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Skipped Stepping Stones: a High school Dropout Story

When I met my ex 7 years ago through my first ex, he was a college drop out living with his parents getting drunk every day, doing not much else. I never thought he had an ambitious bone in his body, but I was proven so wrong. In hindsight, perhaps I was his stepping stone to success, but I don't think I can be too upset that we have now parted ways.

I have always felt I had a good radar for depressed people with great potential. I guess I seek them out in my friendships, because I was that person. In many ways I still am. I was a high school drop out as well, but I dropped out initially due to trauma. My ex, J, now twenty four, taught himself to code when he was in middle school with the intention of making games. He was creative, and he loved when his friends played games that he created or made 'mods' for - this extended to playground games and card games as well as virtual ones. He was also extraordinarily witty, if not a little mean. He would learn people's weak spots and know exactly how to attack and use it against them, which he often did to me during our fights, or when someone else hurt me. Anyhow, one way or another, like many bright teens, he fell into a depression and hit a plateau. He dropped out of school, and again, like many, sought comfort in the bottom of a bottle. My ex came from a rougher area where it was not particularly uncommon for people to be unemployed and a little over enthusiastic about pints. Even now, very few of his friends have left that hometown and add to that the pandemic, many struggle to pay rent. J seemed content to live under his parents' wing forever and they didn't really have an issue with that. I developed a strong friendship with him online, as he was my first boyfriend's best friend. I come from a much more privileged background. I went to private schools. I will someday do a PhD. But it is unlikely I will ever make anywhere near the salary J does today, even though he is only 24. So... how did I come to elicit that change in him?

After attending what was supposed to be my highschool graduation and feeling unprecedented levels of FOMO, I had a plan for our little band of high school dropouts - my first ex, J and myself. I was going to get us all into universities in London, and we would stay together in a rented flat. Without J's knowledge, I sent a cover letter to a couple of universities along with projects that demonstrated his coding talent that he had put on GitHub and other platforms. I did the same for my first boyfriend: I explained his situation and asked for an interview at a university so that he could demonstrate his own abilities. He had always had amazing grades up until he dropped out. To my surprise, both of them were given a chance. They aced their interviews. I also got myself into a university on a course I was naturally good at at the age of 17, despite never completing school beyond year 10 (grade 9). Reveling in our success, I was full of pride that we were given the opportunity to override our circumstances. I was ready to start our dream life with my boyfriend and our best friend. Because I was the only one from a more socioeconomically privileged background, I paid for almost everything when we'd have nights out or do anything fun. My parents resented this deeply (I don't blame them) but that was only the start of my woes.

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

Things didn't go as well as I had hoped. My first boyfriend turned out to be quite physically abusive and I couldn't hide it well. The university gave me an ultimatum that I dump him and press charges, or I leave the university campus because I was still a minor and they felt they couldn't protect me. I chose the stupid option and stayed with him and downplayed my story to the police so I wouldn't ruin his budding law career. I returned to my home country and enrolled in distance-learning. J comforted me through the abuse and I guess feelings started to develop on both ends. I eventually found the courage to leave my first boyfriend when I found out he had been seeing other women and lying to me about things that were important to me (and making fun of the death of my beloved cat, I might add).

J's and his friendship was obviously severed when J and I started dating. J dropped out of university, but he had made a strong impression on one of his lecturers who recognized his gift, and she offered him a job.

After completing my first year online, I got the grades I needed to transfer to a Russel Group university. Again, J applied to a nearby university while simultaneously working on the job his lecturer had recommended him for. As I said, he was very talented and could work at lightning speed, so he was able to maintain the work and uni balance really well for a while. But the classes were unchallenging to him. Unlike everyone else who was just starting their coding journey, he was finding flaws in the lecturers' examples. He saw more efficient solutions. He got bored and less motivated to attend classes, because they couldn't teach him anything. He decided to aim for a higher paying job that respected him more and he gave up uni once again. I'll admit, I was worried about him. He had dropped out of three institutions now and I was aware he was making a very risky decision. I didn't think he could honour commitments. Still, I supported his decisions and we celebrated together. He started working way past his scheduled hours. He stayed in the office alone stupidly late and never got financially compensated. His work loved this, and people started taking advantage, piling on more responsibilities. He picked up everyone's slack and basically carried the company. They offered him very meagre pay raises, because, well - he was willing to do it for free anyway. I was very angry with him and them for taking advantage of a young man (they were all way older and had their own lives) and it caused us many fights. It put a huge strain on our relationship and I felt that I had been there for him since the start when he was a "nobody" and now he was abandoning me to please people who clearly didn't care about him. Praise was his fuel and payment. I have thought about this a lot since we parted and I get it now. He was a quiet boy from a small town, now making his uprise in the capital city, where every day, he had to prove himself to people who were much older; people who had taken the traditional route and had credentials to back themselves up. He had to prove his worth not only to them, but to himself. He wanted to become something big. He wanted to become a CEO and millionaire by 30. I was now in his way.

