



# Lou Who?

Louise Johnson

TWO COUNTRIES, TWO NAMES, MANY MEN...  
A MEMOIR OF SELF-DISCOVERY

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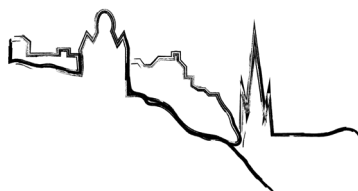


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Dedicated to the one who birthed me, the one who raised me, the one whose love and support and energy knows no bounds, Mama Johnson. Thank you for teaching me that every challenging situation is simply a learning curve.

To all those life lessons, thank you, I wouldn't change a thing.



## Forewarned is Forearmed

If you know me professionally, or maybe in a brotherly/sisterly way, some of the stories and details in this memoir may be “eye opening” for you to read. I’m comfortable sharing the stories, regardless of whether you’re comfortable knowing them! If you can’t look me in the eye afterwards, well, as my friend James would say, that sounds like a “you” problem.

With Love, Lou.



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<sup>1</sup> This is *not* a typo.



Lou Who?



## Part 1



# One

## How the West Won

“You can’t outrun your problems. Moving to Canada won’t make you a different person suddenly.” I love when my friends don’t pull any punches. My first thought in response to that comment was: *But wouldn’t it be bloody lovely if that were the case!* My second, more sobering, thought was: *Oh god...is that what I’m doing?*

Sitting in the bar of a cliff-top hotel on the southwest coast of England, with my colleague and friend Danae, it was the type of difficult conversation that I knew would come up as I told more people about my plans to move to Canada. It wasn’t yet confirmed by way of a booked flight, but the decision was pretty much made. So, while telling work was still a ways off, Danae was more than a colleague. She was the friend who I lined up for hours on end with when Krispy Kreme first opened in Edinburgh, the one who paid good money to devour gourmet burgers when a historic Edinburgh library turned into a popup restaurant, and the first person to make me prioritise my mental health. This is not a British trait (but she is American, so it figures).

I’d never truly considered that my sanity should be a higher priority than getting my ass to work and paying a mortgage. My mum<sup>2</sup> was an exceptionally hard worker and showed up for herself every day during her divorce: she showed up for work; she showed up for her kids; and she showed up for everyone who relied on her. I guess that’s where I got it from—not only the hardworking bit, but the unfortunate turn of falling in love, getting married and then getting divorced. Sometimes, the people we love come to see, treat, and value love differently than us; and sometimes this changes us forever.

<sup>2</sup> I call any North American mother “Mom”; but I call any other mother “Mum.” It’s a distinction I make to respect both tendencies.



Rarely, however, do our past relationships hurtle us across the Atlantic Ocean to Canada.

Walking into work the morning after my marriage ended, I remember how Danae swiftly took me to the coffee shop across the street. She'd seen the panic cross my face as I walked into the office, and I *had* been questioning how I was going to function at work, now that my life was falling apart. She recognised the shortness of breath, the fear in my eyes and my complete inability to make a coherent decision regarding whether work was something I could manage that day. Over coffee, she assured me that taking some "me time" was not a sign of weakness: prioritising my emotional wellbeing was not only the kindest but also the most healing thing on my plate. Work could wait.

But in that grand English country hotel near Cornwall, having returned to work from my time off, Danae was now asking the hard questions re: my plans for the future. And I'd have expected nothing less from her. As lovely as it would have been to think a flight to another country could solve all my problems, I wasn't that naive. Regardless of where in the world I ended up, I knew there would still be work to do. There were wounds that I thought would never heal, mental trauma that I might never make peace with in full. Honestly, it would take much more than a ten-hour flight and an eight-hour time change to soothe my level of emotional devastation.

What was I hoping to achieve by choosing to move to a city I had never visited, where I knew no one, at a moment when nurturing a support network was not only sensible but necessary? Searching for the right words, I tried to explain myself to Danae, starting with the tangible, the part that I hoped she and others would get: *I didn't honestly know how to start my life again in Edinburgh*. Despite having all of my friends and family there, staying and rebuilding at home truly seemed more daunting than starting new somewhere else.

I was also finding myself in an entirely different time of my life; all my friends were married (or getting married) with kids (or having kids) and I was...well, I was back home living with my mum, looking for any excuse to get shit-faced drunk and relying on the *but-life-is-so-tough* line when I didn't want to face reality. Essentially I'd regressed to a teenager. While they were wonderful for support, my friends and I were looking for different things in life now, and you know what friends really don't like? When you suggest that you might need to make new friends....

