

The Most Intimate Enemy

*Love, sex, and coming to
terms*

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“It was dark on the street,” Jorge said to me. He’d been walking alone through his L.A. neighborhood when a car pulled up beside him. A couple of guys climbed out, tall and shadowed. A bolt of fear jolted Jorge into action—he turned to run, but one man lunged and grabbed him around the knees. Jorge hit the ground, kicking and yelling and squirming until he got a foot free and booted the guy hard. Then he ran like lightning, asthma be damned.

“When I got home, my mom could tell that something had happened,” Jorge continued. Maybe it was the sweat on his face and how his knees couldn’t stop shaking. And yet, he hadn’t even really reached home. Jorge, his mother, and his sisters had taken shelter with a family friend for the past weeks; Jorge’s father had been discovered cheating yet again, and this time they had all bailed on him. Despite the limited breathing space—seven people, one apartment—they stuck together, furiously adamant.

Then, Jorge’s father was lighting up their phones. “What’s going on? These bastards are calling and saying that they’ve got Jorge and that if I don’t pay up I’ll never see him again.”

Jorge explained—not to his mother but to me, his girlfriend, sitting bewildered as he dramatically recounted his summer vacation—that his family had money. That his family, who scraped by, week by week, squeezed tight into their closet of a townhouse, were juicier pickings than the majority of the Mexican border-town populace. Just a few dozen miles south of San Diego, where we lived and went to school, some people were so money-hungry that they’d kidnap your kids and send back their fingers to force you into submission. They targeted families who lived in the dreamland.

Jorge was the only member of his family to attend a four-year college. If he made it to graduation, his computer science degree would lift his family out of poverty and carry them into the star-studded horizon. That meant they might cough up all they had and more

to get him back. Also, they loved him.

“Anyways, we didn’t give them what they wanted. Everything turned out okay,” Jorge said. “But what I really wanted to tell you, Liz, is...” —he took my hand— “that night, as I was going down and fighting for my life, I thought to myself, I wish I could see her one last time.”

He gazed into my eyes, finished with his tale of heroism and undying love.

“You are so full of shit!” I yelled in his face.

It had not been a good summer for our romance. Over the last months, we’d taken turns interrogating each other about various crimes:

JORGE: I saw your browser history. You read *Yu Yu Hakusho* fan fiction when I’d asked you not to! I know what happens in fan fiction! That series is my childhood favorite and now you’ve soiled it!

LIZ: You didn’t tell me not to. You said, “If you do read, don’t let me find out!”

JORGE: What? No! Well, whatever, now I know! What exactly did you read? Show me! [*He shoves his laptop forward.*]

LIZ: [*Thinks: only a story about one of your favorite characters boning his mortal enemy.*] I don’t remember.

JORGE: Lies! I bet they were doing weird sex things!

LIZ: It was just a random story.

JORGE: I bet you masturbated to it!

JORGE: What is this? [*Holds up a small, black notebook.*]

LIZ: My old poetry homework?

JORGE: What is this?! [*Opens the notebook to an erotic poem featuring him and a mutual male friend.*]

LIZ: Uh, you were never supposed to find out about that... Sorry.

JORGE: I—I can’t even—! [*Tears up the pages.*]

JORGE: [*Over Skype*] I wanted to call you to cheer you up.

LIZ: I feel really guilty about doing all this stuff to you. I think you'll be better off without me.

JORGE: No! If you break up with me, I will kill myself.

LIZ: I'll call the police.

[Jorge grabs his inhaler and starts huffing and puffing, dead set on overdosing. Liz picks up their phone but can't remember his address despite having bunked in his apartment for so long that his roommates tried to charge her rent. In her panic she can see it clearly: wailing ambulances and police cars racing around and around his block their sirens smearing into red streaks of light while Jorge lies prone in his room breathing better than he has ever breathed in his life...]

Jorge had charged into our relationship ready to drink deep from the soul of a beautiful, pure-hearted maiden who would give him marriage, babies, and 'til death do us part. But over the course of our first year together, he slowly discovered the true me: a money-hoarding porn enthusiast who was as feminine as a piece of cardboard. It did not help that I mistakenly told him that I was a masturbation addict. Combined with the fact that I had a thing for one of the characters in the musical *Cats*, Jorge decided that I was some sort of perv extraordinaire.

He was not far from the mark. The earliest fantasy I can remember was hatched at age nine and involved Luke Skywalker, a cage, and several giant space worms. Every morning I would spread my legs into a taut V and rock my clit against a tiny fist. Afterward my knuckles would smell tangy, my damp underwear riding up into sensitive seams. Later, I would masturbate on loop underneath my school desk and in the backseat of the car.

