

J. Quinton
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The Stumbling Block

"Why can't I forgive her?" This question kept repeating in my mind over and over again. Each iteration only deepened the mystery behind it. It was another night I'd be left pondering this question while I stared up at the ceiling. Unraveling the secrets of the Universe posed an easier task than answering this simple question. I really wanted to forgive her, I wanted everything to be the way it was - the way it used to be - but something was in the way. Something buried deep down inside of my heart that I couldn't read.

This was Michelle's bed, her house, everything... yet I was here still trying to find it in my heart to forgive her. Although her house, she didn't live there - it was her second apartment, the one she used for her work as a dominatrix that was dubbed "The Dungeon". The deal was that I was to pay half the months rent - 150 dollars - each month, and to make sure to clean up before each of her sessions here, so that her or her clients wouldn't be welcomed by a messy house.

It was mid November, 2003, but just 2 months prior my "best friend", my "sister", had told me to "fuck off" and left me to fend for myself in this new city. I had just gotten out of the Air Force and was attending the University of Pittsburgh living in the dorms when we had our fight. I was working for a company called Cutco to try to make cash to support myself. If you don't know about the company, Cutco works off of referrals. You attempt to sell your product to friends or family, and they refer you to other people. Michelle was my only friend in Pittsburgh so I was completely dependent upon her to let me sell my product to her - I got paid for just attempting to sell the product, and got paid more for an actual sale.

Michelle's boyfriend Rick - an upper middle class Real Estate agent (obviously well off) - was supposed to be my next interviewee after I had interviewed Michelle. Since Rick and Michelle lived together, getting to interview him should have been easy...

but Michelle had forgotten to mention to him that I wanted to interview him because she had gotten drunk - by herself.

"Let's meet for some coffee" she text messaged me the following day. "I'm busy" I replied. I really wasn't busy but I was upset that she had ignored my calls the day of my interview with Rick which effectively prevented me from making any money. The next day, she asks the same question. "I'm busy" was my response again. I was still a bit angry about it.

"Why didn't you pick up the phone when I called the day of my interview with Rick?" I asked her over the phone the following day. "Because I was drunk." she replied casually. "I don't like you drinking by yourself" I said. Of course I was concerned about her, she was the only person outside of my family that I profoundly cared for. You know the feeling - when you see your mother or sibling cry, that stab in your gut that makes you want to stop whatever caused those tears immediately - that's the feeling I got when she told me she had been drinking alone. It meant that she was depressed and I wanted nothing more than to alleviate that sadness. "You should've tried calling again" she said in response to my comment about her drinking. "I did. You can't ask me to meet you for coffee when you've prevented me from even making money" was my response. The accusations began, and the conversation ended on a sordid note. She told me to pack up my things from The Dungeon and get out. The clincher:

"What kind of 'best friend' tells her boyfriend I got her drunk to have sex with her as an excuse to get off the hook???"

Satan – or more accurately Ha-Satan – translated from Hebrew into English literally means the concept of The “Adversary/Obstacle/Stumbling block”. In Judaism, Satan is an angel who’s sole purpose, *ordained* by G-d, is to test men of their faith in G-d, as depicted in the book of Job.

I met Michelle on my birthday while in the Air Force's basic training in September 1997. We were sitting in a room, just her and I, waiting to get briefed on some of the intricacies of our top-secret Cryptologic Linguist training. Air Force linguists are the smartest 1% of the entire enlisted Air Force, so the chances of her and I meeting were

pretty slim. "Is today your birthday?" she asked, looking at the folder containing my personal data that I held in my hand. She was sitting next to me with her legs crossed towards me (I had just been learning about body language back then), the question almost rhetorical since it was ostensibly true due to my birthdate being visible on the documents I had in hand. "Yeah" I said tersely. My mind was on something different though – I was still consumed by the anguish of having my best friend in high school lie to me and turn his back on me. "Happy birthday" she replied. "Thanks."

Maybe she was a birthday present.