My explanation for Danae then moved onto the less tangible and slightly more unhinged note of: *I actually hadn't really thought that much about it.* I mean, I had, obviously, but there wasn't really a decision to make. The only thing I could see helping me in that moment was getting out of the eternally familiar but now alien-feeling bubble of Edinburgh. It just *felt* right; and when the mind has suffered a break with the way things *once* were but are no longer, sometimes following a feeling in the body is the best resource we have.

Vancouver specifically came about after a school friend of mine, Sophie, told me how much she'd loved her four months living there—not to mention her complete assuredness that I'd love it too. I'd gone through a few other options: Australia or New Zealand (too far away), London (just didn't feel far enough), somewhere else in Europe (I didn't want to deal with a language barrier), or the Middle East (not ideal as a single white female, even if I had grown up in Egypt). I had moved to Cairo as a seven-year-old with my family, for my dad's work, and we ended up staying for seven years. It was very different to move somewhere by myself as a single, twenty-eight-year old female.

Having said that, my parents' conviction to uproot their family to move to a country as "colourful" as Egypt definitely galvanised me into feeling like I could do this. We'd moved to Egypt from an area of Edinburgh where people don't even leave that part of town, never mind move to the other side of the world; and we arrived in Egypt at a time of political instability (has there ever been political stability there?) when electricity and water were patchy to say the least. The summer before we made the move, my parents decided that we should take our first ever trip on a plane to somewhere else, somewhere a little more *family friendly*, before they landed us in the Middle East. And so we visited Toronto.

Hence why Canada *just made sense* to me as a destination. We ended up taking a couple of family holidays to Toronto during my childhood as well, to visit some extended family who moved to Ontario in the eighties, but I don't know how I would have felt moving to Toronto—a big, anonymous city—by myself. From what I'd read, Vancouver sounded like Edinburgh: a small, walkable city with the ocean and mountains (albeit in Edinburgh, they are more like hills). I'd registered for information about moving to Canada less than a month after my marriage ended. So quick was my want to get the hell out of dodge.

I take that back, Edinburgh will never be dodge to me, but in that moment it wasn't the place for me; and, like I said, Canada just seemed to make sense. Danae wasn't overly convinced by my arguments yet she accepted them. As we returned home to Edinburgh and the reality of feeling so alone in a place where I knew so many people returned to me, I knew for sure that I'd rather feel lonely in a place where I didn't know anyone, because at least that would make sense. Looking back now, it pains me to know that I made this decision out of so much sadness, rather than hope for what a future in Vancouver could bring. I just knew that I couldn't stay in Edinburgh.

I applied for a year-long working holiday visa once they became available that January, but they were kind of like Coachella or Glastonbury tickets: the first batch was gone in forty-five minutes, with the site crashing multiple times. Who knew so many people wanted to move to Canada? But I got a lucky golden ticket on the next round and managed to apply. This was the first time that I recognised how lucky I was that my marriage ended before I turned thirty. "Lucky" is maybe a funny way to put it, however. Did it feel lucky at the time? *Abso-fucking-lutely not*. But the type of visa I was applying for was only applicable if you were thirty years old or under, so if I'd been much older, it wouldn't have been an option for me. Honestly, not having that opportunity would have been devastating.

A month after my conversation with Danae in Cornwall, my visa came through and on April 25th 2013, I booked a one-way ticket to Vancouver. I would be leaving for Canada on September 25th 2013, as the Moon in Gemini was sextile with Uranus in Aries and Mars in Leo. I didn't know much about astrology, but according to Google, the formations above me that day sketched a helpful framework for this next chapter of my life, forces that brought ease to my relationship with independence, with willpower, with courage, confidence, openness, and ultimately going my own way.

Perhaps my instinct to move to Vancouver was only a gut feeling, but then it must have been one hell of a gut feeling, to have also written itself in the stars. At the time, instead of looking up, and like so many who came before me, I decided to look west, across the ocean to Canada.

## Two

### The End of the World as I Know It

The end of my marriage was not something I'd planned (I mean who does? Gold-diggers maybe?) But it was shocking to me. Six weeks —not months, not years—after our wedding in April of 2010, I found out that my husband had cheated on me, in numerous fashions. Before we even got married, he'd slept with at least one other person; and since we'd been married, he'd been texting a whole host of females, mutual contacts of us both and strangers from online. The texts would have raised eyebrows even if he hadn't been married.

