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Getting Out From Under: Transcending Genre and Trauma

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GETTING OUT FROM UNDER: TRANSCENDING GENRE AND TRAUMA

by

Paige Netzel

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the English

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Fall 2017

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
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Getting Out From Under

Transcending Genre and Trauma

By Paige Netzel
Thesis Advisor Naomi Greyser
Fall 2017

Abstract

Nick and London haven't seen each other in years, since college graduation, until London arrives at Nick's bar one night, clearly in trouble. On a whim and with a surge of sympathy, Nick invites London to stay the night. This one night turns into many as the two have to maneuver living with the other, one struggling with mystery, the other with trust. Their walls slowly begin to come down and they fall in love. But London still has secrets that keep her closed off. It takes a lot of strength for her to reveal these secrets and get past what they mean.

This project seeks to study how trauma can affect an individual and those around them. It is the story of London overcoming trauma in order to build relationships that have trust and transparency in them; to build relationships that allow her to fully be herself.

The genre of chick lit plays a role in some of the conventions in the story, most notably with the romance that forms. The romance is actually a mode of healing for London which pushes back against the large feminist debate that romance plots are a patriarchal structure that don't allow for autonomy. *Getting Out From Under* allows romance and autonomy and healing to coexist as well as thrive.

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Getting Out From Under

Clean-Up – Day 1

Nick dragged his rag across the slick mahogany bar, picking up cardboard coasters and stacking them as he went along. He came around to the front to swing the bar stools over the top when he noticed a woman hunched in the far corner, an army green duffle bag before her on the round table.

“Hey, it’s closing time.”

She started at his voice and her sheet of dark hair parted to reveal a face full of freckles and a deeply bruised eye. “Nick?”

Nick looked closer until he could determine who it was that knew him. The freckles were what gave it away. “Wait, London? Is that you?”

“I, yes, it is.” London stared up at him with green eyes that matched the color of her bag. “I’m so sorry,” she ran a finger below her lash line. “I—I’m not doing too well and for some reason this is the only place I could think to come.”

Nick was too shocked to say anything. She was trembling. “Are you okay? Do you need me to call someone?”

“There’s not really anyone to call.” Nick couldn’t believe that she was here. She was—is—beautiful. Even behind that black eye. Her lashes were thick enough to make it not matter, even if they were clinging to each other with tears. He hadn’t thought of her in years, but his little crush came back the minute he knew it was her. The last time he had seen her had been here, at this bar. The night after University of Illinois-Chicago’s graduation, when Chris had proposed to her.

“What about Chris?”

Her jaw tensed ever so slightly. “We’re not together anymore. Please don’t tell him I’m here.” Her green eyes looked up and pleaded with him.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” But some part of him wasn’t sorry at all. She was a buddy’s girlfriend and she had never been more than that. They’d never really even talked. But he knew that she was sweet. And beautiful. And tough as hell. Although she didn’t look much like that part of herself now. “I won’t tell him. We haven’t spoken in years.”

London sighed a breath of relief, the first time her nerves seemed to still.

Nick ran his rough fingers over his lower lip and beard, wondering if he was really about to say what he was thinking. “Do you need to stay here for the night?”

“What? Stay here?”

“I mean above the bar. That’s where my apartment is.”

“Wait, do you own this place?” She looked around. He knew it hadn’t changed much since the last time she had been here.

“Yeah, I bought it a few years back.” He rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed that he felt so proud. “So do you want to stay?” This was nothing like the usual way he asked a girl to come up to his room. He usually didn’t have to say anything.

He could see her debating whether or not to as she twisted her hands in her lap. “I guess so. I didn’t really think about what I’d do after coming here anyway.” She gave a weak, humorless laugh.

“Okay, great. Just give me a minute to tidy up.”

He flicked his rag over his shoulder to lock up the front door. He decided he wouldn’t worry about cleaning the floors. It was a Wednesday, after all. He flipped off the light behind the nearly fifty bottles of liquor and looked over at London, expecting her to follow him up the stairs

behind the bar. She was still clutching to her bag, glued to her seat. She looked less than willing to come.

“Are you coming? I promise you can trust me.”

Tears welled in London’s eyes.

“I’m sorry. No, London please.” Nick walked back to her. “I’m sorry, did I say something wrong?”

“I’m just going to be here one night.” London stood abruptly and wiped her tears from her cheeks.

Nick was confused but he stood back and said, “After you,” She stepped in front of him with her duffel bag pinned to her chest like a shield. When Nick placed his hand on the small of her back to usher her up the stairs, she jerked away and gasped.

“Whoa, hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Please don’t touch me.”

They walked up the stairs in silence.

The apartment was much more modern than the rustic bar under their feet. To their left was a living space with a gigantic TV, surrounded by a sleek black entertainment center. Facing it was a boxy white leather couch that wasn’t sat on often. Past that was a kitchen with all-stainless steel appliances and a black marble island with thin lights shining just above it.

“It’s nice.” Nick couldn’t read her noncommittal comment. Was she impressed? Was she second guessing her decision to stay? Either way, he knew he had to do something to make this less weird.

“Can I offer you something to drink?”

“Actually, would you mind if I took a quick shower?”

“No, not at all,” Nick said, even though he was startled by her sudden willingness to invite herself in. He led her to the just-as-modern bathroom with its marble and glass and stainless steel. “Clean towels are in the closet in there. You can help yourself.”

“Thanks.” She closed the door quietly. The shower turned on almost immediately.

Nick backed away from the door and ran his hand through his coiffed hair. What the hell did he do in letting London stay here? Something was clearly stressing her out. She wasn’t behaving like the sassy London he knew from college. And if Chris knew she was staying here... London said they weren’t together, but Chris had always struck him as a jealous guy. They had never been that close—they mostly just ran in the same circle—but he didn’t doubt that Chris would think he was breaking the guy code if he ever found out.

He went to the kitchen and poured a glass of his favorite whiskey. He downed it in one gulp. What had happened with him and London anyway? They had been dating since like, the first day of freshman year if he remembered right. How long ago had it ended? He decided that no matter the answer to that question, there had to be a reason she was here, of all places.

Even though she hadn’t answered his question about something to drink, he figured it might be nice to come out of a shower to some freshly-made hot chocolate. That was his usual move when he had a girl over, even if this situation was, well—totally twisted from that. But hot chocolate was great in moments of needed comfort, and it seemed like she could definitely use some of that.

He put on a kettle of hot water to boil while he went to his bedroom to change the sheets and pick up a few odds and ends he had scattered. He was a fairly tidy person, so he wanted to present himself as such. He realized he’d be sleeping on the couch for the first time since he’d moved there four years ago.

The kettle whistled so he went to the kitchen to stir up the hot chocolate, adding some Kahlua and peppermint schnapps to his own mug. He set hers on the coffee table and sat on his couch to watch TV until she was done with her shower. He noticed just how stiff his couch was and grimaced. But it would just be one night, right?

Nick continued to check his watch, coming to understand that London's "quick shower" was comparative to any other normal person's "super-long shower." He was able to watch one and a half episodes of *M*A*S*H* reruns before London peeped her head out of the barely opened bathroom door. "So I don't really have good clothes to wear right now. I wasn't looking when I was packing. Could I just maybe borrow some sweats from you for the night?" She didn't look him in the eyes.

"Oh, yes absolutely!" Nick sprang into action. He dug out the smallest sweatpants he could find, since she appeared skinny—almost too skinny to be healthy—and a sweatshirt and socks. Would she need underwear? Oh God. He threw in a pair of boxers just in case. "Here you go, hope this is okay."

London reached a hand wrist deep out of the door to grab the clothes, shutting the door tightly again. She emerged in his clothes a few minutes later, long hair wound tightly in a bun, duffel still clinging to her chest.

He offered to take her bag from her.

"No! Just show me where to put it, thanks."

He showed her to the bedroom and her eyes wandered over the plush bed and the just-as-large entertainment system as in the living room. She set her bag next to the walk-in closet door.

"Come and watch some TV. I made some hot chocolate, although it might be cold now."

She shuffled behind him and sat on the very end of the couch, her right hip seeming to meld with the armrest with how far she leaned into it. Nick handed her the microwaved hot chocolate which she accepted and held closely to her chest. Her knees followed suit.

He sat on his end, legs wide with a lazy arm slung over the back of the couch. “Do you like *M*A*S*H?*”

“I’ve never seen it.”

“You’ve never seen *M*A*S*H?*”

“No.”

“Well then you have to watch. It’s my favorite.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes until London said, “I think I’ll go to bed.” She set her mug on the table next to her and shut the door of the bedroom before Nick had the chance to finish saying “okay, goodnight! Let me know if you need anything, I’ll be right out here.” He sighed and stood, looking into the mug. The hot chocolate was left untouched.

Covers – Day 1

Pulling the comforter up past her nose, London sunk low into the bed that was not her own. The light smell of a beachy cologne and fabric softener remained in the sheets. The scent had her swirling. It wasn’t that different from how Chris smelled...when he had bothered to clean himself up. She had been trying to keep him out of her mind, but it didn’t take much to remind herself. She could feel his hands all over her. Tugging at her clothes. Biting her neck.

Tears slipped silently out of her eyes. She willed herself to stop. She couldn’t go there. She had to think about something else.

The faint glow of the overhead kitchen lights peeking from under the door went out as she blinked. She heard a shifting and a grunt as Nick laid down on the couch. Some part of her felt she could trust him if he offered his bed and was willing to sleep on that unlivable couch.

But she had to think smarter. She hadn't seen him in years. He certainly seemed more put together than he had been in college. The apartment was pristine and posh, seemingly odd for the bearded and plaid-adorned bartender he was now and especially the typical college guy he had been back then.

She hadn't known him then and she certainly didn't know him now, which made her heart race. What had she been thinking, allowing herself to stay in this near-stranger's apartment? But he knew enough about her to not be a total stranger and that scared her more. The thought made her sweat and she kicked off the comforter. But that was too exposing and she yanked them back to cover her. Only when she heard thick snores coming from the direction of the living room was she able to unclench and breathe again. More than a few times she thought of sneaking out past him, but fear kept her confined to the bed, clutching only sheets to protect herself. Besides, where would she go? Where could she go? The thought sent her spiraling into tears once more. She worried she'd be heard but the only sign of life outside the door was more rumbling from the next room.

She spent the rest of the night in between fear of the man in the next room that she knew hardly anything about and the man she knew better than anyone else. The thing about sleep was even when it came, it wasn't guaranteed to be restful or an escape from the present. Waking fears had the potential to bleed into bad dreams. London couldn't escape the fear, no matter how hard she tried.

Blurting – Day 2

London's long, dark hair had twisted out of her bun and flopped all over the crisp white pillow, flattened by her twelve-hour presence. The comforter was pulled above her chin but it was so fluffy, only her closed eyes were visible to Nick in the doorway.

He snuck his way across the plush carpet to retrieve the cup of cold coffee and soggy eggs and toast, setting down a bowl of soup to replace them. The steam wisped up in the late afternoon sun, but she still did not awake to the warm smell.