More privileged linguist briefings followed during the course of basic training and we began to talk more. There were 4 other linguists in total in our basic training class. In one of our meetings, Michelle sat on my left and another linguist, Jodi, sat on my right. "I like this girl in the other flight (class)" I mentioned to Jodi. Michelle, with her legs crossed towards me again, noticeably got annoyed at my comment which prompted her to fold her arms and cross her legs away from me. Hmmm...

Our destination, as linguists was the beautiful Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey California. There, our elite cadre of linguists split off into social "pairs" due to those unforeseen forces of social interaction. Jodi, Michelle, and I formed our little hang-out trio. However, since Jodi was engaged to be married, she was sort of an outsider waiting for her husband to be. This left just me and Michelle. We spent almost every day together, quickly getting to know each other as though time were against us - the weeks were more like years. I became her "surrogate" boyfriend and she became my "surrogate" girlfriend. I had confided in her that a poem I had wrote for the girl I liked in basic training was originally intended for her (it was - really!). Michelle was a very attractive girl. She was about 5'5", dark hair with blue/green/gray eyes. Michelle's face favored her all-time favorite heroine Scarlet from "Gone With The Wind". Maybe a bit too much...

While Michelle had begun dating a civilian guy casually, we still hung out a lot. Going for coffee almost every day. But living on the Army Post had its fair share of restrictions. One day in December, she 'popped the question' (heh). "Quinton - do you want to get married?" she asked. "Whaa?"

"Let's get married so we can live off post"

"I dunno..."

In the second or so it took for me to come to my decision of 'no', I didn't think of any responsible remonstrance to her query. I said 'no' because I was insecure at the time. I had liked Michelle a lot, but I was too scared to 'ask her out' or anything, and she was already kinda-sorta dating another guy. I had just gotten out of high school, and a lot of the events in high school were still very much on my mind. But that's another essay altogether. But still, we would've been more like roommates - a lot of DLI students got married so they could live off post, a terrible result of such a long and academically strenuous school. Most linguists are at DLI learning a foreign language for a year. That's a year of living in the dorms and subject to the military's standards in the dorms. Room inspections. Curfew. Signing in and out guests (no guests of the opposite sex, though). Getting married and subsequently moving off post alleviated all of that.

Maybe a week or two later was what was called "Christmas Exodus" at DLI, where all of the students got to go on leave for a little over a week (you can't go on leave at any other time during training) and go home. I went home back to NYC, Michelle went back to Pittsburgh. Upon our return from our Exodus, Michelle told me that she was engaged - not to one person, but to *two*. You can imagine my skepticism - and with that skepticism, my romantic feelings for Michelle were sullied indefinitely. But for some reason, it didn't totally register. There was something obstructing my view of her, of how she really was. So, between the 6'3" football player she was dating before she joined the Air Force and the ex-Marine, she chose the Marine because the football player was a wuss and never stood up to her. Yes, me being her best friend I was privy to all of this information.

In late January/early February, Michelle notified those in command of her engagement and was given permission to live off post. She had gotten her own 1 room apartment about 3 blocks from the beach, and this apartment became our new hangout spot. Her fiancée was due to arrive in Monterey March 13th of 1998, and they were to get married on March 15th (the Ides...?). In the privacy of her and her fiancée's new apartment, our friendship began to grow even more - from simply "best friends" to "best friends who occasionally kissed every now and then". It began to look like, to others witnessing our friendship, that we had gotten married. We got along and argued, albeit playfully, like a married couple... why would anyone think any differently?

Michelle loved the ocean, it was in some indescribable way connected to her very essence (I had wondered why she didn't join the Navy). I, on the other hand, loved the sky because I joined the Air Force to become a pilot. One night while standing on the beach looking out towards the endless void of ocean, it seemed as though the ocean and the sky were one single entity, the horizon completely gone. "When it rains" I said "The ocean and the sky become one". She looked at me as though I had said the most profound thing imaginable, since it indeed was evident that the horizon was gone...