The way I found out was...a mess. It wasn't long after we were back from our honeymoon, and I was still recovering from the gastroenteritis that had landed me in a Mexican hospital. (Who knew the marriage was going to end in as much shit as I witnessed during those few days of illness?!) I got home from work on a Friday night and he tried to pick a fight with me almost instantly. It was so odd and out of character, as if it were a joke. I tried to reason with him but he ended up storming out of the house, although not before he'd changed clothes and planned to meet friends, all in about five minutes flat. Honestly, how many guys make plans that quickly?

Despite the unpleasantness of the whole situation, I was glad that he left. I was confused by his outburst. Being alone gave me time to figure out whether or not I'd just completely lost my mind. This would turn out to be one of the first examples of gaslighting that I can recall. Gaslighting is a topical word these days, defined as: *to manipulate (someone) by psychological means into questioning their own sanity*. But it's not just one's sanity that gaslighting calls into question; it's also the core aspects of who we are.

I didn't hear from him all night, until finally he came stumbling in the door at four am. Now, I'd seen him drunk before (neither of us held back while drinking in each others' company, which wasn't the healthiest thing for our relationship), but this was some next-level intoxication. This was *incoherent, couldn't see, couldn't undress himself* drunk. I let him sleep on the sofa until the uneasy feeling in my gut made me give up on sleep altogether. I moved the dead weight of his body to the bed, allowing myself to take the living room, and undressed him.

That's when his phone fell out his jeans pocket.

I had never checked his phone before; the thought had literally never entered my head. I guess it didn't align with my consciousness until then. I looked at his phone staring up at me from the bedroom carpet. I looked at him lying on the bed, temporarily dead to the world, rocked by a feeling that I still cannot explain. Something felt different. Call it women's intuition or gut instinct, but I picked up that phone and took it into the lounge with me.

I couldn't have known that what I found would trigger the biggest life shift I'd ever experienced, even bigger than my parents' divorce eleven years earlier. The reality is: certain things cannot be unseen, certain truths cannot be untold, certain hurt cannot be reversed. What is it that they say? *Don't ask questions that you don't want the answers to?* Regardless of the outcome, I did want the answer. I've always hated being kept in the dark. Rather than being made the fool, given the choice between knowing something shitty or not knowing at all, I'll always go with the "know something shitty" option. Being blind to something doesn't make it untrue so why not know where things stand?

And so, I sat on the sofa with the early morning Edinburgh sun streaming into our first floor flat (yes, we do sometimes get sun in Scotland) and delved into his phone. It's hard to believe that something simple like creeping someone's messages can change your life forever, yet it happens all the time. Instantly I read texts to some girl from the previous night, suggesting that she travel through from Glasgow and he would book them a hotel room. It was a back and forth, sexually-charged text exchange, full of banter and flirting, which only let up once, when she wrote, *I thought you just got married? Lol.* He replied with, *Oh yeah, so I did.*

Like, talk about a punch in the gut. Or how about a stab in the heart? How do I talk about a pain that I never thought words on a screen could cause?

There is no way to describe the hurt of the person you love so callously referring to your newly minted marriage, the one you thought was built on love and trust. Over the course of the next few days, as I held his phone hostage, I discovered more texts. I even had someone confirm that they'd slept with him before we were married and were still regularly in touch.

He denied it all, claiming that none of it was true, at least until I presented him with enough black-and-white evidence that he had no choice but to come clean. None of it was information he gave up easily, however. He made me work for every single confirmation; I had to go digging through months of texts; I had to hold his phone like a time bomb and text people back as if I were him; I had to confront my husband with the names of women whom he might have inappropriately texted. All this energy expended, just in getting him to admit it.

And so, before the official wedding photos were posted online, before the gift-list delivery had arrived or the thank-you cards were sent, I was questioning whether I could stay married to my husband. It hit me like a train.

I moved to my mum's and gathered my best friends around me, the same girls who'd stood by me at the altar just seven weeks earlier. They were the first to hear what had happened; and upon hearing the news, people rallied around me. Work was understanding, and my husband was desperately sorry, inconsolable almost. Me? I was numb. I could not understand how this was my life. How had this happened? How could I have married someone that would do this kind of thing? I'd known my ex-husband since I was nine years old, so how did I end up married to a stranger?

