the red flags, to feign ignorance and convince yourself that his actions were only fits of jealousy; that couldn't be what abuse looks like, right?

Jake became the stoplight between our friendship. He set the pace, controlled when the light was green, when we could see one another, and speak freely like we did before he was a looming presence in the background. But other times the light was red, and I wouldn't hear from Ilene for weeks at a time, not because he specifically warned her against it, but because he became such a conscious part of her decision making, and speaking to me would only allow the doubts to become a looming forefront.

When you think of abuse, you think of the big, tall, scary, roughneck guy constantly nailing his girlfriend for not putting dinner on the table in time, the kind of abuse that the media highlights in film. However, you don't stop to consider the many forms that abuse takes shape in, that abuse is in language as well as in physicality. That abuse can manifest in the form of possession and entitlement. But those things are easy to ignore because they only do those things, act that way, because they love you. Or at least that's what Ilene convinced herself to be the catalyst of his actions.

One night during the summer before our sophomore year of college, Ilene and I decided to go to a party. Knowing Jake's inevitable reaction she decided not to tell him about it, instead Ilene and I hatched a plan to fool him into believing that we were home having a 'girls' night.' We bought candy we had no plans of eating, picked

out a couple of movies we weren't going to watch, and took various pictures of us around the house in our pajamas, a halo of candy surrounding us on my bed, movie covers splattered throughout the different frames. We saved them with the plan to send them to Jake throughout various points of the night, a ploy to throw him off our true intentions.

We were both terrifyingly ignorant. The process of our photo shoot had been fun, silly; we were constantly making jokes about why guys play so easily into the 'stereotypical' girl slumber party of pillow fights and boy talk. We didn't stop to think, "Why are we doing this?" or "Do we really have to go to such lengths?" It all seemed so normal, like this is how all boyfriends react to their girlfriends going to a party without them.

The party was fun at the start. Ilene and I fell back into our old routine of me maliciously teasing her about her stupid dolphin laugh, and her nudging me in response and telling me to stop being such a sarcastic bitch. It was like we hit play after a few months of being on pause.

Then came the phone call. Jake was hysterical. Someone at the party had taken a Snapchat of her and I playing a game of beer pong and he had seen. He accused her of coming to the party so she could fuck around, accused her of cheating on him throughout the whole relationship, calling her a 'slut' and so on and so forth. I watched as the longer she talked on the phone with Jake, the more she drew in on herself, her arms crossed over her stomach, her body turned towards the corner of the room where she continued to talk to Jake for another twenty minutes. When she finally got off the phone with him, presumably hanging up on him after he demanded she give him the address of the party, she came back over to me and told me Jake was just drunk and being an asshole, that all would be worked out in the morning.

We only stayed for another half-hour before I suggested that we leave. Ilene didn't protest. The party having been about 30 minutes away left us with an arrival time back at my house around 1:30 in the morning. As we were about to go through the side gate leading to the back door of my house, Jake jumped out from the bushes behind us. He had been parked outside my house waiting for us to get home for two hours.

We both just kind of froze. It was obvious he was drunk, as he stumbled up the pathway toward us, we both looked at each other, hoping that the other had the answers on how to combat the situation. He suddenly lunged forward and grabbed Ilene's wrist, jerking her towards him before grabbing her phone out of her hand. He began taunting her with it, saying how he was going to tell her parents that she was at a party, tell them all about how she was fucking around with guys. When he ran back towards his car, she ran after him, and I after her. She was trying to talk to him while he was screaming in the middle of the street about how much of a slut she was and how he was going to show her parents the "true whore they had raised."

There was a moment of silence when Ilene managed to calm him for a minute, holding his face between her hands as she whispered to him that she loved him. If someone were to have seen a snapshot of just that scene, of them caught up in one another in the middle of an abandoned street, one could argue romance. I suppose it was those small moments of clarity and affection that kept Ilene around for three years. Those small moments, however few and far between, I think, are a major reason that people such as Ilene stick around for so long. That maybe Jake, and any other abusive partner, has the ability to rewind back to that charming and adoring partner he was at the start. And they will wait around forever for it to happen.