Around March 10th, 2 days before her fiancée's arrival date, we almost consummated our "makeshift" marriage. The natural result of where our friendship was going. March 15th, Michelle and her fiancé, Mark, got married without incident. Jodi and I were their only two witnesses. Afterwards, I began thinking of what exactly Michelle and I were doing in the months before her marriage, what we had almost done days before her marriage, and I began to distance myself from her. Was I wrong? Was she wrong? I didn't know. The main question was *what would've happened if I had taken her up on her marriage proposal to me?*

We didn't talk for 2 weeks, her angry at my silent treatment. I was confused and upset about Michelle's apparent character, or lack thereof. The beginning of April Michelle had contacted me so that we could talk about things. She drove back to post to pick me up and we went to a secluded park. The time was around 11 pm. The duration of the 10 minute drive, we didn't say a word to each other. When we got to the park, she began talking slowly. I wasn't really listening to her reasoning, but the only words I heard that I cared about was "I'm sorry". But why wouldn't I listen to her reasoning? Or more accurately, why didn't I care about her reasoning? Again, maybe something was preventing me from viewing the situation and her role in the situation in its entirety. We began to talk some more, rekindling our friendship. Along with that, also our playfulness. We got out of the car and hugged, and as we embraced each other, it began to drizzle. We looked at each other and smiled, recognizing the symbolism. A couple of months later, Michelle left me a poem on a piece of paper in one of my school notebooks that read:

See the ocean meet the sky

A sharp defining line

When the clouds decide to cry

Then the two intertwine

Michelle's marriage was off to a rocky start because the newlywed couple had no money. Michelle began to complain about every little detail of her marriage to me, I always lent an ear to listen, as she was also the ear that would receive my lamentations as well. Towards the end of the school year, we both began getting into academic trouble. I was battling my own personal demons and she was depressed about her marriage and being in the Air Force in general. Somehow, while my own demons were flapping their wings in my face, a connection to Michelle was made. She was a little too reminiscent of a "friend" I had back in high school. Of course I know there was a connection now, but I didn't know it back then. I had decided at the time that if I had passed this linguist school I wouldn't be happy being around Michelle all the time, since we'd get stationed at the same base. So, I failed the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) on purpose. Now we were destined to be pen-pals.

I went on to my next assignment after failing the DLPT and left Michelle behind in California. Michelle drove me to the airport on September 22nd. As a going away gift, Michelle gave me a locked box that contained her maiden name dog-tags, and signed the bottom of the box "To my best friend". While in the airport and in my dress blues, I began sobbing uncontrollably while adding her dog-tags to my own around my neck along with the key to the box. We had spent 99% of our days together for over a year, in the airport I had missed her already... or was it the cognitive dissonance of my decision to leave her that made me cry? It was probably both.

Sometime in November, Michelle wrote to me giving me some great news: she was pregnant. This meant, among all other obvious things, that she would be getting out of the Air Force. While in training status, a pregnant trainee is given the option of going on maternal leave or simply getting out altogether. Since Michelle wasn't enjoying her experience in the Air Force, she chose to get out. She had her first child in June of 1999 in Pittsburgh while I was stationed in New Mexico. We were constantly writing back and forth, emailing back and forth, calling back and forth with nothing other than the casual banter of our daily lives. "A couple of days ago I stubbed my toe. Damn, that hurts!" "Yeah, that sucks!" Once a year I'd go on leave to visit her. Her marriage still not perfect, she'd complain every once in awhile. In September of 2001, Michelle had her second

child. Although initially overjoyed about her children, she began to feel the restrictions that having kids came with. She became even more depressed, not only with her marriage, but with her kids as well.

In my letters to her, I'd complain about how my supervisor was a liar and a poser, or how a friend I met turned out to be a liar. I'd always complain to her about how much I hated liars, as I had a friend in high school who turned his back on me. "You sound like the main character from 'To Catch A Mockingbird'" [2008 note: *it was probably "Catcher In The Rye"*] she'd reply. I've never read the book, but I can only assume that the character she refers to is badass. She'd console me, and I'd console her. She proclaimed once that I was one of the only remaining pillars of her sanity while she struggled with marriage and children. Occasionally, we'd talk about lingering thoughts about the sexual tension that existed between us; I'd always say "but we're never gonna do *that*." She'd reply with something along the lines of "We should've". When my enlistment was coming to its end, Michelle asked if I would be her room-mate when I came to school in Pittsburgh – the question all too familiar to what she asked me in DLI. Again, I said 'no'.

