Dear Keri

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Dear Keri,

I can only imagine what your reaction will be when you read this… If you ever read this. Your thin fingers will trail along the edges of the manila envelope; trying to decipher who it is from. Then the shock you will feel seeing my name clumsily scrawled at the bottom.

Maybe you will gasp at the recollection of the name. Your dark brows will arch over your squinted eyes heavily fringed with black lashes. That I remember all too well. Maybe you will drop the letter in surprise as a flood of childhood memories come rushing back in a hurricane of emotion. The only thought that may cross your mind is why… Why would I be writing to you after all these years?

The answer to that is simple enough. You are the only one I can turn to. The only one who ever knew me. The real me.

Even though I know you will never see this, I find solace in the fact that at least I’ve told someone. I can purge myself of all my transgressions and try to right the wrongs that I have conflicted on others, but most importantly…Right the ones that I have done to myself.

-R.

Dear Keri,

Today was a good day. The sun was blazing in the cloudless sky. It was so clear and peaceful, with nothing but the sound of the wind whistling through the bare branches of the oak trees. You could almost see all the way to heaven and back. I closed my eyes and let the sun embrace my body. The warm rays caressed my skin with gentle fingers, and I smiled for the first time in weeks.

This feeling of euphoria would not last long. I could feel the happiness slowly begin to slip away as I opened my chocolate eyes to the glare of the sun. Nora would surely have some medical explanation for this. I can hear her callous voice drawl out the word ‘depression.’ Just the thought of it makes me roll my eyes.

It was Nora’s suggestion that I begin writing to you. To unveil the
repressed memories that are locked away deep down inside of me. Things that I try to avoid thinking about, because of the intense pain that they inflict in merciless blows. She said it would clear my mind and help me start over. I find it to be bullshit, maybe you will too. The last thing you want to do in therapy is work!

The pen feels heavy in my hands as I write you. If you look closely, Keri, you can see that the lines are shaky as if a drunk person has written them. It’s hard to breath. It’s coming out in short, razor-sharp breaths. A vivid picture of a man dances across my mind. He’s grimacing and tears spill out in burning pools of acid. I need to stop now.

-R.

Dear Keri,

I’m sorry that the last letter was cut abruptly short.

I visited with Nora today. She says that I am not showing any signs of improvement. Her words were harsh and cold as she calculated my condition.

She said, “You know, Rebecca, you haven’t been completely honest with yourself. You’re still in denial about your situation.” Her wrinkled face became a deep frown of creases as she studied my distant frame from across the room. I could hear her sigh heavily and shake her white, bee-hive of hair. The smell of her hairspray lingered in the room. It was stifling. An overpowering smell of coconut and cactus flower; my lungs were screaming for air. They felt like an iron cage. I could feel the tightening of my throat, waiting for her to begin the same discussion that we have been talking about for the last year. Every muscle in my body was strained with tension.

“Are you ready to talk about him yet, Rebecca?” Nora said with a nonchalant voice, her hand methodically massaging her temple involuntarily. The unconscious act sends hot bubbles of irritation in the pit of my stomach. The act of feeling bad for someone, but not understanding them, annoys me.

I stood in the small room with my back to her, surveying the bookshelves covered in dust from not being used. I raked my brain for a possible topic changer.

“Hey Nora, why do you have all these books in here if you don’t read ‘em?”

Nora exhaled loudly, letting her breath flow out of her pursed, firm
lips. “You’re avoiding the question.” Her voice took on an agitated tone, “have you been writing it down like I told you to?”

I instantly thought of you, Keri. The letters that I have stacked up on my kitchen counter, all addressed to you. My only companion.

“You know that you can’t heal unless you confront the trauma that has been haunting you; otherwise it is completely worthless for you to continue seeing me.” Nora’s grey eyes were burning into my back with her heated stare.