Our families had met in Cairo, during a period when his parents were living there as well. He and his three siblings were all back home in boarding school as our parents became firm golf-and-gin friends in the Egyptian sun. Though the first time I actually met him was one summer back in Scotland when his family came to visit us at our holiday home in the middle of Perthshire. It was a lodge timeshare on the grounds of a beautiful country-house hotel. We fought from the first moment we met. We bickered and picked on each other, and none of that would change over the subsequent twenty years during which he became a fixture in my life.

He'd been the older "cooler" kid I'd always had a crush on. He was loud, funny, and cheeky, as I imagined my father was as a teenager. Always the life of the party, always ready with a joke, but his energy could be a little

overbearing. (He was also the person who eventually made you feel like lying down in a darkened room alone to recover from the onslaught of jokes and banter.)

When we moved back to Scotland from Cairo, our parents' friendship was impacted by the physical distance, but the rest of us became closer. He became best friends with my brother; and my parents actually became his godparents once he chose to be Confirmed (one of the three sacraments of initiation into the Catholic Church, alongside Baptism and Holy Communion) in his senior years of school. His family provided immense support when my parents divorced; his one sister lived with my mum for a period of time during which she and I became incredibly close; and he lived with my mum for another duration of time. Our families were interwoven in such a way that marriage between the two of us seemed like a suitable solidification of familial bonds.

It had just felt right, like a fairy tale. We got married in the cathedral at the bottom of the driveway of the country-house hotel, the same place we'd met sixteen years earlier. We'd never really discussed the location choice, because we'd always just known; it felt as if things were exactly as they were meant to be. That said, my father, who'd been an integral part of our two families coming together, was not part of the day. (In retrospect, I wonder if I should have made a connection between the two of them. If it hadn't worked out with me and my father, why would it with my husband?) We can heal from anything, transform into whatever we need to become, but first we need to know and understand from what we are healing.

Interestingly, both his father and my mother had given him the *if-you-ever-do-anything-to-hurt-her* chat, but it had seemingly fallen on deaf ears. When I found myself back at my mum's place, excused from work for stress, she understood all the same. I spent a lot of time thinking/questioning/denying/talking things out with family, friends, and work colleagues. I just remember being in turmoil—and I hated living at my mum's. Yes, it was comfortable and she is always a welcoming hostess to family and friends alike, sometimes even complete strangers, but I missed my own home. I missed my bed. I missed having all my things. It was just an added layer of *shitty-ness* in an already shitty situation.

Lost in this world full of people asking me constantly how I was doing—not knowing whether I'd be able to move when I woke up every morning (because stress was physically taking over my body) not to mention having

dreams so tormenting that proper rest became a long-lost memory—I made the decision to suck it up. No more moping around alone, absorbing advice from people who thought they had all the answers for me, while wondering if I'd ever have answers for myself again. When my great uncle married us in front of 131 cathedral guests, I'd taken my vows to heart. Testing the strength of those vows so soon into our marriage was never something I foresaw, but there we were, and now I had a decision to make.

At the time, I made the decision that I personally felt was the only option—go back and try to make it work. While I wasn't morally opposed to divorce or separation, I couldn't even begin to think about how my life would look if I didn't go back. What was I supposed to do? Start all over again? By myself? That wasn't the plan. That wasn't to be my life. I had just applied for my name change, for fuck's sake. I was moving on from Louise Johnson and becoming Louise Moodie. How do you even reverse a name change?! Sometimes change comes in such a way that it yanks an entire world out from under our feet, and our first instinct might be to go and find the original world; but our second instinct is often to create the world anew.

The biggest difficulty I faced was the naivety of my earlier perspectives. Before all this shit went down, I never truly understood the depths of commitment nor the nature of life's extremes. I always said that if someone were to cheat on me, the relationship would be over before the conversation began. Mostly, I said this thinking about my parents' marriage and how long my mother put up with my father's infidelity. Little did I know that it wasn't so black-or-white, so in-or-out, so stay-or-go. Context, feelings, emotions, logistics. All of these things made the decision far more difficult and complex, much more of a head fuck than I'd ever anticipated back when I thought a cheating partner would automatically mean the end of a relationship.

Esther Perel, a Belgian psychotherapist who specialises in relationships and sexuality, once made the comment that *the old shame used to be divorce; the new shame is staying when you can leave*. Her words smacked me in the face like a wet fish. I found myself between a rock and a hard place, because there is still an element of shame tied to divorce. But Esther's not wrong, there is also a shame in staying with someone once they've cheated on you. People presume that you are weak of character if you choose to stay, that you should want more for yourself. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't.