Those moments of calm unfortunately, are never constant, and Jake fell back into his violent pattern. I watched as he shoved her hands out of his face, pushing her to the ground, and that romantic snapshot very quickly morphed into something darker. I put myself in the middle of them, and that sneer turned full force against me. He grabbed my arms and trying to move me out of the way, saying how I needed to stay out of it. And when I wouldn't move, and threatened to call the cops if he didn't leave, he stole my phone as well, chucking it further down the street. Still not budging, he got tall, pushing his chest out and got very close to my face. I don't think it ever occurred to me that he was very capable of hitting me, the smallest move could have left me sprawled out on the ground next to Ilene.

I think what made me most angry with Ilene that night was that she kept gravitating to Jake. That we could have easily taken refuge in my house, left Jake outside where he would eventually leave on his own once we were taken out of the equation. But where Jake moved, Ilene followed, trying to get her phone back, trying to make an already awful situation better, dragging me right in the middle of it with her. Because how could she expect me to leave her with him, knowing that he would hurt her more if I left. But she made the decision for me, she got in the

car with him and they drove off. Leaving me to sit in the driveway of my house, my head in my hands only thinking, “How the hell am I going to explain to my parents the disappearance of Ilene in the morning?”

They came back 45 minutes later. Jake’s shouting drew me back outside after idly pacing in my room. I walked into a scene of Jake screaming about how Ilene was responsible for making him become physical, that she drove him to that point. Jake slammed his driver’s side door so hard the window shattered, littering Ilene’s lap with broken glass. He rounded the front of his car, threw open her door, grabbed her right arm and threw her out of the car onto the driveway. At that point I don’t think she was even a person in Jake’s mind. She became the equivalent of a rag doll, sprawled out on the driveway; she stayed down, and cowered in on herself.

There are no words to communicate the feeling you get when you watch as a person you love, a person who you have spent your life watching grow into themselves, grow into this confident and self-assured individual, someone you had always looked up to, only to watch that person shatter in seconds. I watched her as she drew in on herself, head bent towards the ground, crying at the feet of a monster. Because in that moment Jake was a monster, and I knew he had truly broken her this time.

Knowing there was no making this better, I ran inside my house, shaking my dad awake, bawling nonsensical words about Jake hurting Ilene. He ran outside, my father, a large, top-heavy, burly man, bare-foot in his blue sweats, eyes suddenly alert despite the early morning wake up call. One glimpse of my father had Jake jumping into his car and taking off down the street. My dad walked into the middle of our street, barefoot on the tough asphalt, and stared down the empty expanse of road. He silently gravitated towards Ilene’s form huddled on our driveway, and cautiously knelt down, and gently lifted her onto her feet. Meeting them in the middle I grabbed her hand, and we walked her into the house. Setting her on my bed, I got out her pajamas, and while she was changing, I got her an ice pack for the bruises he had left on her arms, walking past my father in the living room making camp on the couch; he wanted to make sure Jake wouldn’t come back. I put Neosporin and a Band-Aid on the cuts on her knees from when he had pushed her to the ground, and proceeded to tuck her into my bed.

When I woke up in the morning Ilene wasn’t there; she had left before I’d woken up and had gone to go meet up with Jake to get her stuff back, her having made these plans after having stolen my phone to text him all night. She texted me later that day saying that Jake had apologized, that they had worked everything out. I didn’t respond to her message, and I continued to ignore the ones that followed for the rest of the summer. I couldn’t understand how she could let someone treat her that way.

We eventually made up before I left for college again a few weeks later, and Ilene did eventually get out of her relationship with Jake, but it took her a full year to do so. It took her hiding in a Jack in the Box bathroom from him after he became physical in the midst of another one of their fights to finally decide, “Enough was enough”. I had talked with her while she sat in the single stall bathroom in California, and I from my bedroom in Montana, as we both waited for the police to arrive to escort Jake away. That was the last she saw of Jake, and the last I heard of him. Jake has now become somewhat of a conversational taboo for us, we neatly tucked him away, and filed the experience under the ‘no discussion’ category. And that’s the end of it.