For the most part, I tried to be discreet. The only sure witness to my sweaty, sticky magic was the family golden retriever. One day, I decided to rub one out right in front of him as he dozed on the couch. Buddy perked to life, wide eyes asking, *What the hell is she*

doing? I imagined that he would tell his dog-friends about me and was suddenly filled with shame.

As I grew older, my exhibitionism evolved into a hunger for knowledge. My family was no help, for there was an unspoken rule that we should not speak of sex. My few questions hit a wall of angry dismissal—“This is trouble!”—or discomfort—“Let’s stop talking about this!” Even my sister, older by only two years, maintained the silence my parents had laid down. And so I found better teachers deep in the asshole of fanfiction.net. There, formed under the heat and pressure of innumerable collective minds, I found diamonds of the human imagination—glittering, raw fantasies waiting for anyone who dared unearth them. As I read, I learned many things and asked even more questions, like “why is he touching his nipples?” and “why does this horse have two penises?” and “people really like this stuff?” and “maybe I do too?”

I emerged from the internet no longer a girl but a woman. I continued to study sex with a relentless fascination. In college, I majored in gender studies and interned at the local LGBT community center. I hung out with ardent feminists and angry queers, my own budding activism revolving around queer, positive sexuality. My enthusiasm for the subject was something Jorge cursed during our relationship—he remained convinced that I was a deviant in need of correction. That I was rotten to the core and, what’s more, that I liked it.

“Sometimes, I think God wills me to live,” Jorge once said. So far in his twenty-five-year-old life, he’d survived three near-fatal accidents.

The first involved being speared on a table leg. He’d tried to do a back flip off the couch but crashed into a glass table and stabbed himself in the back. Several stitches later, the doctor showed him an X-ray of his chest. He’d almost punctured a lung.

The second was a stroke. When his dad beat his mom, Jorge would crawl into a corner and will his chest to not explode from the

need to cry. He held it all in until he woke up one day and couldn't move half of his body. Each night his mom coated his paralyzed side in a white, creamy, chili pepper paste to wake up his nerves; a single whiff would burn the inside of his one working nostril. It took a month for his body to wake up, his flesh on fire.

The third was a car accident. He'd been riding shotgun along the freeway when a neighboring car rammed into his vehicle. All passengers emerged unharmed save for Jorge, who hadn't buckled his seatbelt all the way through and was hurled through the windshield. He spent the night in critical condition.

"God wills it!" Jorge said.

I didn't really know what it meant to be a Jehovah's Witness. One of the first times I tried to talk to him about it, I accidentally called his god "Jenovah."

"That is a *Final Fantasy* character!" he howled.

His family, who were all Jehovah's Witnesses save for his father, had strict rules. No sex. No kissing. No blood transfusions, including rare steak and sushi. Some of the rules also loosely applied to romantic partners. "If you got a tattoo, I would have to dump you," he said.

The unspoken rule was that he could only date straight. "I'm giving up God because I love you. Please don't tell my family you're queer though!" he said.

"Don't give up your religion for me," I said.

"Well, I sort of already am, if we are together."

Jorge had kissed me on our first date. He slept over that night, and the next morning he climbed in bed with me. Within a few months we started taking off our clothes. He had hardly needed any convincing. He thought himself in love.

Jorge's craving for romance was fueled partly by his dad, a rubbernecking husband who, at critical times, had no interest in fatherhood or family life. "He wasn't present at my birth, nor the birth of my sisters," he said. "He was out partying with friends. My mom went into labor by herself." He had even once badgered Jorge's

mother into sex despite having “a strange something” on his penis.

“I will never be like him,” Jorge said, more to himself than anyone else. Even before meeting me, he’d have dreams of rescuing his beloved from zombies, demons, and other whatnots of the underworld. Maybe he’d get torched, mutilated, or even die, but it didn’t matter as long as he could be her hero. “She used to be in shadow. Now she has a face,” Jorge said dreamily, his head floating up, up, and away. Three months into our relationship, he started speaking of marrying me and how many babies he wanted.

“So you like babies,” I responded, my nose buried in homework. He could talk all he wanted. It wouldn’t affect anything I said or did.

The one thing Jorge could not be for me was, to his deep shame, a dashing prince. His prominent nose was slightly hunchbacked, and his face was so round that it made him feel fat. Also, he was dark-skinned enough to pass as Indian. He told me about how, as a kid, some of his schoolmates had teased him about being so dark.

