His hands, once roaming and passionate, had grown hesitant, and I remember asking if my jumper was in his way. I was wearing a striped onesie from Aerie, with just enough buttons undone to feign an effortless and casual sensuality. Or rather, that was the vibe I was going for when I unbuttoned them before he came over.

The sound he made in response was somewhere between a *humph* and a whimper, but it was resolute. I held him until our thumping hearts slowed into a sleepier rhythm under the soft glimmer of my string lights, because I didn't know what else to do. I still don't know. How could I? There isn't a WikiHow on "Having Sex After Telling Your Undefined College Love Interest You Have Triggers, and Sometimes Dissociate, Because PTSD is a Bear!" So I held him.

\* \* \* \*

Holding other people has always come easily to me, but being held is something else. Feeling someone touch me without asking first makes my heart skip a beat, and forces my blood into my hands and feet. In class, we call that the “fight or flight” response. In real life, it’s the rush of adrenaline that makes my mind feel like it’s being tugged under the waves – an inescapable and unforgiving riptide of dread. Supposedly, humans connect with one another using five, fundamental love languages: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. I’ve discovered many more.

When I met Julia on move-in day last year, I was bare-naked, and scrambling to cover up with a towel. The intimacy of my nakedness is (even more) laughable now, because her steady, compassionate presence makes me feel like I can bare my soul to her. When I try to mask my pain to spare her, Jules reminds me that she asks how I'm doing because she's ready to hear anything I need to say.

Theresa texted me a link to a website on something called EMDR therapy. Being the rebellious younger sister I am, I didn’t text back, but started going to EMDR every Monday anyways. Throughout the week, I wage war with my own mind, unearthing memories that it buried away over a decade ago. On weekends, Tesa and I grab hot tea and talk, planting new memories in the battle-scarred soil of my mind as our drinks cool and my thoughts settle.

When Mark passes along a song that I’ve already found (*Come Through and Chill* has been on my playlist for weeks, dude), I don't tell him, and just simmer in my own sense of satisfaction. I send him songs, too, because I know he shares my somewhat sappy taste in music. We also shared a tight, quiet hug the night before my AP Biology exam, softening the piercing sound of shattering glass still ringing in our ears. Nowadays, we find peace in .Paak.

My mom’s eyes well over with tears when I flinch at her touch, but Noah’s eyes light up to mirror my own when I chatter excitedly about the mystery of memory reprocessing. I get to describe PTSD to him as a system, recovery as a science – unexpected hugs as triggers, consent as a prerequisite. He’s caught me in my towel, too, so we joke that he’s seen it all, but he still knocks before entering my room.

Noah’s a linguistics major, so he loves asking me to say words in my native tongue. But to me, German will always be darker than the language I love. My American is a language of words, yes, but mostly a way of being. You can see it in the unpolished kindness of absolute strangers, and the doors we hold open for one another as smiles grace faces with ease. It's embodied by a younger me, curled up on the floor reading the last pages of *The Prisoner of Azkaban* under the glow of an Ikea nightlight*.* It's the effortless, happy mishmash of German and English I only use when Kat calls, because my siblings and I found a home in this country, and love in its languages.

The love languages I speak with people who don’t know about my PTSD remind me of who I am in spite of it. Before I told Margaret, she complimented me on my unwavering determinedness to be happy. I'm stubborn with myself in that way. I've learned how dangerous wallowing can be, so I let people hold me these days, instead of crumpling to the floor of my bedroom and clinging onto the carpet in the hope that feeling its rough texture underneath my palms will be enough sensory input to keep the flashback from tearing my mind away from a reality that I've glued back together for myself, piece by painstaking piece. It's never been enough, and it won't be when the next one comes. But art helps, and so do breathing exercises, and showers that alternate between scalding heat and bitter cold.

The showering thing is a trick I learned from the man who thinks he made me. It makes sense that parts of my new life remind me of him. His blood runs in my veins, and my quick, quirky humor mirrors his. I inherited his long, lean arms, too, and sometimes that annoys me. Those are the nights I stay in the gym until late with a pounding workout playlist, drowning out my overexcited amygdala and reminding myself that life isn't about the cards you've been dealt. It's about how you channel all of this raw, unadulterated human energy, and what you choose to put back out into the universe. I chose love, and *literal* punching bags, instead of human ones.

Exercising helps me learn the language that still gives me the most trouble. My upper arms are peppered with small, round scars that are so plentiful, they’ve begun to blend into one another. The language of self-love is reminding myself that the scars haven’t been fresh for a while now, and wearing short sleeves even when they are. It’s looking at Caroline’s photographs of me, and trying to picture the beauty she saw when she took them. It’s watching myself in the mirror when I’m naked, alone, and high out of my mind in my room, and seeing how the reflection’s limbs move in tandem with my body and the beat as I dance away the darkness.

The dissociation that characterizes PTSD feels like a shell, and I’m grateful for people like Nicolas, who shakes my hand in greeting instead of enveloping me in his customary embrace. Sitting across from him in the dining hall in a safe, easy silence gives me the space to feel like a student, and flex the muscles of my mind without feeling like I’m stuck inside it. My professors see the side of me that doodles during lecture, skips section on occasion, and treats 9AM deadlines like a challenge to submit at 8:59AM. They don’t know that I skip class because I picked courses like “Sex, Love, and Reproduction” and “Childhood and Books” in order to push myself, but still need space to feel safe sometimes.

I used to love getting to school early, because the brightly colored hallways felt homey in the soft morning light. When I burst into tears in art class because my drawing of a cow looked like an unhappy lump, Ms. Dadian helped me color over it, transforming it into a barn. I redrew the cow on my own, and I remember thinking that it looked positively radiant and free beside its darkly colored prison. When I emailed Eduardo to ask for the date of his lecture on sexual assault, he told me he was happy that I felt comfortable coming to him, and offered to send me the materials in advance. He doesn’t know that attending that lecture is the newest addition to my list of personal goals for this year, right underneath “start playing the cello again,” and “change my last name.”

I try to laugh about people who ridicule safe spaces and trigger warnings. I try to laugh loud enough to color over them with the triumph of my pain, and to show them the darkness of their ignorant stubbornness. They have no way of knowing how it feels to read Yale's annual sexual violence report with the knowledge that each student counted among its impersonal numbers has an unfathomable and earthshattering pain that nobody else knows. I can't know how it feels to pass under a stone archway engraved with the name of your ancestor's slave master, when you’re just *trying* to get to class. I can't know how someone feels in a restroom that doesn’t accommodate their gender, when they’re just *trying* to go to the bathroom. Thanks to people like SGH, though, Facebook lets you have a single letter first name, now. And thanks to the people that were strong enough to publicize how little our school does to make students of color feel at home, Grace Murray Hopper College’s windows seem to glisten in the bright, Connecticut sun, returning a small piece of light and truth to Quinnipiac land. Names matter, and not knowing isn’t a problem, unless you use it as an excuse not to listen, and love.

\* \* \* \*

He hasn’t slept over since that night. At first, I was restless.

Should I have spared him?

Doesn’t he have the right *not to know*?

*Was the onesie too much*??

But then I laugh to myself. This beautiful boy, and all the naked confusion and pleasure I feel with him, is the simplest part of my life. I wish I could carry my burden without my school, and friends, and family. But I can’t. I’ve accepted that all these lovely, loving people are here to hold me, and that there isn’t much I can do about it, because they’ve made choices, too. They chose to stay, and listen, and talk, waiting for me to love myself as fiercely as they love me. And to realize that holding me, without touching me, is the only choice they’ll ever take off my hands.