

## With Love

Hayley Scheuring

The room is spinning. I'm sitting underneath spotted sheets on a soiled mattress that lies dying on the floor. I close my eyes as my soul separates from my body, this beaten pile of bones reeks nothing but disappointment. I float above the mattress and stare down at myself. Looking down, I know that I am not that girl society expects me to be, that girl my mother wants me to be, that girl my father thinks I am. I lean against the cement block wall, breathing rhythmically in hopes of clearing my mind in preparation. I press my lips against the end of the cold hand-blown glass pipe. I inhale deeply; the color begins to fade from her face as she slowly becomes transparent. I inhale deeper until my lungs begin to burn. Exhale. She is gone. My mind begins to wander, prophesizing war on this world that I've come to hate. My world. This world that has been manipulated, completely influenced by someone else—him. My toes begin to tingle as numbness creeps up my legs and slowly blankets my body putting me at ease. I am stoned. This, I've convinced myself—my newly sculpted self—is love.

I search for him across the room and watch as he brings the prepared light bulb to his lips. His long black uncombed hair lingers over his wide brown eyes adding to that sexy sense of mystery that, for reasons unknown, keep me brainwashed. The bulb lights up as if some miraculous thought swam out of his brain and shot through his mouth. As the heat from the lighter penetrates the light bulb, smoke begins to come alive and swirls like a mini tornado inside the darkening glass. He inhales furiously. Methamphetamines enter his mouth and march down his throat, ready to attack his body. He will be up for days.

Snot lubricated my lips and dampened the sleeve of my shirt as I wiped the tears from my swollen red cheeks. I had shared everything with her, my best friend. Beth radiated a sense of confidence that I envied and, on many occasions, strived to emulate. We were the same height, but built completely differently. Entering the eighth grade, I was excited to begin wearing real bras and dreamed of the possibility of cleavage. Beth wore v-neck shirts exposing her plump, ample, full-grown breasts that hosted the label *D* and hypnotized every boy that saw them. I used to sit across from her at the lunch table and stare at her tantalizing, jiggling melons as she laughed, spilling bread crumbs down the base of her shirt. I stared with envy

as her breasts ate the crumbs with pleasure. I stared and so did the boys.

"I'd do anything for attention like that," I always joked, comforting Beth when she would complain about her various admirers. This response would soon become a reality.

Beth and I shared everything: clothes, secrets, feelings, and friends. I knew everything about her and she knew everything about me. We shared every flaw, every success and every tear, never failing to speak to each other daily for an entire year. I considered her family. She was the sister that God had forgotten to give me.

I sink down beneath the dirty sheets and let my mind wander. He sets the light bulb down and joins me, letting the mattress consume him. I stare at the ceiling as he drags his rough hand past my knee, caressing my thigh. I swallow, attempting to salivate. He kisses my neck and slips the round button of my jeans through its rightful opening.

I hate this. I always said that I was going to wait, but "this is love and love means sacrifice," or so he tells me.

I scan the ceiling searching for her—*that* girl. The girl I was before Beth, the girl I should be after him, the girl I need to be now. I wish she would come back and stop this. I wish she would once again become me. A drop of his sweat penetrates my face as he finds his way out off of the mattress and lights a cigarette. He leaves me.

Alone, I close my eyes and pray for her to come back. I curse myself for losing her in the first place. For ever taking that first hit, for ever dragging in that first breath of polluted air, for ever listening to him, meeting him, falling for him.

I was sitting in my assigned chair in room 403 waiting for my history class to start. I sat with my head perched on the base of my knuckles, daydreaming about what Beth and I would do for the weekend. A note came from across the room. I looked down at the piece of paper. My name stared back at me—my name in green pen with emphasis on the tails of each *y*; I knew this handwriting.

*In case you haven't noticed we are NOT talking. You just don't fit in with the rest of us. I talked to the girls and we all agree that we don't want you hanging out with us this weekend...or anymore. It's just girl code. You understand.*

*Oh, I cleaned my room and have all of your stuff. I will bring it to your locker tomorrow.*

*Beth*

I lost my best friend. She left, like a coward, through a note. I sat in that wooden desk contemplating what I could have possibly done to lose her, the sister God had forgotten to give me, Beth. The plastic base of the chair stabbed my thighs and sent pain up my back as I went over questions in my head. I could not wait for the bell to ring so I could find her in the hallway and ask her why we couldn't be friends anymore. So I could ask her what I had done to make her so angry. So I could tell her that, for whatever I had done, I was sorry.