“They told me I was dark because I was dirty,” he said. “I went home that night and scrubbed myself all over with a pumice stone. Scrubbed myself raw.”

I reassured him that I found his nose to be powerful and distinguished, and that, yes, I knew he was not Indian. More importantly, I liked him because of how he cried when talking about his mother, a woman who belted him over poor report cards because she envisioned for him a future. I liked how he’d turned down an internship at Raytheon Defense Company because he didn’t want to build weapons. I liked how his teachers thought he’d flunk middle school yet here he was in college. It was his understanding of struggle that initially drew me to him, stories that he imparted to me during late-night bus rides home from capoeira practice. I was too self-aware of my own naiveté, a girl who didn’t understand the word “fortunate” despite the many chidings from her parents. Every now and then they would impart upon me short clips of rebuilding their lives after the Vietnam War, and that hardship was something that Jorge knew, or at least more than I did. From that well of admiration sprang caring, then love.

Neither of us truly understood the difficult intersections of our relationship. Most of the time, the field of war was quiet. I kept most of my sex politics at school, and Jorge was too busy with *World of Warcraft* to rag on the gays. Our honeymoon months were filled with taco runs, capoeira on the beach, and watching anime while burritoed in the same blanket. Our time spent together sated my craving for close companionship, the sort of easy bond between people that I had sought since beginning college but could never cement with anyone else. He was easily the closest friend I'd made since middle school. And despite my aromantic personality, I found myself giving nods to Jorge's cliché declarations.

"Love in the face of all odds! Opposites attract!" Jorge said.

"Um, I don't really think so but sure, whatever," I said.

Our love flowered in the darkness of our ignorance and shriveled under the inevitable dawn of reality. Near the end of things, Jorge admitted that, at times, he had been on the verge of believing that LGBT people really deserved equality. Each word was a cinder on his tongue.

"Good! At least I had gotten somewhere!" I almost responded. I reined it in because I, in my own private moments of emotional exhaustion, had thought that maybe homophobia was how things should be.

In high school, I read the entirety of *The Rape of Nanking* without ever knowing what rape was, for how can we understand rape if we never know consent?

Day One of seventh grade sex-ed: anxious silence, my classmates gripped by a peculiar disturbia. Not a peep from the usual troublemakers. All eyes were on the teacher, who spoke in a slow, soothing voice, pausing many times for gravity. She laid down a new set of class rules: no laughing, don't ask dumbass questions, etcetera.

The tension in the room confused me. Reproduction. Big deal. Animals even did it on TV as delivered by *Nature* and other documentaries. I spent most of class time attempting to puzzle out the

tension and therefore failed to absorb most of the educational material. As the days passed I grew more disturbed, for underneath my teacher's solemn sobriety and the anxiety of my classmates I could feel fear—a fear of sex buried in their hearts, buried so deep that they didn't even know it was there.

I could have stayed quiet, but for a good student I have always been a tad dimwitted. I stuck my neck out. “You said sperm travels through water. Does that mean we can get pregnant in swimming pools?”

Giggles—the scornful kind that slips between tight lips and nests in brains. The teacher did not shush the laughter as she had done at previous times. Instead, she asked me what was required of a girl to become pregnant. I failed to give any answer because I was too busy wondering what I had done wrong.

After my two minutes of public shame, my deskmate turned an inch in my direction. “That sounded *perverted*,” she said, glaring at me from the corner of her eye as if a full-on stare might soil her. Throughout the rest of class, I felt like an alien lost amongst the human race, clueless to native customs and terrified of its own difference. Everyone understood something that I didn't, and not only was no one going to explain, they were also going to judge me for not knowing. That something wasn't sex itself; it was how to talk about it, what opinions to have about it, and how to be appropriate, polite, clean. As my deskmate spent the remainder of the year flinging similar admonitions for my slightest innuendo or slips of tongue, her fear and shame took root inside of me. I spent the next years skirting the borders of sexual propriety, terrified of crossing lines but also unsure where they were drawn.

The process of initiation was never discussed. I left sex ed with the assumption that sex simply happened, natural as the seasons. While I understood more by high school, some of the pieces were still missing as my history teacher handed me back my *Nanking* paper, commenting that I hadn't delved into the true horrors of war. My paper analyzed straightforward violence—massacres, executions, the brutalization of corpses. Nothing about rape. I would have written

about it had I managed to comprehend what it was. I had looked it up in the dictionary multiple times yet consistently failed to understand.