In May of 2003, Michelle came to New Mexico to be my date for the Honor Guard Banquet. At this time in her life, Michelle had already been seeing another guy, her current boyfriend Rick, and was getting ready to end things with her husband Mark. While dating Rick and still married to her husband, she'd tell me of her exploits at clubs, flirting with guys and her schemes to get over on both Mark and Rick to go and meet up with one or two select guys at these clubs. I could tell from the way she detailed it, she enjoyed coming up with these plots, but it never really dawned on me. After the banquet, Michelle and I went to a local club to dance. We spent most of the time at the club sitting at the bar, waiting for a song that Michelle liked to play so we could go and dance. I asked her if she'd be more willing to dance if she were drunk and she said 'Yeah', so I encouraged her to drink, and she got drunk. When the club closed, we drove back to my dorm room on base, and, well... we finally consummated our fake marriage from DLI. I wasn't very pleased with my less-than-lucid decision but Michelle had commented, "It took 5 years but we finally did it."

Why didn't that register? It was certainly an inappropriate comment, but the implications of it never clicked.

Rick had found out about Michelle's transgression after she had lied to him about her and I and scolded her for it; he had also sent me an email mentioning how Michelle told him that *I got her drunk to have sex with her*. Regardless of all of this, I was inexorably set to go to school in Pittsburgh, this being decided months before the incident. However, my trust in Michelle was significantly damaged by her accusation, and a bit of whatever it was that was that had prevented me from seeing Michelle for who she really was began to diminish.

A week after Michelle had told me to get all of my stuff from The Dungeon, I found out that my financial aid wasn't going to cover living in the dorms in Pittsburgh, so I had to find somewhere else to live. The only person I knew in Pittsburgh was Michelle, so I pleaded with her to let me stay in The Dungeon. She said no. I was stuck living in the dorms, increasing the amount I owed to the school by staying there and living on the modicum of money I had left which I spent on candy bars for food. After a month of living like this, Michelle decided to let me stay at The Dungeon but my doubts in her fidelity had already begun to reify over that month. I was able to resign from school and look for a job. But for some reason, I couldn't forgive her for turning her back on me when I needed her, even though she said 'sorry'.

In January of 2004, my car broke down and I was unable to get to work (which effectively meant that I quit). "Ironically" at the same time, Michelle had stopped scheduling clients to meet at The Dungeon and I was left isolated there for a month. I had continuously asked Michelle to give me a ride to her house (she lived with Rick about a 5 minute drive away) so I could email my resume out to employers, but she always said that she couldn't. I knew she was lying, but I didn't understand *why*. Again, that *something* was blocking me from truly comprehending. In mid-January, she mentions that she's stopped doing her work at The Dungeon and was quitting, saying that it was to be with her kids more. Rick, on the other hand, "didn't know" what was going on and said that Michelle had refused to talk about it to him about her reasoning. Eventually, Rick said that he's getting rid of The Dungeon (since it was in his name) and so I had to

move out. I was forced to stay with my mother's cousin whom I had just met in October (that didn't last, so here I am in NYC).

I had no proof at the time that they had agreed to lie to me about getting rid of The Dungeon, but I had a hunch. In August of 2004, I finally realized why I couldn't forgive Michelle:

She's a fucking liar.

I confronted Michelle about her lying about getting rid of The Dungeon (she continued to see clients after I had moved out); all she could say in response was that "I deserved it" for not keeping The Dungeon up to her standard of cleanliness. I *deserved* being lied to! And with such a cogent argument from her, I saw in her what was veiled to my eyes from the beginning – her inability to curtail her penchant for manipulation. Her penchant for lying. There's a difference between someone who lies, and someone who's a liar. It's the contextual difference between someone who socially drinks alcohol and an alcoholic. Michelle wasn't the someone who socially drank – she was the alcoholic. And with that realization, I saw [my] stumbling block fall like lightning from heaven (Luke 10:18). Much like a person suffering from extreme religiosity denies the existence of anything contrary to their faith, my stumbling block prevented me from truly seeing Michelle to sustain itself. And after all of this time, I realized that the stumbling block was love.