Hatred began to pound my stomach. A wave of nausea hit the core of my body, as a thread-like line of sweat coated my plump upper lip. Soon her voice became a faint sound in the background and my mind was taken back. Thoughts and images were cramming together painting a disturbing tapestry of agony. I need to let go. And I need you to help me do that.

-R.

Dear Keri,

It’s cold tonight, Keri. A luminous light flows through the curtains casting dark shadows on the bare, white walls. The comforter is drawn about my slender shoulders in an attempt to capture some ounce of body heat. But my efforts are futile; the icy breeze still penetrates through to the very marrow of my bones.

I dreamt of him again tonight. His strong face was contorted in grief and anguish. Guilt tore at my insides with torturing speed. I wanted to reach out and touch him. Hold him in my throbbing arms and kiss away the pain. Then I jolted awake, with my arms empty and bare… Just like me. I am nothing but a hallow shell of what I used to be.

And so, I have grabbed a pen and paper and began to scratch down my thoughts. I lit a cigarette and took a long drag, letting the smoke drift out of my nostrils in coiling spirals. It is time to let you in, and tell you what happened. It’s time to tell you about Houston.

-R.

Dear Keri,

Today is the day I cut the bullshit. Let you know about the disgusting
things I’ve done. It’s funny... Even though you will never read this, I’m nervous. I’m worried about what you will think. Will your mind change about me? Will you detest my actions and reject our friendship? Are we doomed to be walking strangers for the rest of our lives? I can barely lift the pen to the paper. But I will. For you... And for me.

Please try and understand.

Houston was the first man I ever loved. His tall frame looms before my eyes. I can see it just as clearly as I could back then. The lazy way his copper hair fell about his face, and the sparkle in his hazel eyes when he grinned. Laugh lines etched across his temples creating a permanent expression of joy. His large hands seemed to mold my body like a vase. They knew exactly were to go. They knew me perfectly, the way only years of being together can create. A sense of comfort and ease. I never thought anything could change that.

There was a strong connection between Houston and me. I was addicted to him like a drug addict is to heroin. I always needed my fix of him. He would shrug at my desperate need to be with him. This rejection only intensified the burning need to find my purpose outside of his consuming world.

I can still see his face recoil in refutation every time I touched him. But I needed to. I needed to feel the warmth underneath my finger tips. I needed to feel that security I thought he could give. The small glimmer of acceptance that was fading in his eyes with every drink from that tainted liquid he took.

I look at my finger where my ring used to be. There still seems to be a faint line where it used to hug my skin. It’s probably my deranged imagination, but my hand feels lighter. I hold it up and the light radiates off the nakedness of my bare skin, and my eyes are fixated on it in fascination. That ring meant everything to Houston. The tightness is back in my throat in threatening chokes of piercing attack. My panic-stricken fingers tighten around the pen. Here it comes. I must stop it.

-R.

Dear Keri,

I think it is best to pick up where I left off in the last letter. I picture you sitting in a huge lounge chair, sipping wine with your feet resting on a plush, floral ottoman. Maybe your children are yelling in the next room, and
you keep peering up from my letter to scream at them… But who are we kidding here? For all I know you could be unmarried or maybe your husband is impotent… But does that matter? I digress…

Now the thought that is probably tugging at the corner of your mind is, why I am writing to you about a meaningless failed relationship? Haven’t we all had those? Why should mine cause me more grief than the average person?

Nora’s voice creeps in. She always manages to find the perfect segway into my thoughts. Rolling around somewhere in my subconscious is Nora telling me the same old shit. “You are not upset by the act itself, but what you feel you lack inside.” Can you stomach the crap she’s feeding me?

-R.

Dear Keri,

I’m sitting in Central Park, under the big willow tree. Do you remember the willow tree? We carved our initials into the dark bark at the base of the massive tree the day my dad left. There is still the faint outline etched into the surface of the willow. My chapped lips crack with a slow smile that splays across my tired face. People have come and gone in my life, but those scribbled etches have stood the test of time. They’re constant and beautiful.

