

By Any Other Name (Non Fiction)

I asked him if he loved me.

“Yea,” he said. “Why did you have to ask me that?”

I needed to know. I needed to know there was some merit in becoming a liar and living in a state of perpetual confusion with a classic “woman scorned” hating me. But perhaps I should go back and explain how I came to be this fool in love.

It started with music.

The notes clung to the moss-colored pews and hovered in the balcony. They shined in the stained-glass window and the offering plates. They covered hymnals and bibles and floated in the baptismal water. Every Sunday, I heard him play piano, so smoothly, like water over marble. He was young, and handsome. I sat in the balcony, sneaking in and out every Sunday. I loved to hear him play.

After weeks of avoiding social contact, I finally decided to hang out with the college and career group. He was there.

“I’m Dillan. What was your name?” he asked, shaking my hand.

“Jenna.” I must have told him my name at least five times. Once he called me Mildred, then remembered Jenna, and finally settled for Jen. They were only names though. I grew out of them like lace-trimmed socks. I grew into them as our relationship advanced.

A couple of weeks later, my acquaintances from the group filled the seats behind me on the bus. We were going to North Carolina to conquer the snowy slopes, but found, instead that ice and mud had already done so. On our way to the cabins, Dillan sat next to me and remembered my name. I didn’t say much but he said enough.

“Why didn’t your girlfriend come?” I had heard rumors that he had a girlfriend, but I had never seen her or heard Dillan talk about her, and was, admittedly, prying.

“She doesn’t really hang out with this group. It’s not really her thing. We have a weird relationship. I don’t see her that often.”

“Then why are you dating?”

“It’s kind of hard to explain. We’ve been friends since we were kids, and I guess it just seemed natural to start dating, like it was the next step. We’ve been dating for four years. I don’t want to marry her though.”

I thought it was very strange, and I wondered if she knew that she was wasting time with him. I decided never to like him more than a friend.

Since the weather didn’t allow us to ski much, I played euchre with Dillan and two others the whole weekend.

After the ski trip, Dillan and I started talking on the phone a lot.

“Tell me a secret,” I said.

“Like what?”

“Anything you want to tell me.”

“You tell me something first.”

“Fine.” I thought for a moment, trying to decide what I should tell him. “I want my husband to recite chapter four of the Song of Solomon while we’re doing it... in Spanish.”

He laughed. "Why?"

"Because it would be amazing. I saw it in a movie once, and it was so romantic. And the guy was supposed to be a celibate priest."

Our innocent phone calls ate the moon away. It was intimacy that I shared with no other, intimacy that made me vulnerable. Oddly, I trusted him. He told me things about himself that swam through my veins, things that intrigued me. I trusted him to guard my secrets, to swallow them. They were connections and hours in us. They were leverage. I couldn't let myself fall into a place I wouldn't come out. He had a girlfriend, and despite his comments that I was intriguing and difficult to figure out, I couldn't become the drop of water dripping on his forehead slowly to drive him mad. Or perhaps I already had.

"Tell me a secret," I said.

"Ask me a question, and I'll answer it."

"Are you a virgin?" I asked, but then decided he didn't need to answer. Why else would he be dating a woman he didn't want to marry?

I escaped to Florida for the summer and assumed he would forget me, my cherry blossom perfume and blonde hair that, lately, I had been wearing curly. But he didn't. Foolishly, my blood ran hot beneath my skin every time he unexpectedly called, and my hands slightly shook when I heard his voice. Why did he call? Everyone expected him to be engaged soon. The ring would wrap around my throat and squeeze, the endless jeer that I could never have him. My disappointment would be as sour as the margaritas I drank. Being reasonable, I tried to forget him. I was unsuccessful.

Back from Florida, at the end of August, I turned twenty. While I was celebrating with friends, he was playing tennis.

Fall came quickly. A patchwork of yellows, oranges, browns, and reds cluttered the sidewalk and crunched beneath my feet as I shuffled through.

"I don't have a tent," I told Dillan.

"We'll share."

"I don't have a sleeping bag."

"We'll share."

He had invited me to go camping with him and our friend, so we ran off for the weekend. Dillan took a picture of me holding a leaf as big as my face.

