

## **My Escape**

**By Drew Peal**

I knew it would never last. There were a few instances where I would convince myself that a relationship with a hyper-masculine man, who had completely different life goals and ideals than me, was alright. Others thought I was succeeding, so was I not succeeding? But the puzzle pieces of our identities never fit together, and not in the cute “opposites attract” way. There was always a part of me that was outside of the relationship, that was living the way they wanted to. I was jealous of her. She had the ability to express her queerness. To express how much she hated all of the structures that the other parts of her were living in and abiding by. On the outside it was perfect, we would always get asked if we were going to get engaged, if we were moving in together soon. I think he thought those things were going to happen. He either rejected his queerness or never felt it at all, but I knew that we did not want the same life. There had only been one time in my life before him that I had been in my true form as a queer young woman, and that was with her. She was nothing like him. I thought that we might make it last. I thought she could escape me from heteronormativity.

She was mysterious in the most compelling, non-annoying way possible. I had never been more interested in an individual. At the age of fifteen, I could already see the life ahead of myself, and it was with her. I always knew my life would never go exactly the way a young woman’s life should go. I knew that the common life narrative did not fit me. Or that I did not fit inside of it. High school was when I met her — a time in a

young person's life when your peers, teachers, and parents are telling you who you should be, and how to get there, along with logarithmic functions and other things I haven't used since. I found myself resisting who they thought I should be. Resisting the small Albertan town way of life. She was my escape. But I was her fear. I was the gateway into a life that she was not supposed to lead.

Our secret courtship lasted a year. This time we created well-maneuvered plans where we would see each other, but remain at a safe distance apart so no one would suspect us. We only ever saw each other once that year where we were completely alone. Her room in the basement was cold and damp, the exact opposite of her. She was warm, inviting and smelled like a nice retail store. Her basement felt like a security blanket. It sheltered us from criticism and questioning. But internalization of societal criticisms had infiltrated our sacred space. After our year in hiding, I was ready to reveal my truth. She was not. This led to our demise. As I was embracing who I knew I was, she was rejecting who she was. This rejection was solely directed towards me. Her fear of who she was had created a monster out of the beautiful person I once saw in her. The rejection was more than a rejection of me, but it was a rejection of who I knew I was, and who I thought she was.

Three years went by, and the only interactions we had were full of animosity. The word “cunt” was thrown around like a hot potato. There was never an argument, conversation, or a confrontation. We were both too cowardly to speak civilly. Our mutual friends knew of our dislike for each other but never knew why. If they knew, our secret would be out — and for the wrong reasons. When I wanted to expose ourselves, it

was out of love and trust. But that trust was broken, so we would both stay silent. I saw my perfect queer life drifting away. I would get a glimpse back into it by talking to mutual friends about her, asking casual questions about how she was. I thought she was my only hope at a queer existence: the only way to escape heteronormativity.

I immersed myself in heteronormativity shortly after she took back her love for me. It was a relationship full of gender norms and the fulfillment of all of the values I did not believe in. My attempts to get out of the patriarchy was met with heartbreak, so I stopped trying. He was everything that he was supposed to be. He was strong, tall, white, and cis: he liked manual labour and hunting, and regarded me in the ways he was supposed to. I was the white cis-presenting girl who was supposed to get her degree but never use it. I was the girl that his family liked because I “kept him in line.” Why was this my job? Why was it my responsibility to tend to the well being of him even though we were in a teenage relationship? As much as I questioned my role, and missed the life I thought I could have, I went with the new life that I was supposed to lead. I knew I wasn’t happy, but how was I supposed to escape? How was I supposed to justify leaving a relationship that was supposed to be good for me? It was after three years of not talking to her when I had finally felt courageous enough to try to rekindle myself and us. I finally realized that justification was meant for everyone else, and not myself. I realized that the life I was living was not for me, it was for society.

That is when a drunken 5:00 a.m. text would bring me back to my queer life. When she replied, it was full of apology and love. I felt queer again, and it was rejuvenating. My understanding of her grew stronger, and her fears of her love towards

me that broke our connection the first time. But I was still trapped. Trapped in a constant battle of what was and what could be, but she could be my escape. The only ones that knew about our queerness were her and me. We spoke of friendship for four months, but it was not enough. She wanted all of me and I wanted all of her, and we were both now finally willing to face the consequences of that. We were both willing to resist the life that had been planned out for us and to create our own. So we took a chance. I ended my relationship with him and started to revitalize the relationship that I had left behind. I was warm with familiarity and comfort.

We had two months of romantic summer bliss, both of us getting used to our newly expressed queerness and a new community with which we had so desperately wanted to identify. As we shared our identity with the people who were closest to us, we were in a constant state of settlement. We were settling into ourselves and into our relationship, calculating if it was as we had hoped. The three years that we had lost had been pieced back together. While being pieced back together, we came to the agreement that we would move in together. From an outside perspective, it was way too fast, but it was what we wanted and needed for our relationship to flourish. Our lives were separately chaotic: her mother's health, her father's inability to look past her queerness, her mental health, my loss of a grandfather, my mother's relapse, my father's drunken reappearance. But our chaos was left behind when it came to us. We were each other's safe space. We were a new constant in each other's lives — a constant that we both had been longing for.

The foundation of my identity does not lie in my sexual queerness, but it does lie in my ability and courage to queer the structures around me. My escape will never end. There will never be a time where I will not be questioning the societal forces around me. My questioning has, so far, led me to a healthy, happy, loving relationship. My questioning led me to her. My identity will always be my own, but there is a part of me that will forever lie with her. Her role in my life went from a secret, to a haunting, to a gift. I have made the decision that my happiness will not be informed by patriarchal values.

#### ARTIST STATEMENT

I wrote this piece as an homage to my younger self. I now have the proper language and knowledge to dissect the information that I was told should be the “truth.” This piece is a personal journey that has brought me confusion, happiness, and success.