Nick stood over her and grimaced at her swollen, purpled eye. He worried it might not open. He wished she would wake up so she could put some ice on it and eat something, but he wouldn't dare initiate that. A few times through the night, he had heard her cry out in her sleep. He didn't know if it was out of pain or fear or longing, but he knew it wasn't good. He wanted to let her sleep while it seemed she was at peace.

His eyes caught her bag at the corner of the room. What did she have in there if she didn't have good clothes? She had said she wasn't looking when she was packing. What did that mean? What had happened to her?

Nick returned to retrieve the bowl of cold soup from the nightstand when London finally stirred. She started upon opening her eyes, realizing her right one did not respond because it was swollen shut.

“Hey! How's it...going?” Nick realized the ridiculousness of his question halfway through and was kicking himself for it. Asking her how she slept would have been much less weird.

“Fine,” she rasped, sitting up but curling back against the headboard. She gently felt the skin around her eye, cringing when she touched a particularly sore place.

“Can I get you some ice for that?”

“Sure,” her voice broke.

“I’ll get you some water too.”

He got a glass of water and bag of ice from the dispenser on the door of his freezer and returned to London having twisted her hair up into a bun again. Her face was milky in the dimming evening sun.

The ice cubes rang a familiar rattle when London lightly placed the bag over her eye.

“Thanks.”

“Sure. Can I get you something to eat?” Nick switched on the lamp on the bedside table, illuminating London’s innumerable freckles.

“Maybe in a minute.” Even with one working eye, she peered at him sharply beneath those full lashes.

“How did you sleep?” He rolled his eyes internally for blurting. What was going on? He wasn’t a “blurter,” particularly in the presence of a pretty woman. The black eye should have even helped his confidence. Instead he was curious about what it might mean.

“Well enough. Sorry I slept so late.”

“No, no that’s okay. I figured you needed it. But I,” he glanced at his watch, “I do need to get back downstairs for the end of happy hour. There’s some soup in the fridge if you’re hungry but you can help yourself to anything. Let me know if you need anything. I’ll be right downstairs.”

Grogginess – Day 2

London drifted in and out of turbulent sleep for another hour before she decided to stop trying. She had slept for so long and so steadily before Nick had come in to check on her that she believed it was her body's way of telling her she'd had enough. She was too spoiled with the comfiest bed she'd ever been in to deserve more sleep. Scratch that—second comfiest.

Her groggy head floated back to the massive four poster in that hotel in Paris. Christopher had been in a rare mood that business trip, actually taking time to spend with her. They'd roamed the sun-soaked streets, stopping in every shop she wanted to, he buying her whatever purse, necklace, or scarf she modeled for him.

They returned to the hotel when the sky had only a strip of warm yellow light left, the color of the sunny-side up eggs they'd ordered the next morning. They got drunk on wine on their private terrace, her bare feet resting on his lap, she giggling frivolously. Happy. It was one of her best days.

Her heart panged at the memory of how he had looked at her, like those drunken giggles were the prettiest things he'd ever heard. Like he wasn't doing something that would ruin everything.

They'd made love that night and it was everything she had ever hoped it could be. But everything was different now.

She began to cry, wiping her snot on the white duvet of the second comfiest bed she'd ever slept in.

Strands – Day 7

London awoke to the sun streaming through the slatted blinds. The first thing she noticed was her smell. She had spent the last few nights watching Food Network cooking shows or old film noir movies from Nick's collection until she exhausted herself enough to fall asleep.

London was always in bed; she rarely got up to even go to the bathroom. She didn't have to get up to eat since Nick brought food to her, even if she didn't eat much of it. She would nibble at it and place it aside as she went back to an episode of "Chopped" where the secret ingredient was eggs, which she now hated more than any other food on the planet. She avoided coffee at all costs, which used to be her favorite beverage. She didn't want anything that would keep her from sleep if she could help it.

Her body tangled in the warm sheets was salty and musty. She wore the same t-shirt/sweatpants combo that was given to her when she first arrived. Her hair clung in greasy clumps. Placing it in a bun was futile because the hair tie would slide off her long strands by morning. Her skin was covered in a sheen of sweat and dirt.

She was filled with such shame. How did she allow herself to get to this point? She pulled the comforter up to her chest. Nick hadn't said anything and there was no way he hadn't noticed. How could he have let this go on, especially when she was a stranger robbing him of his bed and bedroom space? Was it at all possible that he could look past it?

London had to take a shower, but getting herself out of bed was a chore. She had made a comfortable groove for her body to curl up in, even if she was always twisting the sheets up in her nightmare-ridden sleep.

She untangled herself and slipped out of the bedroom to the smell of Nick scrambling eggs in the kitchen. Disgusting.

In the bathroom she closed the door firmly behind her. She rested her hands on the sink counter and glanced up in the mirror. She could barely recognize herself. Everything was slick—her hair, her face, her chest—and she'd lost her wide smile she used to toss around so easily. Even her freckles looked duller.

To strip herself down, she turned away from the mirror and looked up to avoid seeing her body. She jumped in the shower to scalding hot water and kept her eyes squeezed shut the whole time.

London realized she hadn't brought in new clothes to change into, but when she stepped out and wrapped a towel around herself, there was a small pile waiting for her on the sink. Her heart was pounding. She was horrified. Nick had come in while she was in the shower. Who knows what he would have seen?

Her breathing quickened and she had to sit down on the toilet with her head in her hands. Her long hair slid over her shoulders and dripped everywhere. She flung it back behind her, but it was too sudden a movement. She could feel her hair being yanked in a memory, the sudden jerking of her head that left her neck sore for days. With shaking hands, she reached up to twist it into a bun, but she realized she didn't have a hair tie.

She frantically searched through drawers of the sink unit. In her effort to find a hair tie, she found a pair of trimming sheers instead. Did Nick cut his own hair? She didn't care.

London clung to a handful of her long tresses and cut just below her chin. She let the long strands drop, as if in slow motion, and turned back to the mirror with a hardened face and cut the rest of it off.

She sat back on the toilet with her hands on her knees and took several deep breaths. Scattered on the bathroom floor were the long strands of hair that had once been made a weapon

against her. Yet how many times had she been told that her long hair was her greatest asset, her greatest gift? Now it was neither of those things; in thirty seconds it was gone.

She shook her new bob and felt the absence of length as a breeze on her shoulders. She felt lighter somehow; more like herself than she had been in weeks.

With watery red limbs from the hot shower, London pulled on the new sweatpants and sweatshirt Nick had laid out for her. She was still jittery about how they had gotten there, but she had to remind herself that Nick wasn't malicious. He was simply setting out fresh clothes for her, an act of kindness.

Plus, her long hair was covering the bathroom tiles and she felt bad. Sucking in a breath, she pulled open the door and went out to the kitchen. Nick had his back turned, buttering toast.

“Do you have a broom? I sort of made a mess in the bathroom.”

Nick swiveled around and his eyes grew wide. “What did you do?”

“I cut my hair.”

“Well, yeah, I just—wow.”

“What?” She fingered the tips of her hair.

“It looks great. A little choppy but you could get it fixed. If you want.”

She blushed. “So do you have a broom?”

“Yeah, there's one downstairs in the bar, I can grab it for you.”

When he returned and handed her the broom, he followed her into the bathroom. She swept and pretended he wasn't there.

“Can we talk for a sec?”

“About what?” She didn't look up.

“I don’t know, anything. You’ve been here for a few days now and I don’t mind you sleeping or whatever but I would just like to know more about you. It’s been years, and I didn’t really know much about you then.”

“There’s not much to tell.” London had collected the long strands but continued batting at mostly empty tiles.

“Can you stop sweeping? You’ve swept thirty-one strokes already.”

“What? Were you counting?” She finally looked up at him.

“I—yes. I really like counting and numbers and whatever, you’re deflecting. I just want to know one thing about you that I don’t already know. Don’t tell me there’s nothing to know.”

“Fine. You like numbers? I like words.” London busied herself with dumping the dustpan in the garbage, hoping he might just walk away.

Nick chuckled. “Surprising with how little you use them. But thank you. That’s something.”

The Order of Things – Day 10

Nick was lazily slugging on a beer in front of his TV, watching reruns of *M*A*S*H*, bored as hell. His friends had been going out tonight but he didn’t feel like he could leave London alone. He’d really just been swayed by the kind of manners his mom had instilled in him when he asked her to stay, but he hadn’t thought about the consequences or how it might come time for her to leave.

His back hurt from sleeping on the couch. He missed his bed. So much for one night.

He thought about grabbing a movie from the bedroom but London was sleeping—again. He didn’t have any other ideas. He even thought about going down to the bar to work, even on

his shift off, just to have something to do. He had made up his mind to see how business was going when he heard a soft knock on the door, barely audible over the music from downstairs.

Nick thought it was one of the workers from the bar needing help, but they would always text him before disturbing him upstairs. He opened the door to a leggy blonde in a clingy mustard yellow dress.

“Hi.” She clutched a small bag in front of her and gave a small wave.

“Oh my goodness, Sadie, what are you doing here? And looking like...” he pushed a hand through his hair and appraised her curves up and down. “...that?”

She blushed. “I’m sorry, I should have called. I just really wanted to see you.” She took a tentative step forward and kissed him.

“Mmm.” He had to do everything he could to pull himself away from her. He stepped back. “I’m sorry Sadie, this isn’t a good time.”

She was clearly confused. “Oh, I’m sorry. I guess I should have called.” She glanced into the apartment: a half-drunk beer next to the couch piled with layers of sheets and blankets didn’t make anything clearer.

“I don’t know how to explain. Can I call you?” There was a bump from the bedroom.

“Oh my God, do you have someone else here?” She put her French manicured nails to her berry-pink lips and drew back. “I’m so embarrassed.” She made an attempt to wipe the color off of Nick’s lips.

“That’s not—it’s not like that. Please don’t get the wrong idea.” He stopped her hands from dotting on his lips. They’d only been on a few dates but he liked her and he felt like he owed her something.

She wouldn't look him in the eyes and looked close to crying. "Wrong idea? Is there someone here or not?"

Nick searched for the words.

"I should go." She made for the stairs but not before Nick could catch her by the waist.

He rested his nose on her hairline. "I don't want you to go, I really don't. But you have to and I promise to give you a better explanation later." He kissed her forehead softly.

There was a sound from the bedroom again and Nick parted from Sadie, catching sight of London's startled face. Sadie gaped. He tried to see her how Sadie would, with her purple eye swollen shut and in Nick's old sweats. He wasn't sure what Sadie saw but he was sure as hell she wouldn't see it as good.

"Don't mess with me, Nick. I'm leaving." Sadie flew down the stairs with the click of her heels receding into the din of the bar.

"I'm really sorry about that. I didn't mean to wake you—"

"Was that your girlfriend?"

"I—no. Not really."

"Oh. Well. I feel like I maybe came in the middle of something." More than worried about intrusion, she looked scared. She looked so tiny and instead of seeing her size as the mark of a woman, Nick was annoyed with how weak she appeared.