There is a couple sitting across from me. The dark man has his arms draped around the blonde woman in a protective, iron grip. I instinctively want to warn her. My body lurches forward as if hoping to catch the woman’s attention. I want to save her.

The woman’s golden head rests gently on his thick shoulders. He is whispering into her inclined ear. Sweet-nothings, no doubt. My heart aches for the meaninglessness being swallowed by her in greedy gulps. Does she not know how it all can change?

Houston used to hold me like that, keeping my body anchored to the ground. His fingers traced the curve of my spine as I watched the birds flying effortlessly above our heads. They would swoop and dive with agile freedom. And soon I was soaring with them. I could feel the wind caressing my face, and for a brief second, I’d close my eyes. That’s when a tree branch would snare around my fleeing frame with its snarled, brittle limbs. And Houston would be weighing me down to reality. His low, rumbled laugh would vibrate through my skin, but my spirit was with the winged images
fleeing above.

-R.

Dear Keri,

It’s been two years ago today since I last saw Houston. He’s wanted nothing to do with me since the incident that wrecked havoc on both of our scripted lives. That was the day I met carefree Jaime.

It was cold that day. I remember it perfectly. I remember the way most people remember a bad omen.

The autumn sky was clouded over with a light fog, and the wind cut straight to the bone. It was unusually cold for the fall. I remember thinking that was disastrous. That something was going to happen. Something that I had no control over, and my old friend, Dread, began to plunge through my veins.

The steps were wet with splattered rain as I left the large, brick library I was studying at. My eyes surveyed the slick cement stairs that didn’t seem to want to make contact with the tread of my red sneakers. In an act of unobservant concentration, an object ran into me with force. With great agitation, I stared into the dark face of a stranger. His deep, brown eyes glanced at me in a casual sort of way. The stranger’s thick lips pulled back into an alluring smile. An apology floated out of his lush mouth in a low, gravel tone.

I couldn’t help myself. I blushed like a naïve school girl. Tucking the hair behind my scarlet ears, I introduced myself to the stranger. A flight of butterflies let loose in the pit of my stomach and my heart began to beat at an accelerated pace that made the blood surge to my already inflamed face.

“I’m Jaime.” He said, with a shimmer of light flickering across his bronzed features. Maybe he could fill the void in my aching heart. Little did I know that that was the beginning of the end.

-R.

Dear Keri,

Rain is hammering away at the window. Each individual drop slides
down the glass until they all intermingle together. The sky looks dark and angry. The black clouds hover over with a threatening presence. Their dark faces scowl at me from the other side of the window.

I’m sorry that I have not written you in several weeks. Nora had me try some new type of meditation to help calm my anxiety... Basically we sit in her crowded office and listen to a cassette tape of waves crashing against the sandy beach. Where does she come up with this stuff? All it seems to do is increase the intensity to urinate.

Sifting through the pile of letters I have written you, realization stuck me: I have yet to finish my story. The odd thing is... I want to tell you. I need to tell you.

Since the first meeting at the entrance of the library, Jaime and I began meeting often. I would see him at the little coffee shop down on Main Street. We would sit in the yellow glow of the paper lanterns sipping the foamy lattes, laughing at each others’ jokes and witty comments. I felt myself opening up to him, feeling the pangs of doubt float over my conflicted brain. Guilt and pleasure tore at my insides. Their deep claws tearing into my heart. It felt right, to be sitting there with another man, laughing until our sides would bust and tears of joy sprinkled our glistening faces. Our bodies inclined towards one another, and dilated pupils soaked in each others’ presence. As if it all could disappear in a flash.

I could feel the heat generating between our flushed skin. I wanted to kiss him. To gingerly brush my lips against his moist mouth, and coil my fingers in the black spirals circling his face. Natural, animal hunger ripped freely through me and I wanted to ascend with it. Leave my primitive existence behind.