Sex—the raw, basic act—I understood. Society’s lingering puritanism, I also understood, having been bullied in its name. But as I delved deeper into the porny pit of the internet, I began to grasp the fuller spectrum of human sexuality and its best friend, the sexual fantasy. The smut I read made me quiver with anticipation. Made me laugh so that fruit juice jetted from my nose. Made my heart pang because sometimes sex made love hurt all the more. I’d curl up on the floor with a terrible grin and think, *yes, this is why people love sex*.

And so I felt a warm swell of pride when, after a heavy petting session, Jorge came to the same realization. “At first, I thought this sort of stuff was bad. But now I can see that I was just afraid.”

I should have known that it wouldn’t have been so simple, that he would miss something along the way.

Jorge’s sexual repertoire consisted of kissing, hugging, and mumbling sweet nothings to me while I studied. I therefore took it upon myself to introduce this virgin to the ways of the ass.

“Hand.” I placed him appropriately. “Now grab.”

He grabbed. *Amazing*, said the light in his eyes.

However, he didn’t know when to stop. He groped me morning, noon, evening ... on the street, at the park, outside of class, up the stairs, down the driveway. Once, on our way to the bus stop, he grabbed me so hard that I yelped and leapt out of his hand. I whirled around and was met with a smirk.

“Respect!” I shouted.

“You think I don’t respect you?” he said.

Telling him to stop was like talking to a wooden door. A door that adored me, and had legs with which to follow me around and feelings that hurt. I wasn’t sure how to deal with it. I had previously only encountered men who were feminists, ignorant men who should become feminists, or lost causes. Never before had I met a man who thought himself a champion of women but was actually one of the dickheads we both complained about.

Quickly, Jorge was moving on to phase two. One day, he honked both my pancake-tits and declared, “These are mine!”

“No, they are not!” I said, too baffled and outraged to say anything more.

“Okay, they’re ours!” His hands continued to squeeze me.

Jorge’s many violations were not simply those of my body. “I’ve done something bad,” Jorge said. He smelled of both shame in his wrongdoing and pride in his own cleverness.

“You’ve broken into my laptop,” I said. I had noticed him eyeing my keyboard numerous times.

“It was really easy!” Jorge pulled the computer out of his backpack and put it on my lap. “Password?” An insult.

I typed it in, knowing what was coming.

“Your browser history,” Jorge said, “is full of this—“

Cue assorted thumbnails of ninja porn: anime boys tangled together in various positions of rapture.

To me, these were fodder and nothing more, yet when I saw Jorge coiled tight with hurt, my confidence wavered. The old fear of sex—the voice that had shamed me for so long—rose up from deep within me. It had lain in wait for this moment of weakness. I tried to imagine things from his perspective, that sexuality outside the bounds of our relationship was betrayal, and suddenly I understood his hurt.

Guilt held me in the palm of its hand. If our relationship was to survive, one of us would have to cross over and leave their truths behind.

“From now on, you will not look at anything sexual,” he said. There was no questioning his authority, for he was righting an inherent wrong. I nodded not out of shame, but because I could feel his wound.

The madness had begun:

Yes, I will not look at any more porn.

I won’t masturbate by myself.

I will not read or look at anything with a sexual theme, even

purely educational material.

I will not take an LGBT-related job in the future. No working at community centers or activist nonprofits.

I am straight.

Though my vibrantly queer and feminist school circles slowed my descent, no parachute could save me from self-demise. I strove to drain myself of my sexual identity, even verging on refusing to do parts of my gender studies schoolwork. My relationship with Jorge ceased to be about loving him and became about being a proper girlfriend. Loyalty was due to the man who had showed me so much devotion and sacrifice, or so we both believed. Still, deep inside of myself, I clung to the belief that my sexuality was a good thing, a wonderful thing. As long as I kept this secret close at heart, I felt I could still be a whole person.

His assaults picked up again when we were on better terms, flagging when he was mad at me. When summer break hit, I gained a bit of sanctuary and kicked my brain into gear, pushing the issue with a Skype call.

“You’re molesting me, and you need to apologize,” I said.

It was a word he recognized—one meant for criminals. He whined and writhed, but I kept him pinned until he surrendered in a burst of heat: “Fine! I’m sorry!”

Soon after we rejoined in the fall, I had been heading out the door when I felt his hands squeezing me through my jeans. I spun around in time to catch the fringes of him darting into his room. I found him curled facedown on the bed. He looked so pitiful that I forgot that I was the victim in the scenario.