He was fed up and didn't care what he said. "Yeah, you kind of did. She probably would have stayed here tonight if you hadn't been here." Although Nick didn't think it possible, London shrunk even smaller, and this time he pitied her.

"You're right. I'm sorry, I should go." London went back into the bedroom, presumably to gather her things.

Nick suddenly thought of how he had met Sadie. She was a teacher at the same school his sister was the counselor at. There was a group of them who came out to his bar one Friday after work. She was newer to the school so she wasn't yet comfortable with letting loose in front of them. Some drunk dirtbag started hitting on her and got really aggressive. When Nick stood up for her and kicked him out, she was really appreciative. He loved that feeling. His mother had taught him to take care of people who couldn't help themselves, and London was still one of those people, even if she was taking his bed and ruining his chances with another girl.

"London, wait."

"I'll be gone in just a minute." Her back was turned but the brush of her hand across her face told him that she was crying again.

"No, London, you don't have to leave. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. You showed up at my bar, and I offered for you to stay, as an old friend."

She turned to face him and her green eyes were unwavering for the first time. "Well, at least take your bed back," she offered.

"No, no. That's not what I want from you."

London looked as though she might be sick. "You want something from me?"

"I just want to be able to have conversation with you. I want to know what you've been up to the past six years. And I don't think that's too much to ask."

London looked as if it was too much to ask, but all she said was "okay."

The Business of Cleaning Up Mustard – Day 15

London woke up at about 5 o'clock in the morning and was starving. She clicked the door open to sneak out into the kitchen, wanting to avoid Nick. After the episode with that girl the other night, she had taken extra precautions to ensure she wouldn't get into a situation where

he'd try to learn more about her. This guy who had casual sex with beautiful women would not get to know any more about her if she could help it.

But yet it didn't quite make sense. Why would that same guy be so willing to let *her* stay? Maybe he had thought that's what this would be about. She felt woozy again. She had to make something quickly and quietly to get out of the room with Nick.

She bee-lined for the refrigerator and saw lunchmeat right at the forefront. Perfect—no roaring microwave required. She loaded up some bread with a heap of turkey and cheese. She held up the mustard bottle high and squeezed it with two hands like a kid to get as much out as possible. It sputtered loudly to a stop and she whipped her head to check if he was still sleeping. When he emitted a snore, she sighed in relief and booked it to the bedroom, but not before grabbing a couple paper towels in case of a mustard mishap. She shut the door behind her and leaned against it, having made it back safe.

As she was catching her breath, she realized she could learn more about this guy by just snooping around. She was surprised she hadn't thought to do it before. She looked around the room and realized there were no pictures covering the walls or even sitting on the nightstand. Maybe he had some inside the nightstand? She walked over and set her sandwich on the top while pulling the drawer open.

The first thing she saw was a box of condoms, which made her jump back. She respected him for being safe, but the idea that he had women coming to his apartment late at night still freaked her out.

She nudged the box aside with her pinky. Underneath it were three pictures with the same woman in them. The pictures were at different stages of her life; in one she was next to a young boy in the stands at a Cleveland Indians game. She was maybe thirty. Another showed her

younger and in all denim, with a duster in one hand, a vacuum in the other. She was making a pompous-looking face, but you could see the laugh behind it. Another was of her in a hospital, maybe sixty, shrunken in a blue and white hospital gown. The wide hand of man out of the frame held her bony fingers. London saw her own hand holding the picture and saw a surprising likeness to the woman's thin one. Both of their knuckles were prominent, but she guessed that this woman's hands weren't thin because she'd allowed them to be. She knew she should eat her sandwich but she thought she might be sick.

How could he have these pictures and condoms in the same drawer? It made sense with the anomaly he had become to her.

A tap came on the door which startled London so much, she shoved the drawer closed and knocked the sandwich on the floor, splaying out each layer, with the mustard side down, of course. "Oh shit."

"London? Are you up? I wanted to talk to you."

"Uh, yes! Just a minute." She remembered once having had to get a mustard stain off of her uniform from the restaurant she worked at in college, but how to do it was completely lost on her now. She dabbed at the carpet with the paper towels she had grabbed. "Oh shit," she repeated to herself.

"I'm sorry, did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Well, yes. No! Sort of." The mustard stain was just getting bigger.

"Is everything okay? Can I come in?"

"Yeah," She stood, dejected. She started apologizing as soon as the door opened. "I'm so sorry, I was hungry. It was a total accident, I shouldn't have used so much mustard. I really love mustard..." She trailed off.

“Whoa, whoa.” Nick threw up his hands. “It’s okay. But next time you decide to talk so much you should warn a guy.”

She blushed. He assessed the carpet. “Luckily for you, as a bartender, I’ve gotten really good at these sorts of things. There are all kinds of things I come across to clean. I can take care of this no problem.”

“Why are you being so nice to me?” Her voice had gotten softer since the profuse apologies. She felt guilty for snooping around in his stuff, seeing things she wasn’t meant to. How would she have felt if Nick went through her duffel, even though she didn’t have anything particularly personal in there, other than her some fifty pairs of underwear?

“Hey now, just take it easy. It’s really no big deal.”

“But I’m messing everything up. The whole order of things. I don’t get it. Why are you letting me stay here?”

“London, we don’t have to keep having this conversation. I know you’re in some trouble and I have the means to help you. I don’t see anything wrong with that. And actually, I was coming in here because I was thinking of a way you might be really helpful to me. You were a waitress in college, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was.”

“Great. Because I was wondering if you’d be willing to work in the bar. We could use the extra hands and it could be a good gig, even though this might not be a very good selling point.”

He gestured at the mustard stain. “So would you be interested?”

This was insane. He was being nice enough to offer her *a job*. But wouldn’t she be repaying him if she took it? It was the least she could do. And then she could clean up her own

mustard messes. “You know what, I think I will.” As she was saying the words, she couldn’t believe they were coming out of her mouth.

“Want to start tomorrow? It’ll be slow, so nice to get your feet wet. And the rest of the staff will be there to meet. What do you think?”

She had been here for what, two weeks? There was no time like as soon as possible.

“Sure. Sounds great.”

Sweats & Suits – Day 16

“Hey Nick?” London stepped into the kitchen. He looked up from chopping peppers for a breakfast skillet. What was his obsession with eggs?

“What’s up?” He wiped his fingers on the towel over his shoulder.

“So I was thinking. I told you I could start working today, but the thing is I don’t really have any clothes that are good to work in.” She looked down at Nick’s t-shirt and sweatpants she was wearing. “I’ve appreciated the use of your sweats, but I obviously can’t show up like this. Plus the only things I seem to have are dresses. I was thinking about going out to buy some things. Would you mind coming with me?”

“Of course!” He lamely hit his forehead with his palm. “I didn’t even think about that. But I am the boss, you could show up in sweatpants for all I care.” He laughed at himself, but she felt sick to her stomach. She knew she had to do this—she hadn’t been outside since she showed up to the bar. But it had been a major comfort to not face the outside world, sleeping and watching endless amounts of cooking shows and trying to find old movies that weren’t misogynistic in Nick’s collection. She’d avoided *M*A*S*H* since that first night when she decided she hated it.

London could see Nick trying to decipher her thoughts. Instead of asking her what was going through her mind, though, he offered to make her breakfast. “We can leave right after we eat.” She was so grateful for the delay that she thought he deserved some honesty on her part.

“Sure, but can it be something other than eggs? I don’t really like them.” She sat on a barstool at the island, facing Nick.

“Shit, London. All I’ve been making for you is eggs. Is that why you haven’t been eating?”

“No, not totally.” She shifted in her seat. She hated that she made Nick feel bad when he was trying to be helpful.

“Well I’m glad you told me now, otherwise I would have just kept making them, probably for years.” Nick’s face burned red. London was sure her face was a similar color. He cleared his throat and went back to chopping peppers.

“So what can I make for you instead?”

Nick waited for London at the foot of the stairs, his keys in hand. He smiled at London in an effort to put her at ease but she was looking down and fidgeting with her sweatshirt sleeves. She had thrown on the sweatshirt, clueless to what the weather was like outside. But the more she was covered up, the better.

“Are you ready?”

She took a deep breath and nodded, although she didn’t feel very sure of herself. This was a big step.

Once outside, the overcast sky felt far too bright. The air was different out here. She knew it should have felt good, refreshing even, to feel a cool late April breeze, but her lungs constricted. Nick was talking, but she didn't hear what he was saying.

She stood still a moment, trying to make herself breathe. It was a shock to be outside after so long. That's it. Nothing to be afraid of. Nick was right by her side. He stopped when she did. She could feel him standing there, even with her eyes closed.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. I just need a second."

A pack of men in suits walked by and London recoiled. She didn't see their faces, but she was certain they had been staring or laughing or leering.

"Maybe we can do this another day. I'm not ready." She flipped on her heel and sped-walked back to the bar to Nick calling her name, only to realize she needed him and his keys to get back in. She stood taking yogic breaths while Nick fiddled with the lock. He stared at her but she averted her eyes. Why couldn't he get the lock instead of being worried about her? She needed to get back inside.

When he finally opened the door, she bolted upstairs to the bedroom, locking the door behind her once more.

Closed Doors – Day 16

"Hey London?"

No response.

“London.” Nick knocked on the door, exhausted by the chasing and trying and closed doors. They had been getting somewhere and now it felt like they moved ten giant leaps backward. “London, open the door.”

There came a muffled “I can’t.”

“London, you can. Please.”

“No.”

Nick scratched his beard, wondering if he should just let himself in. But he couldn’t, no matter how frustrated he was with her. That would only push her away again. “Fine. But you said you could start work today, so I expect you to be downstairs in an hour. I don’t care what you wear.”

At exactly noon, London came padding down the stairs in leggings and one of Nick’s dress shirts belted at the waist. Although he was worn out from trying so hard, Nick was relieved to see her keep her promise. Maybe tough love was what she needed. And she looked beautiful, too, with her hair pinned back from her face.

He turned to his co-workers and said, “This is London.”

London stood back and gave a small wave.

Nick gestured to the three standing next to him in turn. “This is Josue, Molly, and Callum.” They nodded or waved back at her. “They all bartend and serve; it’s sort of just whatever we need at the time. I think I’ll mostly have you waitressing. And always bussing. That’s something we always keep tabs on. But you can learn to make drinks, too. It might be helpful.”

“Calm down, Nick. You’re going to scare her away before she’s even had a chance to start,” Molly interjected. She gave London a warm smile.

Women & Men – Day 33

Nick and London arrived to his sister’s peach-colored suburban home courtesy of a quiet ride from Nick’s Uncle Zeke, a man of few words. She found a silent kinship with Uncle Zeke and was able to relax during the quiet car ride.

London clutched onto the bottle of whiskey and card Nick had handed her to carry. She appreciated having something to do with her hands and she suspected that was the reason Nick handed them to her in the first place. The thought made her smile.

It was a beautiful May day, one of the first nice ones, and London found herself thinking she’d never seen a sky so blue.