I never thought going back would be easy, but I never could have imagined



how much it would tax me. To live everyday second guessing what my partner was telling me, trying to determine if he was lying, looking for telltale signs of actions repeating themselves. Meanwhile, I was dealing with the fallout from various friends who thought I'd made a mistake by going back, or who'd made their feelings clear vociferously enough when we were separated that they couldn't backtrack on whatever they'd said about the man I was shacking up with again.

We went to couples counselling, well, mostly I went. I think he joined for two sessions. I was familiar with counselling already, having gone after my parents' divorce and seeing a life coach before we got married. I'm not sure how much this particular instance of therapy helped, but I felt that it was the right thing to do. When it comes to therapy, even going and being unsure of whether it has actually helped afterwards is still somehow helpful, because either way, you learn enough to determine whether another mechanism might be more effective for your healing.

I also lost my job during that time (just another tidbit of fun for my first year of marriage). It took around six months for me to stop checking his phone. I did it almost daily for the first few months, and then slowly I weaned myself off. I have since considered that maybe I shouldn't have gone back if I couldn't stop checking his phone, but it seemed like the minimum viable action to being present in the marriage while feeling a tiny bit of peace.

One of my best friends is wonderfully German, and as the rain turned to snow and sleet pouring down on my wedding day, Katrin had provided me with a translation of a German saying: *Rain on your wedding day is all the tears of your marriage clearing out now*. Obviously, when it came to my marriage, that was utter bullshit.

Peace was hard to come by those days. My brain, my thoughts, and my dreams ran wild. I was in a constant state of turmoil, feeling like I wasn't trying hard enough to make things work, not appreciating enough that he'd seemingly changed, not fully feeling like myself. I wasn't sure I'd ever feel like her again. In fact, at this stage, I wondered who she even was. *Little Lou Who* had lost her groove.

We got through his thirtieth birthday in Vegas with family, his parents' wedding anniversary in Portugal, and our first anniversary, which fell in the midst of other events, thus we didn't get to properly celebrate. To me, that

came as a relief. I didn't know if the first year of our marriage was worth celebrating. Sure, we'd made it, but at what cost?

Perhaps I wasn't feeling like myself because the person I'd been up until then was off doing something else now, living out her married life in a different dimension of time, one where her husband never cheated on her and they had given birth to a baby dragon that breathed hearts of fire—for all I know. But jokes aside, there is something to be said about having the intention to remain the same version of yourself for good, only to be cast off the tracks by some circumstance that nobody saw coming. By returning to live with my husband, I'd returned to a version of reality that I didn't believe was just, and this necessitated subjugating the aspect of myself that longed for more.

My husband and I moved through spring and past that one particular date in May that was forever ingrained in my head (it didn't help that the fateful night where I'd read his phone was also my cousin's birthday) because the only thing for me to deal with around that time was a medical procedure for an abnormal smear result. Hospital visits had never been something I'd experienced in the past. Pretty much ever since I'd left the hospital as a baby, I'd had no reason to return. Yet since I'd been married, I had been to the hospital twice. Can we say *omen*? My mum had gone with me to have the colposcopy done, as I needed someone to drive me home. It turned out to be just as well, as anesthesia doesn't seem to agree with me. While I was grateful for the numbing *prior* to someone digging around down there, I quickly felt as if I were about to pass out. It's hard to relax if you can't feel where those instruments are going exactly. Lord, it's fun to be a lady!

The day afterwards, as I took a sick day to recover, I lay in bed still snoozing while my husband took a shower (at the same time that I would normally shower); and his phone pinged with a message. At last I'd grown able to ignore his phone, so I ignored the message as well and avoided jumping to stomach-churning conclusions. But then I heard the second ping on his iPhone, reminding him of the new message; and I thought it might have something to do with work, perhaps an issue that needed his immediate attention, even at this early hour of the morning (a frequent occurrence in his line of work).

There is something ironic in the acknowledgement that I only looked at his phone to make sure his day wasn't going to be fucked up; and instead it fully fucked up, not just my day, but my life. *Again*. Damn that motherfucking

phone. I saw a text from a name that could have been male or female, alongside the name of his company, making me think it was a work text—so I opened the message and instead was faced with a picture of a woman's thong-clad ass. There it was, just staring back at me at seven am in the morning: some women's half naked arse, on my husband's phone.