“If I tell you, you have to promise not to laugh or joke about it.” Jorge said.

We were muddling through an evening at Islands Restaurant. We had just finished a round of arguing about each other’s shortcomings and were nursing our bruises with hamburgers. The waitress had just brought Jorge a root beer, his go-to drink whenever

eating out. I thought he'd forgotten to ask for one when the waitress delivered one seemingly unbidden.

"Well..." Jorge climbed over a hitch in his throat. "I told the waitress to bring me one. With my mind."

A gulf of silence. Then, I said, "How about you tell me something right now."

"It only works with people who believe," he said.

"Well, how come that waitress?"

"She believes!"

According to Jorge, his grandmother had some *indio* in her, and it was through her blood that he was able to tap into the minds of others. Later on in the year, he would claim that he also had the power to teleport.¹ I should have hauled my ass out the door, but I was busy drowning in my own inertia.

Despite his superpowers, Jorge still managed to get his ass beat on a routine basis. Each new quarter shot bullet holes through his GPA. Even so, he was too strait-laced to use his powers to cheat, letting himself inch closer and closer to academic expulsion. Sometimes he squeezed by with no more than a few points or the pity of certain professors. I pushed him to study with classmates. Two hundred students in one lecture hall—at least a few of them couldn't be jerks. Then one day he came home, livid, shocked, and demoralized.

"I went to the library for a group project meeting. The rest of the dudes were a bunch of Asian and Indian guys," he said. "When I walked up to them and introduced myself, one of them was like, 'Phew! You're Indian! From your name on the roster I thought you'd be Mexican. Good thing you're not!' I just turned around and left.

¹ It is in my opinion that, science aside, Jorge does not possess any supernatural powers. This is because, in casual conversation regarding a superpower of choice, he would often forget that he was already gifted. "If I could have a superpower, I would want super-speed. So I could run around and save all the women in trouble," he said. When teleportation renders super-speed obsolete, the latter is only for stroking your ego.

“By God, I’m tired,” he continued. He looked up at me from his position on the carpet, half-cast in gloom. “Liz, if it weren’t for you I’d already be gone. Thank you.”

I could feel his need, and not just emotionally. I felt him in the way his breath trembled on my skin. In the way he’d take my hand and, with painful embarrassment, placed it over the wood pulsing beneath his zipper. Our heavy petting had awakened the beast within, and it went unspoken that Jorge wouldn’t tame it on his own. He’d not fared well over the summer—twice he’d sprouted a raging erection in the middle of the day. It had been choking to death in his pants so he let it out. He tried playing video games and taking a cold shower and napping and thinking unsexy thoughts, but it remained a terrible and mighty obelisk to the gods. He had class but couldn’t bear to stuff it back inside his jeans so he waited and waited and finally, finally...

Eight hours, birth to death.

Here sat a man who had faced incredible challenges yet who was rendered helpless by his own erections. I leashed in my ire by thinking about where he was coming from—that to him, God was good in a world of barbed wire fences and drug clans for neighbors. I wanted him to survive school. I wanted him to graduate, to grab that computer science degree and fly. My own work dealt greatly with underprivileged students, and here was one of them, right in front of me. How could I turn him away?

Each time I would take him in hand, thinking, “this is what justice looks like.”

He felt like such a whore, splattering himself with yogurt while I hunkered over him, my exhaustion hidden behind a plaster mask. During one session, I gave up and lay my head on his stomach, to which he said, “awww, Liz what’s wrong?” Somewhere along this timeline of hand jobs he’d begun to believe they were acts of love.

His hands kept diving into my pants. Telling him off grew so tiring that I took to armoring myself with baggy underwear. Upon touch he’d whip his hand out of my jeans with a giggly “ew!” and I could continue on with my day. My best defense was a satiny,

champagne colored butt-bag that I had accidentally pilfered from my mom's cabinet. I told him exactly whom it belonged to and business had never ended faster.

Once in a while I would wake up in the middle of the night, roused by his fingers stroking my labia. I'd yank him out of my underwear and roll back over, too tired to say anything.

"There will be no secrets between us," Jorge once said at the beginning of our relationship. I'd nodded, because what do you say to a boy who'd just finished shining a light into his father's basement of parental failures and asked you not to fail him too? I felt like I needed to confess every piece of shit I'd ever rolled myself in—the fantasies, the weird crap I'd written, even the things I'd done before we were together—so he would know what sort of degenerate he was dating. My back ached under the stone slabs of my guilt. My emotional world narrowed down to weeks of anxiety, painful confessions, and the cool balm of his mercy. He doled out forgiveness like favors, his resentment lying underneath because how dare I have such a dirty history?