But it was the temptation of death, and I was plummeting with the angels.

-R.

Dear Keri,

I remember the next morning, lying in the large forsaken bed. The sheet was thrown about my waist, and my legs were tangled in the silken covers. A yellow light washed over my naked front. Goose flesh appeared in a scattered pattern on my arm as I shielded my bare breast from the abrasive light. Trying to hide my escaping virtue in the dark where no one could see.
The clock ticked with the speed of a snail. Out of the corner of my red-tinged eyes I watched as the seconds turned into minutes, and the minutes blurred into hours. Sleep would not possess my weakening frame. There would be no comfort, no short escape from what I had done.

A sparrow sat on the wooden window pane, chirping at me through the glass. Its song was bitter and full of reproach. There was a glistening diamond tear in its eye. The brown-speckled wings reached out as if to embrace me, and instead it took to the air in a flurrying liberty. But my body was confined to the bed.

The foreign object began to stir next to me. A long, dark arm flung across my stomach. “Good morning.” The soft whisper blew into my ear sending out sloppy waves of repentance.

Jaime’s eyes were still clouded with sleep as he leaned over to give me a wet, sticky kiss. My first reaction was to jerk back with repulsion. Houston’s face popped into my mind as Jaime traced the line of my collar bone with his slow, agonizing index finger, but my feet were already heading for the door…

My mind raced with possible explanations. Each scenario played out worse than the first one. Messy curls dangled in my face and clung to the tear stains covering my cheeks. I tried to rearrange my wrinkled t-shirt that I had worn the night before. That was no use. I could still smell the scent of Jaime lingering over me. My knees buckled under the oppressive weight…

What happened after that has always been a blur for me. Short choppy images stream together to form semi-coherent thoughts. Amidst the heavy haze, is Houston’s rocking frame, his face hidden behind his drunken hands. His lips snarled over his jagged teeth, and I could feel him sinking them into my pulsing jugular. Draining me of life. Beer lingered on his breath in hot torrid fumes.

“You whore!” he sobbed through his entwined fingers. Houston balled his fists and glared up at me. His face was red and blotchy with anger, and his eyes were filled with the thick mist of intoxicated rage.

He spat insult after insult, raking my body with blow after blow. My lungs had that same tight feeling, like a balloon ready to burst. I hated him. Every part of me overflowed with this new sensation. The weakness in his eyes, the bleeding out of power that he had gotten from my complicity.

It’s hard to believe that that would be the last image I have of him. His body shaking with anguish, filled with unquenchable loathing, and limp with defeat. And the disturbing revelation that I didn’t need him… I didn’t need any man… I was paralyzed, not knowing how I had not known this.

And as I walked away no words would come to me. Not even a
half-hearted apology that meant absolutely nothing. My mouth hung open unable to feel anything… Expressionless.

That is, until you, Keri. You might be able to save me.

-R.

Dear Keri,

This will be the final letter that I write you. For the first time my limbs do not feel heavy. The pen does not feel like lead in my grasp. Writing flows from its tip with one easy, fluid motion.

I stopped seeing Nora. Her shriveled figure was warped with deep wrinkles of disappointment when I left her office. Her throaty sigh followed my retreating back when I exited the dark, concealing office space. Her disapproval was apparent in her cold eyes.

A roar of laughter ripped through me at the sight of her, making Nora’s head swivel with disgust. The laughter could not be suppressed. It flowed out with a brute force of exultation.

For the first time, my soul feels lighter. I hold the letters in my hand, thinking of you. They’re pressed against my beating heart, and my fingers wrap around the sharp edges like the tight embrace of an old friend. I look to the orange sun lingering over the retreating horizon, and the slight shape of wings case the brilliant light, pulling me towards it. And soon I’ll join them.

You have helped me, Keri. And you don’t even know it.

-R.

Renae Oakes says this story was inspired by her friend, Keri. It was originally a collection of journal notes that she decided to turn into a short story.