I put the phone down, rolled back over and pulled the covers over my head. I couldn't bear to deal with it, especially not with the pulverizing cramps in my belly. I almost, for a split second, thought about ignoring it. I was in so much physical pain that the thought of dealing with an issue that I already knew had no good outcome was far more than I felt up to at that precise moment in time. Instead, I waited until he was almost dressed, and then I half sat up in bed and said: "You got a text message while you were in the shower. I checked it because I thought it might have been about work; but it wasn't, it was a girl's arse. I can't do this."

With panic flashing across his face, he picked up his phone and instantly tried to excuse it as a joke from one of the guys. But I knew all the guys he worked with and hadn't heard this person's name before. Then he tried to tell me it was a contact he'd met through work; and obviously they'd sent it to the wrong number. He asserted that I was ridiculous for thinking that a girl would just send a photo like that to him on a Thursday morning.

Again, gaslighting in full effect. With no one around to validate your position and the person you love more than anyone in the world towering over you and saying you're wrong, that you're crazy and making a silly mistake, it's hard not to doubt yourself. It's funny how your mind can beat you up, even as the memory of a lacy thong burns a hole in your brain. But I really didn't have the energy to fight him on this. "Just go to work," I told him, but I could see he didn't trust that things were okay, nor whether I could accept what he'd told me. Me, I just wanted him out of the house. I wanted to not deal with it. He finally left for work and promised to come back at lunchtime. As I heard the car drive away, I called my mum and had her come over from work and pick me up (*with* my suitcases).

For the second time in fourteen months of marriage, I was back living at my mum's. This time, I told even fewer people. I couldn't bear the questions, the judgment, the pity. I couldn't stand having to dissect my marriage all over again. So I kept going to work. I avoided most social situations and instead hibernated at my mum's, while she wondered how her daughter would

navigate this particular trapdoor in her life. The way I caught my husband had been less cut and dry this time: all I had to go on was one picture and not all the mounting evidence. I hadn't witnessed any other inappropriate behaviours and his constant denial re: the truth was really making me question myself. Nonetheless, it was the same situation unraveling all over again.

After I moved out, he continued telling me that I was wrong. He didn't give me my space and begged me to come back. While not motivated by my vows this time, at least not so much, I still struggled to comprehend the alternative of not going back, but mostly due to logistical reasons. We had negative equity on our house, credit-card debt, and friends' weddings we were already booked to attend later in the summer. So, because of stupid financial, travel, and RSVP reasons, I returned to my cheating husband for a second time.

I cannot adequately explain my decision, because it barely felt like a decision, more like an obligation. Suffice to say, I have never felt so stuck and out of options as I did then, like I couldn't see a suitable way out. I'm not suggesting that there was domestic abuse in my marriage, but I understood in that moment how victims end up in situations which, to the outside, are clearly situations they should leave. Take it from me and avoid any "hands-on" research: it's the most isolating and terrifying place to find ourselves, and it doesn't take a violent partner to make us feel that way.

In returning to my husband *again*, while other people were certainly judging me big time, nobody judged me more harshly than I did myself. In deciding to give my marriage another shot, I lost respect for myself. I put my marriage first because that's what marriage is, but it turns out that I should have been putting myself first all along. My husband certainly wasn't denying himself the freedom to be free, so why should I?

Nonetheless, I moved back in with him sometime that August. At first it wasn't that bad. I felt numbed by my own defenses and had compartmentalised a lot of what had happened. I tried to focus on other things, but I was different and I knew it. I was incredibly tightly wound and simply couldn't relax nor enjoy simple pleasures. Life became more and more bland. Where I'd once found happiness, I now found tears. Escaping from a room full of friends laughing and chatting, I would tuck myself away in the bathroom and allow myself to silently weep. For what? I didn't even know anymore.

I persevered in silence for around six months, before noticing that the anxiety rising within me was becoming unavoidable. Frequently I experienced

the feeling of my breath being sucked from my body, usually when I was wondering how I'd possibly spend the rest of my life like this. I had the startling realisation that this could be my new normal, for years to come, and the fear that came with it did a number on my muscles and tissues. This kind of thing was happening more and more often. I'd even started to have panic attacks in the shower before work. I'd scream in tears but no noise came out. I'd fold into the corner of my shower, feeling trapped in a life that I'd trusted to be mine forever. I needed help; I needed to be rescued; I longed for an out, but I couldn't make a sound.