She was wearing a spaghetti strapped dress and one of Nick’s jean jackets—overlarge on her—too stifled by the warmth and too swayed by manners to wear sweats or another of Nick’s button-ups with leggings. Even though it had taken her a full fifteen minutes to walk out of the bedroom in the dress, it was the first she had felt like a woman in a long time.

“You doing okay?” London saw Nick’s hand reaching for her lower back to usher her in but he pulled it away before she had a chance to react. She hid a smile.

“Yeah, I’ll be okay.” She squinted up at him—no longer a purple bruise around her eye—and smiled. So much had changed since that first night.

They entered the sunny yellow kitchen, foil-covered trays of manicotti and Italian beef covering every surface. A woman in her forties stood at the counter, placing ladles in each container. As soon as she caught sight of the two, she wiped her hands on her jeans and smiled. “Hi, you must be London! I’ve heard so many wonderful things about you.” Nick’s excitable

sister pulled her in for a hug which shocked her, but after a moment and Nick's protests, London simply hugged her back. It was the first time she had been touched without mal-intent in a long time. She had no clue what Nick said about her or how he explained the situation, since nothing was normal about their relationship. But the fact that she said so brought tears to her eyes.

Neither left the hug for a long time, which London could tell pissed Nick off.

“Ang, are you kidding?”

“Sorry, London. Nicky's jealous he didn't get his hug yet.” Angela held her at arm's length and smiled. “Oh Nick, did you really have this girl bring whiskey? As a gift for TJ?” She smacked him on the back of the head. “I ought to kill you.”

Nick glared at her and rubbed the back of his head. “He just graduated high school. Jesus, Ang. Lighten up.”

London couldn't help but giggle at their sibling exchange. She already liked Angela.

“Uncle Nick!” A tall teenaged kid with dark hair that stuck out in every direction walked through the sliding screen door from the backyard.

“Hey, nerd! Happy graduation.” He pulled his nephew in for a side hug.

TJ looked at the whiskey in London's hand. “Oh, I was just coming in here to get something to drink. This is perfect.”

“TJ! Where the hell are your manners? This is London.”

“I'm sorry, hi. It's really nice to meet you!” He held out his hand, so London handed him the bottle. TJ laughed and it spread to his eyes, deep crinkles at the corner of his eyes. “I appreciate that, but I was gonna shake your hand.”

“Oh! I'm sorry.” London was embarrassed and gave his hand only a quick shake.

“Thanks for coming. It means a lot.” It seemed like he was being genuine and it almost sent London into tears again. She was understanding so much better where Nick came from.

“Teej, you better hand me that whiskey before your father sees. Don’t worry, we won’t shoot the messenger, London.” Angela winked at her.

London still clung to the card and it grew wrinkly in her clammy hand. “Sorry! This is yours too.” As TJ handed the bottle to his mother, Nick grabbed the card and used it as a shield in front of his face to whisper in TJ’s ear that there was a cigar in the envelope for him.

London suppressed another smile. She wondered why there had been a small log-shaped lump in there. Angela wasn’t stupid either, but she said “All right, let’s let these two yahoos have their guy time. Do you mind if I solicit your help with food?”

“Angie, no.” Nick shook his head fervently. “You don’t have to listen to her.”

“No, I want to help.” London was happy to be of help rather than always being served. Nick was always cooking for her and she was still getting the hang of serving in a bar so she was always asking questions. Pre-made food she could handle.

“All right, your funeral. And don’t listen to anything she says.” Nick put TJ into a headlock and wrestled him out the back door.

London laughed and she could feel Angie eyeing her. “Nick’s never brought a girl home before.”

“Oh, I’m not really a girl.”

Angie cocked her head and gave her a quizzical smile.

“That’s not what I meant.” London liked Nick’s family and already she’d been the cause of numerous embarrassing moments. “I just mean that’s not the kind of girl I am. I guess...I don’t know what he’s told you. But he’s been so kind to open his apartment to me.”

“I won’t tell you that what you believe is wrong, but I know my brother better than he thinks I do. I know he’s the kind of guy to have all kinds of women over who never stick around, even though he tries to hide that part of his life from me and TJ. But Sadie is a teacher at the school I work at; I don’t know how he thinks he can be so sly. And don’t get me wrong, I thought Sadie might have been the one to change things. But London, listen. He is a good guy. He’s just misguided. Nothing in his life has really gone the way he planned.”

That was something London could understand, but she wasn’t sure why Angela was telling her all of this. She noted that she specifically mentioned Sadie by name, which meant she must know about her appearance at the apartment a few weeks back.

Nick had talked to his family about her. What could he have possibly said for Angie to be so open and to think of her in such a kind manner? There was something about this family that she didn’t deserve, but she would try all she could to earn it.

“So what can I help with?”

Counting – Day 33

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Nick stepped up to the porch swing, offering London a bottle of pink lemonade as he sat down, cracking open another beer for himself.

“Yes, I am,” she smiled and thanked him for the drink. “You really wiped the floor with those kids at corn hole.”

Nick chuckled and took a swig of his beer. “See, I would have asked you to join but I didn’t want you to feel like a loser.”

“That’s okay, I like watching.” She lay her head on the back of the swing and breathed deep. The late afternoon sun emphasized her square jawline, long neck, and subtle collarbone, making her freckles pop.

Nick leaned back too and glanced at her, trying to figure out what she might be thinking. He had the sudden urge to hold her hand, which was draped next to her on the cushion.

“I’m going to try something.”

London’s head jerked up and she looked at him warily.

“I want to hold your hand, but I don’t want to scare you. So I’m going to count down from three and you can decide if you want to leave your hand there. Okay. Three...two...”

She pulled her hand away and left, leaving her pink lemonade behind.

Nick looked down at the hand that almost held hers and huffed. He didn’t anticipate her turning him down; he had thought the plan was solid, that the warning would be enough for her to let him touch her. She let Angela hug her; what the hell was that about?

He sat for a moment, sipping slowly on his beer.

London quietly thanked TJ for dropping them off after the graduation party, and slid out of the car, holding her dress down in the back.

“London, wait,” Nick said, but the car door had already slammed shut. He looked over TJ and apologized for her abrupt farewell. “Girls, right? I guess I should go follow her.”

Nick thought his nephew would laugh, but he instead creased his brow at him. “I guess. Aren’t you worried about her, though? She seems sort of upset.”

Nick returned the quizzical look to the eighteen-year-old kid-turned-man before him.

“You’re a good kid.” He leaned over to hug TJ, ruffling his hair when he pulled away.

“Thanks. But I’m definitely opening that bottle of whiskey when I get home.” His boyish grin took over his face. “Tell London thanks for coming to the party.”

“You got it.” He stepped out of the car and turned back and waved as TJ pulled away.

Nick greeted the regulars and Molly and Callum when he walked into the bar.

“How did she look?” he asked Molly.

“She definitely wasn’t in the mood to chat. Was the party okay?”

“Yeah, fine.” He gazed up at the door to the apartment. “I’ll tell you about it later.”

Nick took the steps two at a time and called London’s name when he entered the door. She shuffled out of the bedroom, having already changed into his Northwestern sweatshirt and gray sweatpants. Her face was shiny and red from removing her makeup. She never looked more beautiful.

“London, what the hell happened back there?”

He could see her throat constrict. “Which part of it?”

Everything he had been feeling rushed out of him. “I don’t know, all of it? You got totally quiet at the end of the night and barely said a word to TJ or Angie. They both told me to thank you for coming because you didn’t stick around long enough for them to say it to you. And I—you—you didn’t even let me hold your hand. You let Angela hug you but you wouldn’t let me touch you.” He was more hurt by that than angry. “You’re back and forth all the time. I think we’ve gotten somewhere and you push me away again. I know you’re scared, I can tell. By what, I don’t know. But it doesn’t have to be me. I need to know what’s going on.”

She closed her eyes. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah.” London sat on the couch and a few quiet tears slipped out.

Nick followed and gave her time but his chest tightened; for the first time, it hit him that he might be hearing something that would change everything.

“I don’t know where to begin.” She looked down at her hands curled in her lap. “I guess it helps that you know...Christopher. You know he’s not horrible. He’s not. But he’s not perfect, either. He was arrested for money laundering with this big company he worked for. His parents bailed him out easy, but he went into a downward spiral from there. With no work to do, which is what he literally spent all of his time doing, he finally had time for me. At first it was great. But he started to be resentful that he didn’t have money or a job anymore, and there wasn’t much he could do about either. His parents had bailed him out to protect their name. You must have known how they were.” For the first time since she began talking, she looked up at Nick. He was listening intently and nodded. “But somehow...somehow in this twisted way, he blamed me. Things got really bad. It started with little comments like how I could stand to lose a few pounds and why hadn’t I done it already if *I* had no job? Then he’d squeeze onto my wrists to keep me from going anywhere. Whenever he felt like it, he’d use me like a punching bag.” London’s hands were shaking. They fluttered up to cover her eyes. “But the worst—the worst...he would force me to have sex with him. And he was so violent. There were a few times I thought I wouldn’t come out of the night alive. I finally...I finally got out of there one night. That’s why the things I packed were so odd. I left as soon as there was a chance.” She pulled her hands from her eyes and looked at Nick with a blotchy face.

“Where is he?”

“Nick.”

“You have to tell me where he lives. I’m going to end his life.” He rose to his feet.

“Nick, stop. You can’t. Christopher isn’t evil.” She pulled the sweatshirt sleeves over her hands. “I loved him once. Maybe I still do.”

Nick tried not to let that feel like a punch to the gut, but he keeled over to sit on the couch again. How could she defend that asshole? “What are you saying? Are you going to go back to him? That’s fucked up, London.”

“No, Nick. I need you to not become violent like him. *That* would be fucked up. I need you to be here for me right now.”

He clenched his jaw but a solitary tear rolled down his cheek into his beard. He turned his head away. “I’m sorry.” His voice barely rasped out. How could Chris have done this? How could she still be standing? Nick was in pain for her, but he had to be strong. She’d been carrying this for far longer than him. Tears were at a constant spill down her cheeks and he needed to do anything he could to make them stop. He reached out a hand and counted. “Three...two...one...”

She closed her eyes and allowed him to wipe her tears away. Her cheek was sticky from tears, but it was still so soft in comparison to his callused hands. It was the first time they had touched.

“Thank you for telling me. I know that must have been really hard for you. I didn’t mean to push you into talking about it.”

“It’s okay. I needed to tell you.” She gave him a small smile and placed her hands over his on her cheek. “But, right now, I’d really love to just not think about it.”

“All right, that’s something I can do. Do you want to watch a movie?”

She smiled. “Depends on what you’re thinking.”

“How about *Space Jam*?”

“Sounds perfect.”

Library Card – Day 34

Nick's bronze eyes peered at London beneath thick eyebrows. His rough, rounded fingers reached out to caress her face, wiping away her tears. His head leaned toward her, his eyelids fluttering closed. "Three...two...one..."

