

I Should Have Left Him Then (A Mad Lib)

Brevity / ISSUE 72 / JANUARY 2023 / NONFICTION

By Hayli Cox

You are at a frat party in Michigan—your first and only. Your cousin invited you to see the snow sculptures the houses erect every winter, mythical beasts glistening under clear February sky.

His frat is one of those academic, no-secrets-no-hazing ones, and you watch them sing _____
(silly song title)

as they gather behind the basement bar, arms around each other. You marvel at how your cousin has grown from the little boy who had been your best friend and are _____ to be his guest.

(positive emotional state)

You have recently started trusting men again, something several _____ have made difficult
(plural noun)

since childhood, but your cousin's friends are all kind and into the same nerdy things you are.

You brought your new boyfriend, _____, along to the party. Though outwardly charming, he
(name, male and unassuming)

has a short fuse and is always telling you to see a therapist, as if you haven't already tried that and everything else. His suburban childhood was idyllic, and hearing about yours makes him uncomfortable. You are with him because he is there, because you have just lost your partner to _____ and one before to _____. Because you believe you are _____, and

(choice resulting in death) (illegal substance) (adjective)

because you feel his abuse is what you deserve.

Your boyfriend is downstairs in the basement playing drinking games when you go up for water and a break from all the noise. A significantly younger boy stands in the kitchen, and he asks you who you know. You learn he is trying to get a dungeons & _____ campaign going

(creature, plural)

with your cousin, so you both pull out your phones and exchange _____. During this

(plural noun, innocuous)

exchange, your boyfriend pushes past you and out the door. He has been watching.

You know these moods, know you have to follow and find out what you have done. Intoxicated and afraid, you forget to put on your coat and boots before heading out into the snow. He stands between you and the door, just as he has trapped you so many times, and screams. This will go for an hour or more, until you figure out what you must do or say to get him to stop. He is always writing your story. *This*, he explains, *is why so much shit has happened to you. This is why you were _____.* You _____ *them.* You _____ *too much.* You are such a fucking

(verb, especially heinous) (verb ascribing blame) (verb, innocuous)

_____.
(derogatory noun)

He explains how it is all your fault—the man who pushed his way into your hotel room, took off your _____ and put your hand on his _____, that night you thought you would die. The _____ who stalked you while you were in an unfamiliar town at a conference. The countless men who called you jailbait from the time you turned thirteen, pulling you onto their laps at parties. The ex who would regularly _____ you with his mother in the next room, his hand over your mouth while you _____. You are out in the snow, bare, the temperature well below freezing, several feet of snow. It feels like _____.

You are reduced to _____.
(noun)

Later, you hear this story from many miles away, listening as though it happened to someone else. The festival is always the talk of the peninsula, and between spirited retellings of broomball games and laments over hangovers something more familiar murmurs. The sound of your boyfriend's screams had carried through all of Greek row, punctuating the night's festivities. *Nobody knows what happened to her, if he _____ her. She just disappeared.*

That was it, how you felt for so long. You still can't go back to that place.

That night, you delete the boy's number, as instructed, ignore the worried texts marked unknown. You drown yourself in _____ and _____ for two more years, lying face-down underneath him as he calls you his little _____, hiding your _____, avoiding his _____. He never _____ you, but he will leave so many marks on your body. Your therapist will later name the trauma _____. Even now, with _____ miles and a(n) _____ between you, you still sometimes wake up afraid.

—
[Hayli May Cox](#) is a PhD candidate studying Creative Writing and Gender Studies at The University of Missouri, though she's really a Michigander. Her stories and essays have found homes in places such as *DIAGRAM*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, *Sundog Lit*, *New Delta Review*,

and others. In her free time, Hayli paints, builds Lego worlds, and hikes around with a backpack full of field guides.