The nights were cold and the firewood was wet. Without a fire, the three of us nestled together like sardines in the tent, the boys wrapped in sleeping bags and me under a blanket. The thin layer of plastic between me and the ground was not enough. I moved closer to Dillan, hoping his body would keep me warmer. He covered me with the edge of his sleeping bag, but the mountain air seeped in colder as it got later. He pulled me close, my body perfectly curved next to his. I snuggled under his sleeping bag, pretending to sleep. He lazily wrapped his arm around me and rested his hand between my legs. I couldn't sleep, thinking that it was all a mistake, and that he didn't realize what was happening as he slept. The next night was the same.

I woke to the crack of an ax splitting through wood. That afternoon, potato soup simmered over the campfire. Dillan took a picture of me reading Elie Wiesel and handed me a celery stalk.

“I have a confession to make,” he told me two months later. “Remember when we went camping? I wasn’t asleep.”

“Neither was I.”

I didn’t know what to do. I thought Dillan still had a backburner girlfriend, but he seemed more than interested in me.

It smelled of history, philosophy, and stories. Pages of ink filled the rows and shelves. I searched for books that smelled of José de Espronceda and romanticism in Spain. Dillan was listening to Bach. It was the first time he saw me naked.

We went to the library together several times to study, but we always ended up talking. This particular time he asked to see dirty photos of me on my computer, and I let him. I skimmed my fingers along the call numbers in the history aisle while he browsed my x-rated folder. I knew I shouldn’t have mentioned my extracurriculars in Florida to him, but I suppose part of me wanted him to look or else I would’ve kept it a secret. I let him borrow my computer that night under the stipulation that he wouldn’t look at the photos again.

“I have a confession to make,” he told me later. “I looked again.”

I smiled.

Statistics say eighty percent of massages end in sexual activity. Dillan came over to watch a movie but offered to give me a massage instead. I thought I would fall into the twenty percent. I lay on my bed, and he stood over me. His hands pressed deep into my back and shoulders. His hands almost fit completely around my waist. The room was warm with the glow of a small lamp, and music closed my eyelids. Soon he straddled me, still massaging. He lay down over me, still rubbing my shoulders. He kissed my shoulders and then my neck.

“Will you hump me?” He laughed softly after he said it. Somehow the question fit into the conversation, but I was surprised he asked so bluntly. I turned from my stomach to my back. I kissed his forehead, his ear, and then his neck. I felt like Julia Roberts from *Pretty Woman* as we kissed each other, but never on the lips. Everything would have become too personal. I pressed my lower body against him as if it was an accident while kissing. He did the same. Soon, the subtle became blatant, and I suppose I had answered *yes* to his question.

After secrets shared, camping, risqué photos and now a physical connection, I was much more involved than I intended to be. Where had I faltered to get myself into this? I had decided not to like Dillan, and I most definitely had very strong feelings for him. It had started with music, and it was laundry that sealed it.

My laundry was washing at his house. It took hours, late into the night, so I lay on the couch. Dillan was in his room. We text messaged each other, and he told me to sneak in and lie down with him. I quietly tip toed to his door, careful not to disturb his roommate who was sleeping with his door cracked open.

Lying in the bed together, I still hadn’t kissed Dillan on the mouth. He tried to, but I moved to kiss his neck. I was so close to his lips but could not bring myself to them.

“Jenna, do you want to kiss me?”

“Yes.” But I still didn’t. I told him I was scared, but of what, I wasn’t sure. “I might be bad at it. It’s been two years.” It had been since I broke up with my last boyfriend, and I had forgotten what it felt like.

He finally placed his hand on the back of my neck and pulled me close. I felt his breath on my lips, so warm. I then pressed my lips against his, softly. I felt his tongue touch mine, and I did not want to stop. That night, we told each other the secrets that we had kept from one another.

“I didn’t even like euchre when we first started playing.”

“Why did you play then?” I asked him. He brushed my cheek with his hand.

“Because you played.”

He told me I had been in his head since the ski trip. He told me he was on a break with his girlfriend, which was a relief. He told me everything he loved about me. I lay curled next to him under the blankets until the morning when I snuck back to the couch.