By the beginning of summer, I realised that I needed to get real help. Paranoia was making me crazy, and I truly mean that. So convinced that my husband was doing things behind my back, I'd begun to try and catch him out. I'd feign sickness at work to head home at lunchtime in case he returned to the house. I would make the bed a certain way, so that I'd know if he'd been in bed with someone else. Not to mention, I started sniffing the seat belt every time we rode in his car together.

I know it sounds crazy, but the seat-belt thing is what gave away my dad's final affair. I remember how he picked me up from school one day, which was an unusual occurrence in and of itself, and I happened to smell the seat belt as I was pulling it across my body. It was a perfume scent that I'd never smelled before. In all fairness, it was lovely, but it wasn't among the perfumes my mum wore. I remember thinking that a person would need to be in the car a lot for the seat belt to smell so strongly of their fragrance. Long story short, seat belts can be the downfall of a cheater.

Mostly, my husband's passenger seat belt smelled of me, though it didn't stop me from having a quick sniff every time I got into the car. Yet with every lunchtime stakeout, precision bed-making or seat-belt whiff, I was slowly losing my mind. It was the start of what could have ended up in certifiable insanity—I can entirely understand how people go there. Imagine the mind as a ball of yarn: mental illness is when it starts to unravel, and insanity is when somebody grabs a hold of the loose thread and runs in circles around the room. In this case, regardless of my husband's cheating, that somebody was me.

After one particularly tough morning, unsure of whether I could even make it to work, I texted my mum and asked her if we could meet for coffee. Our offices were close, in the West End of Edinburgh, with a perfectly placed Starbucks right in the middle. Sitting with our coffees at a little corner table,

I explained to Mum how bad things were: the panic attacks, the resignation to a joyless marriage, the anxiety. She was shocked, because everyone thought we were doing so much better. In some respects, I'm glad that we'd managed to create such a facade, because I didn't like the thought of people going through things with us. But it meant that if/when I told people about the reality, they were likely to be surprised.

I explained that I'd wanted to wring his neck in the supermarket, for no apparent reason. I told her that I had begun to flinch whenever he wanted to have sex, that he felt like a stranger. And I noted that, unlike in the beginning, I no longer felt safe in his arms. I so longed to feel secure, protected, safe. *Could I give those gifts to myself*, I wondered, *if I gave myself enough space to open them?*

My mum, having gone through a tumultuous marriage plus a divorce with my father, was well placed to offer good advice. She suggested that I set myself a time frame, be it two months, ten months, whatever I felt comfortable with; and in that time, to really be aware of what was causing me to feel the way I felt. Was it solely what happened in the past, or were there other external factors, ones that could just amount to a bad day for somebody else?

I'd been trying like a motherfucker to make it work, but she wanted me to be triple sure that I'd done everything I could before calling the game. She knew how important this would turn out to be, in the long run—to know for sure. But she was emphatic as well, saying that if I'd done all I could and things weren't better, I had to walk away for my own sanity. It was hard for her to say those words to me, and I knew it. She believes in the sanctity of marriage, despite her divorce, and she would have done anything for us to simply work and stay together. She loved both of us, even after all he'd done; but her concern, ultimately, was for me.

In my head, I gave myself six months, taking us to November; but in reality I wasn't sure how things would look then, nor how I would end it. Like, how do you just blow up your marriage? That was really more *his* forte. For the first time since we'd been married, I hoped that we could at least make it through the summer. Our first year, the shit had blown up in May, and the second year in June. But summer really wasn't to be our season.

On the last day of July, we returned home from a weekend away with friends. While he unpacked, I settled into the sofa with our laptop. Opening the web browser, I saw an unfamiliar login screen for an MSN account, with

an email address pre-populated in the login field. It was a nickname of his from university, one that I'd incidentally always fucking hated. Wondering why he had an email address that I didn't know about, I called him through from the bedroom to ask about it. My spidey-senses were now on full alert.

Had he come through and just admitted it was his email address, who knows how things might have ended up. However, the story he tried to spin me was... incredulous. Initially, he said that he knew nothing about the email address. Then, after five or ten minutes of back and forth, he admitted that he'd previously had that email address but hadn't used it since university. When I pressed him regarding how it had ended up on a login screen on our laptop, he proceeded to tell me what I can only describe as a tall, tall tale.

