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Letter to a Friend

by William C. Riley

I can't remember how we met. One day you weren't there and the next you were. I do remember riding my bike the ten blocks, from my house on Elm Street to yours on Tara Court, to see you almost every day. And the times we walked home from Four Georgians Elementary and played at your house. And I remember how excited we both were when we found out I would be living just down the street from you.

I remember all those nights staying at one another's house, though it was considerably more fun to stay at yours. After all, you had a Nintendo and we could stay up late playing games. My family never could afford a game system, but we would rent one sometimes. I remember begging my mom the first time you stayed at the house. I didn't want you to think I wasn't cool. Heck, I would have done anything to be cool in your book, even if it didn't make any sense.

I remember when my body started to change. I was scared and anxious, but you showed me I wasn't alone. We were way too young, but in the moment we were doing what felt natural. We explored ourselves and one another and it felt like we were closer for it. I could tell you anything and know you'd support me and we were free to try just about anything with one another without fear.

I remember the day I said, "No." All day, you had been hinting. After all, we had done it several times and we both enjoyed it. But that day was different. I don't know why I wasn't interested, but I remember I just wanted to play games and laugh and joke with my best friend. It didn't matter how many times you suggested. I just kept saying no. You got frustrated after a while and eventually went silent while we took turns playing.

I wish I didn't remember the rest of that night. Your mom called us up to bed. We went up to your room and pulled the mattress off the top bunk for me. I was already in my pajamas—a t-shirt and a pair of sweats—when you stripped down to nothing. I lay down and you turned off the light before going to bed. I figured you'd take care of yourself and then go to sleep and I tried to let my mind wander off and I lost track of time. It seemed like just a few minutes or maybe it was an hour.

I remember hearing you get up. I thought you were going to put on some clothes, but instead you got down on my bed. My heart raced when you threw my covers aside and pulled down my sweats. I shivered and said, "No," again. Maybe I wasn't loud enough. I tried to say it again, but you pressed yourself into me and I went silent. Everything hurt, but I was too afraid to scream out. You didn't seem to care while I whispered, "No," over and over into my pillow.

I remember that night every time I lay with my husband. When you were done, you pulled up my sweats and put on a pair of your own before stepping out to the bathroom. I can sometimes still hear the sink running as you cleaned yourself while I lay shivering and cold on that mattress. Despite my repeated refusal, my body betrayed me and left me with a mess of my own. I had forgotten about that until recently. I said, "No," but maybe I meant yes?

I remember the feeling of your skin on mine, your weight against me. I remember thinking I should yell or cry out, fight back and get you off of me. For years, I was conflicted on why I didn't. Each time I think about it, I come back to the same thing: I didn't fight back and I didn't yell, because I was afraid of losing your friendship. That same reason was why I never said, "No," to you again. If you wanted me, I was only too happy to say yes.

I remember when I heard you took your own life. We hadn't spoken in well over a decade, but the mention of your name brought it all back. Like most people, I wondered why you did it. You had everything: a wife, two kids, a good home and a job you seemed to like. But we never really know the inner lives of others and there was something you struggled with too. There were many nights where I contemplated taking my own life. I hated who I was, but I never could end it.

I may not be able to remember how we met, but I will never forget how I felt that night. Every moment is

etched in my mind. What I can do, however, is stop allowing that moment to have power over me. No longer will I let you define who I am. I am not a victim; I am a survivor. I survived that moment and every day since and I will not let you take that away from me. I survived the agonizing way I felt about myself and I learned not only to love myself, but to love another. My future is not for you to determine, but for me to live.