Sometimes you ponder someone's future, what they might be like ten or so years down the road. The specter of violence loomed over Jorge's shoulder because he'd been the one to pry his father's hands off his mother's throat. I wondered about what I'd do if he'd turn his fists on me. I'd tell someone and leave, or so I had thought at the beginning of our relationship. Now, as I sat on the carpet of his apartment, submerged beneath the cold, cloudy waters of depression, I knew that I wouldn't do anything at all.

The question of my own desires never arose until I graduated and followed my financial needs back to my parents' home in San Jose. Jorge stayed in San Diego, having flunked too many classes, and was preparing to embark on a grueling sixth year of college. The distance allowed my mind to clear. The trance of routine lifted, as I was no longer in close enough proximity to be groped, give hand jobs, or be shamed on an easy basis. I took my first fresh breath of sanity. Then another, another, another.

I called him over the phone to break it off. At first he resisted, but then he came up with his own excuse to mutually end our pain. “You don’t believe in God? We’re breaking up!” he shouted. Never mind that I’d told him my religious viewpoints on our first date. Perhaps he was realizing it for the first time.

Whichever it was, I did not care. I had freedom.

Freedom?

The rage awakened several months after our break up. Blasts of heat that would flare up and overtake me at any point in the day. At night I lay in bed, my mind buzzing with curses and comebacks that I wish I’d voiced when I had the chance. And sometimes the trauma pursued me in sleep. Once, I dreamt of Jorge looming in front of me, squeezing my breast. In the distance I could hear screaming, but I couldn’t think or move, a nuclear storm cloud building inside my chest. With that I lurched upright in bed, mouth open, my voice dying in the darkness of my room.

A couple years passed, but the nature of my anger remained relatively unchanged. At one point, my hatred flared to the point that I had imaginary violent confrontations with him. In an effort to blow off steam, I wrote him an email:

LIZ: The memory of your sexual abuse is causing me a lot of stress.

Sometimes I get so angry that I imagine myself chopping your arms off with my forty-inch, carbon steel longsword. In self-defense. Don’t worry, though. These are just fantasies. I won’t actually harm you.

JORGE: [texting] A:prOJK/g:\$ {. @&mpeG. S#.sWd:[\$q [interpreted as: What?! What?! But I was a great boyfriend!]] Can I call you? I’m at work. I can’t concentrate.

LIZ: I want a sincere apology. Respond to the email if you’re going to talk.

JORGE: I need some time to think this over. Is that okay?

Never another word from him.

That was fine. Deep inside I knew he was not my enemy.

Biochemically, anger only lasts for ninety seconds. When triggered, the brain releases chemicals and the body rises to the challenge. Once the timer rings, the chemicals dissipate, but when we return to our angry thoughts we willingly reignite our own pain. Jorge is gone, yet always present, and I am burning, burning.

My sister once asked me why I insist on being hateful despite the years. The truth is I wish I could learn how to forgive. But it's not a matter of forgiving Jorge. I wish I could learn how to forgive myself. For all his violence, it is my own weakness of character that hurts the most. I want to forgive myself for being weak. For weathering his wrongdoings. For giving up my truths. For believing that he loved me when what he loved most were his fantasies. For blaming him for my misery when all I had to do was walk away.

Once in a while, I remember a moment when I was crying on his shoulder from the stress of our abusive relationship and he scooped me up off the toilet seat and rocked me like a baby. The dignified part of myself stirred, though only faintly; how small she had become, buried beneath self-doubt and a mistaken sense of responsibility. I was too weak to feel properly insulted and so mired in my own inertia that I couldn't even stop crying.

I hate that crying girl with a cannibalistic passion. She is a specter living somewhere in between my ribs, and I am always attempting to purge her. Sometimes I wish for men to try to wrong me so that I can prove to myself that I'm strong. Whenever someone offends me and I fail to rise up, the anger takes hold. My thoughts fester in my brain for days, coloring the later weeks, echoing into the months. Only when the situation is righted does the noise stop. *If* things are righted.

They say that the strongest people are the ones who love themselves. I barely loved myself during my time with Jorge, and I certainly don't love myself now. But maybe I can extend a hand of kindness to that lonely, crying girl. If I can spare some self-compassion, maybe she can, after so long, find a way to dry her tears.