Essentially, he suggested that someone had logged into our Wi-Fi, hacked into our laptop through the Wi-Fi, and then finally hacked into an MSN email address that he used to have at university. Did he hear himself? Did he genuinely think I was going to believe a single word of his story? At this stage, I was working in the tech industry, but I'm hopeful that I would have been wise to his big pile of stinking bullshit anyways. Nonetheless, this was his story and he stuck to it. In fact, as far as I know, he still sticks to it today. The delusion was fascinating to me.

I suppose the alternative—taking responsibility—would have required him to admit that he'd done something wrong and to apologise for his choices, or else be seen as a total asshole who actually didn't see anything wrong with cheating on his wife yet *again*. Maybe the latter option applied for my husband, thus the delusion was his preferred reality; because in my version of reality, he simply wasn't worth my energy, space, or time. I gave him every opportunity to tell the truth and backtrack on what he'd said without further repercussions. But no, he was adamant. *Deny, deny, deny*. He stormed out of the flat after an hour of relentless back and forth, hurt by the accusations I'd leveled at him, apparently. *As if he didn't have any priors...*

While he was out, I made myself busy hacking into his email account, the one he insisted not to know anything about—at least until he miraculously did, but apparently he didn't remember the password. I went through all of the security questions, tracked down the backup email account, reset the password, and added new security questions. Not long after he returned to the apartment, I was in. I didn't say anything to him about my extreme password-reset skills; instead, I gave him one last opportunity to come clean. I remember

looking over the back of the sofa and saying: “I don’t think you understand how crucial what’s happening right now is to our marriage.” But yet again, he flat out denied the possibility that he might have something to tell me and took himself to bed.

I don’t think he was lying awake with any concern for the situation. So, while he was presumably drifting off to sleep, I delved into an online world that felt dark and secret and disgusting. The email was registered under a type of MSN account that I’d never before seen, almost a Facebook-type, “friends” network. I didn’t even know MSN still existed at this point—but turns out it did and my husband was a seasoned user. All of the people on his friends’ list were female, mostly with profile pics of them in their underwear. There were also a few names of women whom I knew (friends of his sisters and a woman from his work).

I’d hit the motherlode as far as evidence goes; there was literally so much information. I was taking screenshots and trying to get timestamp clarifications to put together a timeline. If it said February, was I to presume it was February of that year? Could all of these conversations be from his university days? Writing this now, I’m aware that it didn’t fucking matter! It was shady as shit either way. Clearly he’d lied about something and I didn’t need anymore proof. Still, I wanted to be sure and fact-check everything one-hundred percent before I effectively blew apart my marriage—this time for the absolute *last* time.

I went from looking at his MSN account to Googling how to conduct a deep dive of the laptop’s history. Sure, I knew the browsing history could be easily wiped, but this wouldn’t completely clear it either. So, I spent hours reading articles and doing all sorts of things in the depths of my laptop. Truly, I was on a mission. When I finally discovered some browsing history that confirmed my previous inclinations (he had, in fact, been coming home at lunchtime), I also discovered that it wasn’t necessarily to have sex with people (though who knows). He’d been coming home and logging into this MSN account. He’d also been partaking in dating sites. *Wow*.

With a chill, I realised that this didn’t even hurt me. My overriding feeling was actually one of relief. Relief that I finally had a reason to walk out, validation that my subsequent choices were the right ones, and gratitude that I could end this on my own terms. That night, I barely slept. As soon as I heard his car leave the next morning, I called my mum at work. I gave her a



brief overview of the previous night's cyberspace investigation and asked if she'd find out from a colleague in the IT department whether there might be another, more feasible explanation for my discoveries. The guy must have been like: *WTF, why are you pulling me into your family drama?* But I didn't even care. I sent my mum the details of what I needed to know, word for word, in a text ending with: *Can there be any other explanation?* which she relayed to him. Her reply about half an hour later came back no.

Trying to make a relationship work after cheating is like getting shot with the bullet still lodged in your flesh. The doctor says you can probably survive with the bullet inside your body, so you try to heal, hoping time will take care of the wound. But the long term effects of having the bullet lodged deep inside you end up causing complications, thus you choose to remove it. You know the act of removing it will cause far more short-term pain than if the bullet were left to rot, but doing so will leave a vacuum that floods with blood, pain, and tears in the meantime—and this could well kill you.

Nonetheless, I decided to remove the bullet that day, to be one with the flood—come what may. I didn't have time left to build an ark or find God or take one of everything I wanted to replicate once I'd gone away. I simply let the waters rise around me, finding myself, in time, awash on the shores of British Columbia.

Lou Who?

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