She wouldn't listen. Every time I found her she just walked away and ignored me completely. She was angry with me for a reason that I would never truly understand, and she would get everyone to share her opinion as well. She convinced all of our friends to take her side. She had made everyone believe that I was some sort of traitor. Shortly after, the rumors began. Her rumors. They verified to anyone with a doubt that I was not good enough to be friends with her, and convinced everyone that they shouldn't be friends with me either. I sat alone at the lunch table. I spent my weekends at home, alone, with no one to call on the phone, no friends to confide in. She had taken it all away. Beth, this person that I had grown to love, this friend that I had trusted, this sister that I had shared everything with, was gone. I would sit on the edge of the lunch table silently--the lunch table where Beth and I once shared everything, that place where he first found me.

I close my eyes to hold in the tears. I think about him, how I got here, why I'm here, what he just did to me. I cringe knowing that I let him manipulate and take advantage of me, knowing that I let him steal a part of me. My toes tingle and the numb sensation begins to leave my body. The cocktail of marijuana and cocaine slowly fades away. I take a deep breath. The clean air fills my lungs and I know I can do this. I breathe deeper until my legs are filled with strength. I sink into the sheets and search through the waves until I find my pants. I slide them up to my knees and shimmy them the rest of the way up my thighs.

"Love means sacrifice," I repeat in my head. I would do anything for attention like that, anything for the love that Beth received daily. I would sacrifice, if that's what love means and if that's what it means to be loved.

I let the thoughts circle in my mind as I focus on the smoke swirling above my head. The air in the room becomes stale and singses the back of my throat. My mind begins to work as my high continues to fade away. The room that was circular forms corners, showing me there is a way out.

I glance at the staircase he once pushed me down. The stairs are wooden and unrefined with peeling blue paint and rough spots waiting to hand out splinters. Sacrifice. I examine the rest of the room. My eyes catch the pink reflection of my patent leather wallet that lies open on his lap as he slides the rest of the bills out of the pocket. This can't be love.

Love is something beautiful. Something people spend their lives dreaming about and searching for. Love is supposed to make you feel alive, feel wanted, feel good. I know this now. This is what I want.

It started that way. He would say the sweetest things and bring me up when I was down. When I cried about my loss, that heartache that happened weeks before we met, he comforted me. He told me I didn't need Beth, that she didn't value me, that she didn't love me. He would bring me flowers at school, buy me small gifts and call me just to hear my voice, or so he told me. He did all of this for me so I had to sacrifice for him, for love.

I stare at my wallet wilting over his knees. *My wallet, my money, my last sacrifice.*

I push myself against the cement block wall and kick the sheets down my legs until they come to rest at the bottom of the mattress. I take a deep breath and tell myself I can do this. I swing my legs over the side of the mattress and slide each foot into my canvas shoes. I tie each one carefully and tightly. I tell myself that I need to do this. I take another deep breath and I am ready. He looks up at me as I stand. His almond brown eyes pierce through me as he tilts his head, making his dark uncombed hair fall to one side. I exhale and walk toward him, eyeing the stairs with every step. He watches me until I am right in front of him. He smiles, thinking I'm ready to sacrifice some more. I pick up my purse that sits by his feet and snatch my wallet from his knees. I stare at him. His brown eyes glare back, screaming at me, trying to manipulate me, trying to stop me. I blink and turn for the stairs. As I begin to walk, he reaches for me gripping my wrist. My body becomes stiff, and for a moment I am still, I feel his grip loosen as he thinks he has won. He thinks I am going to turn around. He thinks I am going to stay, that I am going to sacrifice my thoughts again, my mind again, my body again. I reach my arm forward--escaping from his hand. I take a step forward onto the stairs. This is it. I jog my way up the staircase and keep my pace until I find the front door. I keep pushing until I've made it to my car. I rush until I'm out of the driveway and onto the road, heading away from his house.

I am gone. I'm sitting in the driver's seat with my hands clenched

on both sides of the wheel. I am ready to be her. I look into the rearview mirror, expecting to see him. Large Hazel eyes reflect back at me. I stare into those smiling hazel eyes, her hazel eyes, my hazel eyes. I exhale. I am her. I love her.

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**Hayley Scheuring**, after obtaining a degree in photography, was encouraged by a professor to study literature. In fall of 2008, she transferred to Iowa State and joined the English department, where she discovered her love for literature and writing. She is now a senior looking into grad school in hopes of continuing her education in the writing department.