And then she woke up. This was the first dream in weeks that she didn't want to wake up from. She found herself wishing he had followed through and kissed her.

The memory of telling him what had happened to her came back, but for the first time, she didn't feel physically sick when thinking of it. Somebody else knew. And she felt like she needed to learn about anything else she could that would help her get back to a sense of normalcy.

Nick had given her the day off at the bar, so she got up and pulled on some of his basketball shorts and a t-shirt. She brushed her fingers through her hair and ruffled it up in the mirror. There was less tangling when it was this short.

She tiptoed out to the living room where Nick was still sleeping. He had criticized her for staying in bed so late when he did just the same thing. Such was the life of a bartender—staying up late and sleeping in just as late.

She slipped out the door, grabbing a set of keys on her way out.

It was still pretty early in the morning, around nine, but the day was already shaping up to be a warm one. Only a few wispy clouds floated behind the skyline, and the sun peeked through the buildings to warm her skin. It was the first time she had felt that comforted by bare skin in months.

She had walked a few blocks when she came across a library. The walls were made of glass and she was mesmerized by row after row of books in every shape, color, and size. She used to love to read.

London entered and made her way to the non-fiction section, reading the subjects on each row. When she found what she was looking for, she checked around her and in the next aisles to make sure no one was around.

Her fingers ran along the spines until one caught her eye—*Domestic Violence and Rape*. She was awestruck. She had heard about domestic violence before and could easily place that phrase on what had happened to her. But rape? What did that mean?

She slid that book off the shelf and started flipping through pages and pages, soaking up as much as she was able to process.

It was more than overwhelming, it was a relief. To realize that so many others had gone through the same thing she had that there were numerous accounts written about it, as horrible as it was, she felt she wasn't alone.

She was wrapped up as the sun moved west and she realized suddenly she was hungry.

London didn't think she could get a library card without any proof of address, so she put her book in its rightful place. She would ask Nick tomorrow if she could borrow his address. That felt pretty serious.

It had been a straight shot with one left turn toward the end so she strolled back easily. The sun was now high in the sky and she wondered if Nick had opened the bar yet.

As soon as London walked through the door, Nick ran up to her, fuming. "Where the hell have you been?"

“I went to the library.” She looked at his face and Molly’s and Callum’s and Josue’s. Their faces painted a swirling portrait of worry, relief, and anger. Nick’s was angriest.

“You didn’t even leave a note or anything! You were gone when I woke up and didn’t come back for hours after that! You can’t just disappear like that.”

She was incredulous. “I don’t have to answer to you.”

Out of her periphery, London could see her co-workers busying themselves so as not to get involved in the argument that seemed about to ensue.

“Let’s move this upstairs.” Nick put his hand gently on her lower back to lead her toward the stairs but she slapped it away.

“Don’t touch me.” But it wasn’t because she was uncomfortable with his touch, it was because she was furious with him.

When they reached the top of the stairs she whipped around toward him with her arms crossed and repeated herself. “I don’t have to answer to you.”

“Are you serious, London? I suppose having you stay here and giving you a job and giving you clothes to wear,” he gestured up and down at her slouchy athletic wear, “means absolutely nothing.”

“Oh my God, I can’t believe you just said that. You don’t think I’m grateful for all that? I am a twenty-five year-old woman, Nick, not a child. My staying with you does not mean you get to keep tabs on me at all times.”

“I’m sorry, but I think it does. After what you told me last night, there is no way I’m letting you out of my sight.”

“You can’t be serious.”

He appeared to be running through a mental checklist. “We have to get you a cell phone. And I need to make you a set of keys too. But you won’t—”

“Nick. Nick! Stop. All I want is a library card.” She grabbed his hands to stop him from ticking items off on his fingers. “And I need you to listen to me.”

“No, London. I need to fix this.”

“Fix what?” She stepped back. “Fix me?”

“I was so scared. You ran off and I had no idea where you could’ve gone. You have to let me protect you.”

“What am I supposed to have you do? Follow me around all the time? I don’t need you or this place to protect me.” For the first time in weeks, she really meant it.

“What are you saying? Do you want to leave?” He didn’t think he could bear to lose her twice in one day.

“No! No, that’s not at all what I’m saying. I don’t *need* you, but that doesn’t mean I want to do without you. I don’t want to leave any time soon, if that’s okay with you.”

He exhaled and reached for her hand. “That’s more than okay with me.”

She twisted her hand away from his. “But we need to set some ground rules. I have to be able to go out on my own. I’m sorry I didn’t leave a note or tell you where I was going. I am totally glad to do that in the future. But you can’t go with me everywhere. That’s just no way to live.”

He conceded. “Okay. But what about the time when you tried to go shopping? What if that happens again?”

“If that happens again, I’ll ask for your help. I will. But today was the first day that I really felt free in a long time. Telling you helped me so much. I went to the library to learn more

about what happened to me. I already feel like I'm growing so much. I have continue to do what's best for me and if you want to help me, I'll tell you what I need. I get that you want to protect me. It means a lot because I know it's coming from a good place. But being protective—that's not what's going to help me."

"Okay. So what can I do to help?"

"Kiss me." The words passed her lips before she thought them.

It was obvious that this was not at all what Nick had been expecting. "Are you sure?"

Instead of responding, she kissed him. She was ready to take charge of her own life.

Give-and-Take – Day 39

The weather turned humid and rainy in the next couple days. Nick had helped London get a library card, so she had been spending time outside of work poring over the books she checked out from the library. They were splayed out before her on the bed. She had a mug of hot chocolate—Nick's specialty—in her curled lap.

She picked up *Rape is Rape*. The title had been enough to grab her attention. She flipped it around to look at the back cover:

More than 80 percent of rapes in the United States are committed by someone the victim knows—colleagues, dates, friends, or family members. But the clichéd image of a violent stranger lurking in an alley has so distorted the media and the public's view of rape that many no longer recognize rape cases as "real" but rather as alcohol-fueled miscommunications.

London felt a heavy pressure set down on her shoulders and temples. "Someone the victim knows." She was guilty of believing in the stranger lurking in an alley ready to pounce. She knew the definition of rape was about unwanted sexual encounters, but she never thought it could really apply to the relationship she was in. She had never wanted to have sex toward the

end of their relationship, she was forced into it, and that was rape. Her hands were shaking. She had been raped. By a man she had loved.

She set the book down and let herself cry for a while. But it just made her want to learn more.

She turned to a book that seemed to have more hope in its title. *Courage to Heal*. It had a subtitle about healing from child abuse. It was a thick book so there was sure to be more that it had to say. Setting the floppy book down, she allowed it to fall wherever it chose, and the text proved her right. It settled at a chapter called “Healthy Intimacy.” A sub header read “A Working Relationship”:

By its very nature, intimacy isn't something you can do alone. Intimacy assumes a relationship and a relationship means risk. The other half is a person you can't control.

London couldn't help but smile at that. Nick was so good-hearted, but that didn't mean he wasn't misguided. But she could help him get there. She noted that there were a few sections to benefit those in relationship with the survivors.

She continued on with the section. It challenged its reader to ask a few questions to see if intimacy was truly possible:

Do I respect this person? Does this person respect me? Is this a person I can usually communicate with? Do we both try to listen and work through conflicts? Is there a give-and-take? Do we both compromise? Can I be honest? Can I show my real feelings? Do we both take some responsibility for the relationship's successes and problems? Is there room for me to grow and change in this relationship?

The text mentioned how if most of these could not be answered yes, then it was probably the sign of a new relationship that wasn't ready for intimacy. She found herself able to answer

“yes” to nearly every question. She had been staying with Nick for about a month now, but she already felt so close to him.

But one of the questions was stuck in her mind: “Is there a give-and-take?” She realized that nearly all of their relationship was based on her wants and needs. She knew there was a reason for that, and that Nick was trying all he could to make sure she was comfortable and safe and got everything she needed, but what did she know about him? The thought didn’t make her nervous—she knew the person he was—but realizing she knew little about what made him tick or his likes and dislikes made her sad.

She flopped the book closed. Nick would be in the bar preparing to open soon. She left her pile of reading materials and padded down the stairs to the bar where she sat on the middle-most barstool.

She sat quietly, running her fingers up and down the edge of the bar. Nick was pulling the chairs down from their tables. When he was finished, he went behind the bar and leaned on it with his arms wide. “Hi.” A rag was thrown over his shoulder—a staple of the job he spent so much time at, a piece of who he was. But she had never looked when he was making a drink, not even hot chocolate. She’d learned her drink-making skills from Josue.

“Will you make me your favorite drink?”

“What?”

“Will you make me your favorite drink,” she repeated.

“It’s one o’clock in the afternoon. Do you—do you even drink?”

“I know, I know. And yes, sort of. I mean, I did. When things were better. But the drinking is not really the point. I just want to know what it is. And watch you make it.”

“Okay.” He looked at her questionably. “But do you want it to be my favorite to drink or to make? Because they’re different.”

“Either. Both.”

“They are literally quite different. So, well, I don’t know, were you wanting to try them? They might taste a little weird together.”

“Just make them, please.” She sighed and rested her chin in her hands.

He went to work, and made something of a show of it, too. She could tell that he wasn’t trying to impress her; it was simply what he did. It was his craft. He tossed a highball glass straight up and caught it again. He scooped the perfect amount of ice in a swift flourish; there was no hesitation or guesswork. The liquors and juices were in all different locations, but he grabbed them in turn, flipping them to release the right amount of each into the glass: vodka, peach schnapps, orange juice, and cranberry juice. He popped a slice of orange on the rim and slid it over to her on a bar napkin.

“I present to you, ‘Sex on the Beach’.”

London couldn’t help but blush. “Is this your favorite to drink or make?”

“Drink.” He smiled softly.

She was startled by this.

“I know, I know, girly drink right? But I love it.”

“I think it’s the beard and flannels that are throwing me off. The image just doesn’t go,” she said, holding the drink up to his face and laughing.

“Try it.”

She lifted the glass, toasted him, and took a small sip and smiled. It was good.

“You like it?”

She nodded and kept sipping. Nick smiled back at her. “Now the next one is much more complicated, I thought I’d give you something to drink while I’m making it.”

He pulled out a chilled martini glass from a cooler by his legs. He turned on the espresso machine, which was a sound she didn’t recognize. Since when did they have an espresso machine?

He stripped a vanilla bean and rimmed the glass with it before he made a flourish of pouring chocolate liqueur and adding the espresso, amongst other liquors she would never be able to recall.

He took his own sip before handing it to her. “Sorry ‘bout that, but this stuff is amazing. And it’s fun. Plus coffee.”

“I love coffee.” She took a sip and could feel her insides warm from both the coffee and the alcohol.

“London, you have never asked for coffee before.” He looked exasperated. He had made it a few times at the beginning, but she never drank it so he’d just stopped making it for her.

“Yeah, I know. I kind of just got used to not needing the caffeine fix. But you can feel free to make me this every day.” She took another frothy sip.

“Hang on, you’ve got something on your lip.” Nick leaned over the bar to kiss the foam off the lips of a smiling London.