We became secretive. We became physical. We talked about love, but I always refused to answer his recurring question of “do you love me?” Of course I loved him, but I couldn’t let him know that and I didn’t want to lie either, so I changed the subject. No one knew about us. He was on a break with his girlfriend, but I knew they still saw one another. I didn’t know how often or in what capacity. The secrecy was fun, though sometimes I felt dishonest. But my constant state of arousal far outweighed any guilt. And Dillan’s late night visits made me forget about anything else.

January came again as did the annual ski trip that was renamed *winter retreat*. Not much euchre was played, but Dillan and I played other games. We snuck kisses in the cabins and on the slopes. When the pine trees screened us and snow dusted around us from blowing fans, we were in a snow globe as we kissed. My nose and ears became numb in the cold, so he wrapped his scarf tightly around me. With my arms spread, singing “the hills are alive with the sound of music,” he took pictures of me on top of the mountain.

That night he built a fire in the girls’ cabin. After he washed the soot from his hands, I came into the bathroom to kiss him. Our reflection in the mirror could be seen from the kitchen.

Summer was close, the sun begging anything to sweat. Dillan took me four-wheeling, and we rode to a lookout point where we sat with our feet dangling over the edge of a cliff making up a story about a girl named Fiona who licked the sun like a lollipop. I settled comfortably between his legs, leaning back against his chest with the valley before us and the river snaking through the trees.

“I love how every country has its own color scheme,” I said. “Like Thailand, I think of turquoise and dragon heads. And Greece, I think of crystal blues and white skirts. In Germany there are lots of grays and browns of paneled houses and kuku clocks. And here, there’s so much green everywhere.”

We stopped for barbecue and fried okra on the way home.

The May air was chilly at night, stars teasing in the sky, and I didn’t take time to find the moon. Dillan took me on a motorcycle ride, and my helmet that was too big clacked into his every time he shifted.

I wanted to do these things with him, spend time with him, but I was beginning to worry about his ex-girlfriend. Everyone thought that she and Dillan were still dating and no one knew about the two of us. And finally, I couldn't stand knowing that one night my legs would squeeze around his waist and the next night it could be her. So I wrote him a letter.

I cried and cried. My vision was blurred. The wipers smeared the sprinkling rain across my windshield, and the street lights were a smudge of yellow paint. When I got home, I sat on my bed, jacket and shoes on, too tired to do anything but sit. I had just given him the letter. He had to choose then: me, her, or neither. *Write back* was how I ended it. I don't know how long I had stared at the ceiling when my phone rang.

"I just read your letter."

"Oh." I hadn't expected him to call, especially that soon.

There was silence, the kind of silence that speaks neither for you nor against you.

"Jenna, do you think you would marry me?"

"Yes."

More silence. More breathing. More thinking. More.

"Do you love me?" I asked.

And this is where I began. I was a fool in love with a man who loved two women. Was it to be the familiar ex girlfriend that everyone expected or the exciting new flame no one knew about?

He invited me over the next night. I had planned on keeping physical distance, which was unsuccessful.

"Leave a mark," I said. He moved his lips to my neck. "In a place that doesn't show."

He continued down to the top of my ribcage and sucked gently.

My laundry was washing.

I kissed his neck, his chest, his stomach. I heard him breathing deeply as I moved my kiss down his body. He held my hair back and watched. I swallowed.

My laundry was drying.

We lay in the bed, waiting to hear his roommate's car pull in the driveway, but it never did.

We breathed. Together.

I left at two, without my laundry, and placed a note under his windshield wiper. "Write me." The mark stayed for days.

Low on my torso, etched on my right side, a lily blooms in a cross. The first time he saw my tattoo was in a photograph. The last time he saw this pink flower, his hands were running over the petals. Truth clung to the roof of our mouths. It was blankets and hidden kisses. Sometimes my friends asked about me and Dillan, and I always claimed we were only friends. His ex-girlfriend called me and blamed me for ruining her life and relationship with Dillan. I denied it.

I told Dillan to write back. The letter never came.

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