At the time, I didn't understand his work ethic and I called him a workaholic and resented him for being naive, working extra hard for no tangible reward. My parents were the same sort of people and as a result I felt neglected as a child. This is the story of many successful parents: They work endlessly to give their children great prospects, but at what cost? I

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

grew up attention seeking, and deep love and friendship became my main desires in life. I didn't want my career to dominate my life: all I wanted was to be cherished and accepted. I never had to work to put clothes on my back and so I didn't fully understand why anyone else had that drive. That's not to say I didn't have dreams. I had a teacher/school admin figure in high school that gave me a second chance after I had been out of school for a year. He allowed me to skip a grade and enroll in more classes than any other student had previously. I was overambitious and like my ex (albeit in a different way) I had a chip on my shoulder, and was determined to make up for lost time. However, I was dating my first abusive ex at this time. He was emotionally manipulative and I was exhausted trying to keep the peace, do my million higher level (AP) subjects, and catch up with classmates. I had not only taken a year out of school, but I skipped another one when I joined my new school - in science and maths, there were knowledge gaps that were hard to compensate for, despite any intellectual acuties. I was also bullied profusely by my old school for a hideous scandal centering myself and a teacher who took advantage of me when I was 14 (he was 45 and made me feel special, which back then, was the thing I craved most). I never quite recovered from that drama and despite the support, my first boyfriend and I both found ourselves dropping out again. I never forgot the admissions admin/ English teacher who had given me a chance and inspired me to love reading again. I felt as if I failed him big time and when I dropped out, I isolated myself and hid. He was later killed. I then made it my mission to become a teacher like him, and be the chance-giver that he was to vulnerable, depressed children with overlooked academic potential. And I was going to look out for those being bullied: I'd be that branch at the end of the waterfall dropout spout that they could cling onto, catch their breath next to, and then head back upstream with - against the current, to ultimately reach their final destination. So yes, I have my own life goals: nothing that will entail huge paychecks, but that's fine with me.

So yes, my second boyfriend - the guy I considered to be my Otter half in life, drifted away from me in the dead of night. I never cheated, but I did receive the attention of other men and I did give them my time and friendship. I even broke up with him several times, intending to pursue other people because I felt neglected by him, but we always ended up back together. He was broken, and resented me for these emotional entanglements and by the time I grew to understand him and his work ethic, he was emotionally numb to me. When I had mental breakdowns, he put on his headphones and ignored me. I like to think we loved each other at different times and we hated each other at different times. We gave up on each other when the other most needed support; it disintegrated pretty quickly from there. I eventually finished my Masters degree and had a lot of lull time to despair. He kept busy with work and I guess that helped him through it.

So now he's quit working for companies. He is pursuing a career with his former colleague-turned-friend designing an app, for which they have been given a generous entrepreneur grant to work on. His friend has just started a family. He has a baby, and multiple contracting jobs and so naturally he commits less time to their project than my ex. I like his friend, but I worry my ex is yet again doing an unfair amount of work again for

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

the same pay cut, but I respect his decision as it's his journey. I learnt that can't protect him, and if he falls, that's on him, which is something he's wanted me to understand from the start. So far, he has done amazingly. He is earning more than both his parents combined and then some. He has almost completely forgone any social life. As far as I know, he has no close friends and talks to nobody about his emotions. That bond that we had, where we could talk about everything, share a million inside jokes and always know how to get the other to laugh when they were feeling stressed melted away into a puddle of my tears. Memories - the product of a seven year close friendship dwindled into no-contact. I can't see him again, but boy do I miss him as a friend. Whenever something happens in my life, he is the first person I think to tell, and I talk and I talk and I talk to other people but no one gives the responses he would: he always knew what to say. But on the whole, we were very very toxic to each other and it must be accepted that some things, like trust, you cannot repair. I hate him but I am proud of him - How far he's come. I spent years pointing out how he was being taken advantage of, calling out his mistakes and offering unsolicited advice. He never really knew how proud of him I was. I told him sometimes but he always thought I was telling him what he wanted to hear. He still is incredibly insecure, and while I taught him so much and introduced him to all these opportunities that he never would have come across had he stayed a drunk in his parents' house, I can't say that I didn't contribute to his self doubt. When he met me, he knew little about hygiene, other cultures, cuisines and luxury. He didn't even know how to tie his shoe laces, ride a bike or wash/fold/iron clothes. We learnt to cook together. He stopped borrowing my money when he started making a higher salary and he often treated me to impressive hotel getaways, five star meals and lavish gifts. We had a good life when it was good, but those fights were my lowest lows. Child grooming, sexual assault, domestic violence and every other setback I suffered didn't break me as badly as this heartbreak did. I often wish we never ventured beyond friendship... because maybe if we had just stayed at that level, we wouldn't have come to resent each other to the point of ruin.

Alas, regrets, I have a few. I still plan to be a badass, bully-eliminating, dead-poets-society sort of inspiring teacher, but my future partner and family will always take precedence. Those priorities didn't align with my ex's, and similar to the way he was investing much more effort into his career than his colleagues, I was doing the same for the relationship. Many do not need the emotional human connections the way I do to feel alive - I am in my own way. I was the only person J ever opened up to, and maybe I'll be the last. I wonder if he'll have a Wikipedia page dedicated to him one day, like Bill Gates or Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg. I wonder if they'll be a subheading about me: the girl who discovered him, saved him, and then made him fear love. He is talented and dedicated enough for sure... his only downfall is that he is insecure and too humble. The entrepreneurial world is a dog-eat-dog world, and more often than not people pretend to be your friend, use you and then step on you to get ahead, but there is hope. I really wish that his app becomes successful. If not this one, then the next project he puts his soul into.

I am sad I wasted six years of my life with nothing to show for it, and only a deep emptiness where our connection died and evaporated. I hope

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

I find the love of my life someday, but it'll be hard to beat that whirlwind of toxic passion we had for each other. We were drop outs. Social Rejects. Weirdos. We lifted each other out of the nothingness and went through so many life milestones together... And now look at us.... We don't even know what the other is up to anymore.

My takeaway message to you is one of hope. Whether you choose to love hard, or work harder, you can start improving yourself at your own pace. You can go back to education or pursue a new career path at any time. You can have been disadvantaged, discouraged or distracted by life's eccentricities and still come out better in your own time. You don't have to be prodigious to get ahead. To all my fellow dropouts, you aren't failures. You will find your own way.