Reclaiming Memories – Day 44

It was eight o’clock on a Tuesday evening. Nick and London lay on top of the covers, *Casablanca* playing on the flat screen, more of background than anything. Nick had asked Josue to run the bar so the two of them could take the night off. It would be a quiet night, anyway.

Ever since Nick had made London his favorite drinks, she had a running list of questions about his likes and dislikes, his past and his future.

London was laughing at a story about Nick's disaster of a fishing trip with his mom when he was nine. The fish he had caught was still very much alive when his mom took a picture. It flopped around and smacked him in the face before falling to the bottom of the boat. His mom picked it up and threw it back in. After that episode, he worked up the courage to try again and managed to hook himself, luckily only on his shirt.

"I should still have the picture my mom got." London held her breath. She remembered the pictures she had seen in his drawer and felt guilty again for snooping. But Nick went to the closet and slid down a bin from the top shelf. She hadn't seen the bulk of them. Just the really important ones.

He dug through it for a few minutes until he found the picture of himself mid-jerk, eyes closed and entire face scrunched, the fish in mid-air.

The visual evidence started a whole new bout of laughter for London and it took her a while to stop.

"All right, all right. It's not *that* funny."

"Oh, it is." London said between gasping breaths. When she had calmed her hysterics, she asked, "Do you have any pictures of your mom?" She figured she might as well ask.

Nick tensed. "Yeah, there should be a few in here."

So he wouldn't show her the ones in the drawer. Those were personal, she could accept that. But it made it harder to believe she had done that.

He flipped through picture after picture of him and his sister: Angie holding him when he was born, in front of a Sea World fountain (with his front two teeth missing), at her college graduation at Northwestern.

London looked at them one by one, each bringing a smile to her face. It was an amazing transition for him to have been this gangly little kid with noodle arms who was terrified of fishing to the man before her.

“I found one,” Nick looked up and when he smiled at her, her stomach bottomed out. He really was handsome.

The photo showed his mother as thin and long-limbed wearing mom jeans and a white tank top. It was easy to see where Nick had gotten his gangly-ness from. She looked about forty and was laughing, looking down at the camera. The photo was a little blurry and with the angle, it looked like a child may have taken it. “Did you take this?”

“Yeah, I was pretty little. But I remember this for sure. She was laughing that I had gotten the camera and tried to take a picture like she was always doing with me. She was always laughing.”

“She’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, she is...you remind me of her sometimes.”

With the way his face lit up whenever she was mentioned, London was flattered.

“What happened to her?”

“About three years back she had a brain aneurysm. It was completely unexpected.”

“Oh Nick, I’m so sorry.” She covered the hand holding the picture with hers.

“Thanks,” he took a deep breath. “I wish you could have met her. My soulmate in a way. I have never met someone who understood me as well as she did. Although I’d say you come in at a close second.”

London smiled and slid back on the bed. She patted next to her to get him to sit. She rested her head on Nick’s shoulder as he continued to talk. “She made sure I was always heard and of course laughed at every single one of my jokes. I miss her so much.”

London felt a tear drip onto her forehead. Nick cleared his throat and turned away. London tried not to smile. She knew Nick took a lot of pride in being a “manly man,” but she thought it was beautiful that he cried because he missed his mother. She felt drawn in to kiss him, so she turned his face toward hers and did just that. His lips were salty and wet from his tears.

Her hands reached up to the sides of his face and she traced her thumbs across his cheeks and through his beard, picking up wetness on the way. Nick maneuvered so he was hovering over her, but she detached their lips and sank into the pillows. She pushed at his chest. “I can’t have you on top of me.”

He swung his leg over to fall back on the bed. Some of the pictures they had been looking at fluttered off the bed. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

“Nick, it’s all right. I just have to let you know what’s okay with me. You don’t know what that looks like and I might not even know what that looks like until it happens. Is that okay?”

“Of course. I want to make sure you always feel safe and comfortable.” His eyebrows were creased in genuine concern and she couldn’t help but lean over and kiss him again.

She pulled him back onto the bed so they were laying down facing each other, still kissing. Nick's hand landed lightly on London's hip and she gave a small gasp. Her shirt had ridden up so a small strip of skin was exposed and his touch made her shiver.

She pulled herself closer to him so that their hipbones were touching. Nick wrapped his arm all the way around her waist which felt far too dominating. London tilted her head away. He started to kiss her neck, but that wasn't what she wanted. "Nick—" Between breaths she pulled his arm from around her.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Should I not have done that?" His brown eyes widened with concern. Had his eyes always been brown? They were gorgeous.

"It's okay." She took a minute to consider if she wanted to make a suggestion. She worried what Nick would think. "What if I get on top of you? I think that would help."

Nick gave a dreamy smile. "Yes."

The pair shifted so London was straddling Nick. The blunt ends of her hair tickled his face and made him laugh. "If you tickle me, I'll tickle you." He flicked his fingers on the skin right above her hips.

"No, stop!" But she was laughing too. She felt happy.

Once her giggles had subsided, he slid his hand down her leg so that his thumb rested on the inside of her knee. "Is this okay?"

She nodded so that her nose brushed his in an Eskimo kiss and he slowly traced his thumb up the inside seam of her leggings. His touch was so gentle she thought she might cry. But instead she let out a moan and wrapped her arms around his neck so that she was laying directly on top of him.

Nick toyed with the edge of her t-shirt, tracing the skin underneath it. It was him who pulled away this time. “Have I ever told you how much I love you in my shirts?”

London smiled at that, but it was then that Christopher crept into her mind. He hated whenever she stole his dress shirts. “They’re not meant to be slept in,” he would say and he’d yank them off of her, only wrinkling them further, which he claimed to be his concern.

“Hey, what’s on your mind?” Nick put a hand on her cheek. “Is everything okay?”

London was struck by how well he could read her. She was thankful words didn’t always have to be used. “It’s nothing.” She bit her lip and remembered that Nick *loved* her in his shirts. She deserved to feel sexy. She dropped her voice to a whisper. “Distract me.”

“Do you know you’ve had me since the moment you showed up at my bar? Maybe even since college. I always had a crush on you.” Every drop of seriousness was in his voice and those deep brown eyes.

She had no clue. But what a feeling that she had been wanted, all this time. And that she’d want him just as much. Every part of him—now.

She kissed his temple, his jaw, his neck, her fingers running through his hair, around his ears, down his shoulders. She could tell he was startled by her sudden change in mood, but his hands didn’t hesitate in finding her hips, breasts, and hair. He pulled a little too roughly on her short locks and she gasped. She propped herself up on her arms, but Nick was already softly running his hands through her hair, barely touching her scalp. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

This time a few tears slipped out of her eyes. She didn’t know if she had ever been touched so tenderly. Through her blurry vision, she could see Nick let a few tears go himself. He

sniffed to cover it up and said, “I know I told you you look great in my shirts but would you mind if I took this one off of you?”

“Actually, I’d rather take it off myself.” London shifted her weight to her knees and gave herself a minute to breathe. The only man who had ever seen her naked was Christopher. But this was Nick—wonderful, adoring Nick. Her hand found his cheek and she smiled. In one swift movement, the loose t-shirt was off of her and on the floor. She wasn’t wearing a bra.

Nick’s hands again found her hips and he ran his fingers along the waistband of her leggings. She was quivering. “You’re so beautiful.”

She could feel her whole body blush and she slowly melted back onto him, her nose pressed to his neck. She inhaled deeply. He smelled like forests and whiskey. “Thank you.”

“Do you want to take off my shirt or should I?” Nick spoke into her hair.

London smiled into his neck and kissed it. She slowly reached up to undo buttons, kissing down his chest and grazing her nails against his chest hair as more skin appeared. Her hand ran over his bicep as she slipped his sleeve off and she could feel a tightening in her gut. He was so fit and handsome and she wanted him badly, but she didn’t know how she could measure up. Maybe she should have had him take off his clothes before she decided to take hers off. She was getting healthier, but she still felt unnaturally skinny, with her bones protruding in odd places. She suddenly felt self-conscious that Nick was running a finger over her naked back.

“London. *London.*” He coaxed her out of her thoughts and she tilted her head up. “If this is too much to ask, please let me know. But could you sit up again? I just want to look at you.”

She was grateful for his appreciation, but she wasn’t ready to do that again. “I’d rather just lay here for a while.”

“Okay.” Their chests rose and fell in unison. Even though her sudden bashfulness had gotten in the way, she still ached for Nick.

Why should her appearance make her feel any less deserving of him? Nick thought she was beautiful. He made her feel sexy. She *was* sexy.

Nick spoke up. “I don’t know if we’re about to fall asleep, but I’d rather not sleep in jeans. Do you mind if I change?”

Instead of responding, she reached down for the button on his jeans. She helped pull them off of his toned thighs to reveal plain black underwear. For some reason, that didn’t surprise her in the least.

She whispered again. “Do you want to take mine off?”

“Are you sure?”

Her finger found a groove just inside his hipbone where she tugged at the very top of his underwear. “Yes. Absolutely.”

Okay – Day 48

It was Saturday night and the bar had a steady enough crowd that kept Nick, London, Josue, Callum, and Molly busy. Even though it had been “the place” for Nick and London’s friend group in college, it was no longer a student hangout. The bar had carried over its customers from that era and the crowd was mostly people in their thirties. But that didn’t mean that their customers ordered drinks at any less a rate than the average college student.

London was behind the bar, swiping a card to start a tab. Nick grazed her free hand when he walked by, three beers in one hand. They smiled at each other. He never failed to notice her, even when it was hectic.

Her eyes flickered to those just walking in when she heard a rowdy yelp. And there stood Christopher.

She whipped around and dropped to the floor behind the bar, heart pounding. How long had it been since she'd seen him? It didn't matter. Her fear was still the same as it had been the day she ran away, she had just allowed herself to forget. She placed a hand over her chest and tried to calm her breathing, eyes closed. Nick's boot knocked with her foot as he was maneuvering behind the bar. "London? What are you doing down there?" He had to speak loudly in order to be heard above the din.

"SH!"

He crouched down beside her. "What's wrong?"

She took a deep breath, knowing that telling Nick could really cause some problems. But he would find out for himself if she didn't tell him. "Christopher is here."

His eyes hardened. He popped up from the bar to check out the scene. London tugged at his pant leg. "Please don't do anything bad."

He came back down to her level. "I won't do anything you don't want me to do. But I can't let him stay here. I have to kick him out."

"Okay."

"I won't let him know you're here." He kissed her on the forehead and crossed around the bar.

She closed her eyes. Even among the bar noises, she couldn't stop herself from hearing Nick and Christopher's exchange. Especially when it turned loud and quieted the rest of the bar.

"What thafuck, Nick? I haven't seen you in years and yoo tell me I haff toleaf? Why?"

He was clearly already way past hammered. She could just picture the foggy glaze over his eyes. Remembering it terrified her.

“I have the right to refuse service to anyone. You’re clearly already very intoxicated, so I am not about to serve you any more alcohol. I’ll call you a cab.”

“You canddo that, asshole.” His words were slurred. There was a shuffle and a few gasps. What happened?

“You don’t want to do that, Chris. It would be a pretty uneven fight.”

Fight? London sprung up from behind the bar to see Christopher land a sloppy drunk punch.

“Stop!”

It took a while for Christopher to see where the voice was coming from but she knew he recognized her voice.

“London, don’t get involved.” Nick was firm but his pleading voice betrayed how scared he was for her. Molly and Josue appeared at her side in the matter of seconds, but she pushed past them.

“London, baby, whatter yoodoing here?” He looked between London and Nick, who refused for her to face Christopher without his body coming between them. “Areyoo here withNick?”

“Don’t call me ‘baby’.” She tried not to think about the drama of the moment. The drunken brawl in a bar over a girl that stuns everyone into silence. She was shaking, but she wouldn’t lose what bravery she had found.

“Are you fuckinhimm?” Christopher jeered and wiped his nose, sloppily nodding his head at Nick.

She looked at her ex-fiancé and was relieved that he had dragged his feet for so long and they had never actually gotten married. Sweat created a big V on the front of his t-shirt. His ruddy cheeks had hollowed out. His hair contained hardly any blonde anymore, although he'd been nearly platinum the last time she saw him. There wasn't any part of her that loved him anymore—she knew that in seeing him again—but maybe one day she could find it in herself to forgive him. She could have told him the truth. She could have told him everything she had imagined she'd say if she ever saw him again. But none of it was worth it. “Get out,” was all she had.

Christopher laughed like he couldn't believe she was trying to tell him what to do.

She repeated herself, remaining steady. “Get out.” She didn't raise her voice, didn't change her inflection or move.

Christopher laughed again, but it contained far less humor. “Whatever. You can haf thabitch.” He threw his hand at Nick.

London willed Nick not to do anything or follow him because of his comment. She could see his jaw tighten, but he did nothing other than watch him leave. They both followed him with their eyes until he could no longer be seen stumbling down the street. London suspected most of the bar was too. It was still quiet and it seemed no one knew quite how to react.

Callum spoke up, making an executive decision, “Hey everybody, we've decided to close early tonight. All your tabs will be taken care of, but please come back soon. Thanks.”

London was appreciative of Callum for taking charge but she knew that in any other circumstance, Nick would never close the bar early. She could see him still reeling.

She was shaking uncontrollably in the adrenaline aftermath, which grabbed Nick's attention right away. As people were exiting the bar, he took both of London's hands in his until they steadied.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” And she truly meant it.

Pain and Pleasure: The Effects of Trauma on Sex and Onward Growth in the Framework of Chick Lit

Introduction

Trauma writing often contains a narrative of hope. The purpose of many of these works is either to portray a narrative of healing from trauma or to instruct its reader in the ways of healing. Some may accomplish both. Chick lit is a nuanced genre that has allowed women both to write and read about their particular experiences as human beings. Autonomy is a persistent theme in the genre, giving women the ability to make their own choices based upon their wants and, notably, pleasures. Similarly, trauma writing attempts to display how human beings can break away from their trauma to find autonomy.

Although the genres are similar in their preoccupations, they are disparate in how they are received and in how they portray certain themes, such as autonomy/choices, pleasure, and sex. Since many of these themes in chick lit require a woman to find her true love, there has been ongoing feminist criticism of chick lit. Feminists view sex and autonomy as positive and powerful things but there is a disconnect when chick lit uses clichés. The patriarchal narrative of romance is often viewed as regressive to feminist critics for how it insists on coupling.

Because *Getting Out From Under* is a story of trauma, it has an inevitable trajectory of healing. London's healing comes in an unexpected way because it is, in part, through the mode of "love story" that is often seen in chick lit. This pushes back against the feminist criticism that romance is generally a regressive narrative. My aim is to argue that because a large part of London's healing is found in her relationship with Nick, and because she is also able to find healing of her own accord, the conventions of chick lit can ultimately be feminist.

Definition of Trauma

In a piece called “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History,” trauma expert Cathy Caruth defines trauma as:

An overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (181).

She goes on to cite the example of a soldier who experiences the numbing effects of witnessing persistent death to, years later, relive the pain in dreams. Other examples of events that may cause traumatic responses include natural disaster, vehicle accident, social isolation, bullying, some kind of physical abuse, or in the case of my story, rape. How any one victim of trauma responds is dependent on several factors. In the case of rape:

Variables such as prior psychological functioning (including any prior victimization, major life stressors, and/or PTSD), severity of the assault (including level of violence) and resultant physical damage, identity of the perpetrator, cognitive appraisals and perceived threat, initial level of distress, participation in the criminal justice system, presence of social support from significant others, and personal attributions all contribute to severity of reactions (Courtois).

Rape’s effects may take on any shape due to these many factors. In a book investigating the complicated conception of rape, Michael McGrath states:

First, the victim's personality and history can, and will, affect her response to trauma. Second, the victim might suffer this traumatic event in a culture, or within personal relationships, that may or may not be supportive (251).

A major thread that runs through both of these points is that of outside support or lack thereof. Other people, whether that be family, friends, a significant other, or even strangers and their reactions will affect how a victim is able to heal. Getting people to listen to your story can be a major help in the healing process, and that is how the genre of trauma writing came about.

Writing About Trauma

Literature about trauma rests on a wide spectrum. There are informative pieces that contain data and research about trauma as well as self-help works to educate those who have

experienced trauma. Examples of these include *Rape is Rape* and *Courage to Heal*, which are pieces that the protagonist London directly interacts with. Reading these books, if briefly, allowed her to recognize that she wasn't alone in her experience of rape and that she could experience growth. Her reading of *Courage to Heal* prompted her to ask questions of Nick and to ensure that their relationship was two-sided.

There are also works of memoir in which people who have experienced trauma write about their experiences, either to learn and grow through the writing process or to educate others. Some accomplish both. These pieces cover every kind of trauma from full-body paralysis (*Waking* by Matthew Stanford) to coping with the aftermath of persistent blackouts due to overconsumption of alcohol (*Blackout* by Sarah Hepola).

While those stories have a significant place in the lineage of trauma writing, the form that will be most important to consider in this essay the novel, fiction that contains characters who experience trauma and have to find ways to cope. The most relevant to this piece are books about rape trauma. *The Round House* by Louise Erdrich is a key example to consider. The novel follows the story of a family on an Indian reservation that falls apart after the mother, Geraldine, experiences a violent rape. The story is notably told through the perspective of the victim's young son, so the whole narrative is colored by his naivety and immaturity, as well as his status as a male. Healing in this novel is in justice being served to the perpetrator of the assault. It is an important work in considering how healing works for every person differently.

Sand Queen by Helen Benedict tackles a few subjects that result in a protagonist who is traumatized. The story follows Kate, a woman soldier in the military stationed in Iraq. She experiences sexual harassment daily and this leads to an attempted rape by her lieutenant. This encounter is not the central driving force of the narrative, however, as Kate does not appear to be

deeply affected by her sexual assault as some trauma narratives may have her. She is primarily concerned with other aspects of her life including her friendship with one of the only other girls in her platoon, her concern for an Iraqi women whose family has been wrongly imprisoned, and the assault she incurs by the prisoners she guards. This is still a story about trauma because the assault carries reverberations throughout the rest of the text, even if there is not a great impact on Kate. The narrative of trauma is complicated when she enters into a romantic relationship with a comrade who helped fend off her perpetrator. The novel slips into conventions of chick lit in some moments because of that narrative of romance.

The Lineage of Chick Lit

While the naming of the commercialized genre “chick lit” did not emerge until the 1990s, the genre itself has been around since the late 1700s with novels like *Charlotte Temple* by Susanna Rowson written in 1791 and *The Coquette* by Hannah Foster from 1797. These are referred to as “seduction novels” for how pervasive desires are in driving their narratives. The protagonists of these novels are women who go against the wishes of their parents by involving themselves with unsuitable men. In a journal about both of these specific texts by Anna Mae Duane, she argues that even though novels like these were seen as impositions on women’s choices and bodies, “proto-feminist subtext emerges when we read these novels against the grain” (38). They are stories of women breaking away from their parents or a man’s wishes to pursue their own wants, often based on lust or sexual desires.

This theme continues throughout the lineage of women’s writing to the rise of “chick lit” in the 1990s. Many mark the beginning of the present moment of chick lit with the widespread popularity of the novel *Bridget Jones’ Diary* by Helen Fielding (Ferriss & Young 4, Harzewski 58-9, Rowntree 508, Wilson 214). The novel follows a single, thirty-something woman with a

career, love interests, family and friends, who also happens to ponder the issue of her weight and vices. As Margaret Rowntree states in an article about feminine sexualities in chick lit:

Usually the chick heroine, somewhat flawed in character, adopts a first person narrative style to tell a tale of self-transformation, self-realization, and self-empowerment as she navigates the messiness of her personal and professional life, including the quest for true love in the form of a suitable male partner (508).

This narrative that frequents chick lit has been criticized for being formulaic and generic in nature and for relying on tropes that are argued to be anti-feminist.

Reception and Criticism of Chick Lit

Chick lit has been criticized for as long as it has been around despite its widespread popularity. As Professors Suzanna Ferriss and Mallory Young state in a book on chick lit, “On one hand chick lit attracts the unquestioning adoration of fans; on the other it attracts the unmitigated disdain of critics” (1). Chick lit is often thought to be nowhere near the literary canon; as journalist Anne Kingston states in a Canadian National Post article, “stories of female experience have long been dismissed as “women's stories,” “lit” rather than literature.” Ferriss and Young go on to note that “highbrow critics...have dismissed chick lit as trashy fiction” (1). Chick lit has often been made to be something lesser than what has been perceived to be serious literature.

This antithesis to seriousness carries through into feminist criticism as well. Chick lit often runs into uncertainty on whether it, as a whole, is feminist. The goal of chick lit to show the experience of a woman in contemporary culture on a journey of self-discovery sounds inherently feminist. But because the stories often rely on the trope of romance, there is a discrepancy.

Ferriss and Young ask a few interesting questions in thinking about this ongoing debate:

Is chick lit advancing the cause of feminism by appealing to female audiences and featuring empowered, professional women? Or does it rehearse the same patriarchal narrative of romance and performance of femininity that feminists once rejected? (9).

Here resides a tricky argument because it seems these questions might never be able to be answered. But we can also consider tone: “partly at issue may indeed be differences in tone. In the minds of many chick-lit detractors, feminist means serious, and chick lit’s humor makes it as unserious.” (Ferriss & Young 9). The problem with feminist criticism is that it often takes itself too seriously. Feminists have to be willing to see the potential in a genre marketed specifically toward women and see that a romance or any other plot can be feminist as well.

Despite the rampant criticism of chick lit, it does nothing to lessen the consumption of these books by women. According to ABC News reporter Heather Cabot, “In the \$23 billion publishing industry, chick lit books earned publishers more than \$71 million [in 2002], and that’s just the best sellers.” Since this was in 2002, there is likely to be an even greater revenue, considering the many subgenres that have popped up in recent years.

Intersectionality in Chick Lit

Although most chick lit portrays the experience of heterosexual, well-to-do, white women, it is important to note the deviation from this in representing the experiences of women on the outside of this image. Authors like Terry McMillan (the matriarch of black women’s fiction) and Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez (the proponent of “Chicana lit”) have created subgenres that represent other ethnic backgrounds. “Hen lit” and “chick lit jr.” have popped up as a way to reach different aged audiences (Wilson). Any number of other experiences as a woman—being a working woman, bride, or mom—have given rise to niche genres (Ferriss & Young 5-7).

Trauma and Chick Lit in Getting Out From Under

When considering the piece that I have written, it is important to acknowledge the many minute complexities that make up the completed project. It is far too limiting to say that *Getting Out From Under* fits into either trauma writing or chick lit, or to even say that I have borrowed

components from each genre. It will be my mission to pull out those many tropes, themes, characterizations, and modes in order comment on how they are working in the piece to push back against the literary and feminist criticism that snubs chick lit.

Beginning with the trauma itself, London goes through a pretty typical mode of response to rape. Some of the potential responses as cited by Christina Courtois in the *Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Violence* include:

Fear and avoidance...depression, re-experiencing, nightmares, startle response, and general hyper-arousal; depression...negative self-esteem including self-blame, guilt, and shame; negative impact on social adjustment, including...work, leisure, and intimate relationship and/or marital adjustment; problems with sexual functioning, including avoidance and low sexual satisfaction; feelings of anger, hostility, alienation, and confusion; and feelings of fatigue.

London experiences many of these reactions, whether that be right after her assault or as a prolonged response. She immediately pulls away any time Nick tries to touch her and is often jumpy. She eats hardly anything and spends days in bed sleeping unable to get up, which are all signs of depression. She often pulls away from conversation with Nick and remains closed off unless she has unwilling displays of emotion. What is important to consider is how London finds healing even in the midst of all these visceral reactions.

The most notable point of growth when considering the aforementioned list is London's ability to be in a relationship with Nick. The relationship between the pair turns both romantic and sexual. London's ability to have sex with this man she has grown to love shows major growth when considering how she initially would not even let Nick touch her. Additionally, her ability to communicate with Nick exactly what she could handle was a visceral display her healing. There were things that she'd have to pull back from because she felt too controlled, but her willingness to speak up got her some of that control back. Rape is a kind of trauma that can leave its victim with reverberations for possibly their whole lives. There is a lot of strength contained in the choice to have sex with Nick. And that strength might also come from the idea

that she doesn't think about it all that much; she just goes with her heart and her desires. Pointing out that she has desires felt critical to show because rape can take away a lot of things but that doesn't mean it diminishes sex drive or the ability to feel love.

I found that London's willingness to communicate what she needed in her relationship with Nick, not just sexually, was the most significant way she was able to heal. One of the most notable moments are when she tells him about her relationship with Chris and Nick immediately jumps to wanting to kill him. She says that he needs to recognize that acting out in violence would be just as bad. She then tells him when she can no longer talk about it so that she has control over when she thinks about her past relationship. Another critical moment between the two of them where London demands what she needs from Nick is when she comes back from the library. Nick is furious and tries to control her so that she doesn't get hurt again, but his feelings are misguided. She tells him this because she is unwilling to be controlled by a man again. The fact that she is able to say something to him also shows that they have trust in their relationship. I think she would have been more hesitant to say anything in her relationship with Chris since he could have done something to harm her in retaliation. London knows Nick is not violent and just has to correct him in his thoughts.

There was also a growth in Nick at the level of writing him. My peers commented in initial workshops that he seemed to be only a projection of what London needed; that he was this perfect guy willing to open his home to a total stranger with no hesitations or resentment. He became fuller when he became flawed. He didn't always react in the perfect ways when he and London would have important conversations, which also allowed for London to work through her healing process. He was imperfect but that made the interactions between him and London that more realistic.

However, it is important to note that growth for London does not just occur in her relationship with Nick, but also in her desire for independence and her ability to stick up for herself. She grows as person, separate from her relationship with Nick, which is apparent in places like the library scene, in which she only wants to learn more about herself and her trauma and how she can grow from it.

Her experience of going to library and finding books that relate to her experience help her to name her experience as domestic violence and rape. This scene was also a critical scene for me as a writer and in using research. By suggestion of my advisor, Professor Greyser, I went to the public library in the mindset of London to get that visceral experience. I pulled books off the shelf much like she did. I flipped to random pages and read the back covers and introductions and gleaned the information that would be relevant to her. It was a crucial exercise not only in furthering London's growth, but as growth in my own writing process to be able to get in the headspace of a character. I have experienced nothing like what London did in this story and the goal was to ensure my writing was true to life.

Nick's response to her account also follows a typical response of those related to a victim, and of those in a romantic relationship with the victim (although at the time of the reveal, the pair are not quite there yet). This reaction is common because of the typical perpetrator/victim relationship. Perpetrators are often male committing sexual violence on a woman. Nick reacts in this way because of his position as a male. Because of his taught masculinity, he acts out in violence and tries to be the hero saving the damsel in distress. Although the argument can be made that the damsel in distress narrative is regressive (which it certainly is), one of my main goals with this project was to push against common tropes. I wanted to make it clear that Nick is a flawed character and his response isn't justified or

welcomed. Because of London's narrative of growth, she's able to tell Nick what she needs from him, and that does not include stepping in to be the hero. For her, it looks like him just being present and willing to listen to what she has to say. This is the first step in their romantic relationship which leads to their sexual relationship.

Conclusion

Getting Out From Under merges the two distinct genres of trauma writing and chick lit to create a narrative of healing while also containing the convention of romance in a way that disagrees with feminist criticism and allows for chick lit to be a feminized genre.

Works Cited

- Bass, Ellen, and Laura Davis. *The courage to heal: a guide for women survivors of child sexual abuse*. New York, Collins Living, 2008. Although this book is meant to apply to the victims of childhood sexual abuse and gives language that can be applied to the experience as well as steps to move on to healing, there are still some applicable chapters. I have specifically used excerpts from the book in my creative piece as if it were a book read by the protagonist herself. It served as a piece that London could read and react to. The chapter she read was for those closest to the victim and it prompts her to get to know Nick better for who he is.
- Benedict, Helen. *Sand Queen*. Soho Press, Incorporated, 2012. This novel tells the story of a female soldier who has to navigate her relationships and worries in a pervasively male space that allows for sexual harassment and assault against her. This novel not only served as a model for *Getting Out From Under* on how to integrate a romantic relationship narrative within one of trauma, but it was also relevant as a book about trauma that I was able to discuss in my critical essay.
- Cabot, Heather. "'Chick Lit' Fuels Publishing Industry." *ABC News*, ABC News Go, 30 Aug. 2002. This short news article details the kind of money that chick lit makes on the market and the conventions that make it so successful. There are also reader accounts to emphasize the enjoyment of chick lit. This article was helpful to me for the specific monetary amount chick lit has made in the market.
- Caruth, Cathy. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History." *Yale French Studies*, no. 79, 1991, pp. 181–192. This journal from trauma expert Cathy Caruth explores how the conception of trauma is changing because of the persistence of it in our history and how people react in so many different ways. This piece was useful to me in placing a definition for trauma into my essay.
- Courtois, Christine A. "Rape Trauma Syndrome." *Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Violence*. This encyclopedia entry for the term "rape trauma syndrome" defines it as the culmination of the immediate response as well as the ongoing struggle of the person who has experienced rape. Courtois mentions the several responses any victim may have, as well as the factors that contribute to that response, such as the victim's personality or the relationship to their perpetrator. This information was useful when thinking about how London reacted to her own experience of rape. There are typical responses as have been documented, but with variation due to the individual person and situation. This citation was important in discussing that idea in my critical essay, as well as narrowing the discussion of trauma to that of rape trauma.

Duane, Anna Mae. "Susanna Rowson, Hannah Webster Foster, and the seduction novel in the early US." *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, 2011, pp. 37–50. This piece focused solely on the two seduction novels I brought up in my critical essay on the history of chick lit. Duane spoke directly to the fact that these novels were widely read and appreciated so that helped me consider where chick lit started which I had no previous knowledge of.

Erdrich, Louise. *The Round House*. Harper, 2012. A novel about a family on an Indian reservation that falls apart following the violent rape of its matriarch, this book served as a useful citation in discussion of trauma writing. It was also relevant when discussing narrative voice, considering this novel was from the POV of a young boy and Getting Out From Under sometimes stood closely to Nick.

Ferriss, Suzanne, and Mallory Young. "Introduction." *Chick Lit The New Women's Fiction*, Routledge, 2006, pp. 1–13. This introduction gives a great overview of chick lit, with its reception, the growing of the genre into subgenres with more representation, and both literary and feminist criticism. I used much of the information from here as this was a work that many of my other sources referred to. I used the most information on the criticism and the debate over whether chick lit is feminist or not.

Kingston, Anne. "Chick lit keeps on clicking: Pity the female writer who tries to break the mould." *National Post (Canada)*, 1 Nov. 2003. This is a concise article that enters into the musings over why chick lit is such a successful genre, including the history of novels from Jane Austen to now, as well as giving the amount of money that the market has made. I used this article particularly for a line that commented on chick lit was taken seriously because it is not really considered literature.

McGrath, Michael. "Rape Trauma Syndrome and the Investigation of Sexual Assault." *Rape Investigation Handbook*, 24 June 2011, pp. 251–267. This is a psychological study that looks at how those who have experienced sexual assault have almost the exact symptoms of PTSD. I used commentary in my critical essay in which he commented how the people who are surrounding a person who has experienced trauma can have an impact on the healing process.

Raphael, Jody. *Rape is rape: how denial, distortion, and victim blaming are fueling a hidden acquaintance rape crisis.*, 2013. The back cover of this book which states the misconception about rape being perpetrated by someone in an alley is a crucial point to London claiming her experience (cited on page 41). This information helps her to realize she is not alone in her experience and helps her understand better that it is not completely crazy that she can identify what happened to her as rape.

Rowntree, Margaret R. "Feminine Sexualities in the Chick Genre." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, Aug. 2014, pp. 508–521. Rowntree's research looks at several different works of chick lit and considers how their portrayal contributes to the ongoing debate over whether chick lit is feminist or not. It also contains a study of women and how they perceive certain sexual behaviors in writing. Her piece was helpful for my essay where I placed a formula for how chick lit usually plays out.

Wilson, Cheryl A. "Becky Bloomwood at the V&A: Culture, Materialism, and the Chick Lit Novel." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2012, pp. 214–225. This article starts off with entering into the feminist debate of the seriousness of chick lit. The rest of the article serves as a case study of the popular chick lit series "Confessions of a Shopaholic" and its pervasive culture of materialism that has so critics against the popularity of chick lit. I used this article in order to add more commentary on the validity or invalidity of the feminist debate over chick lit.