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## He Feels Bad about It

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## He Feels Bad about It

Cover Page Footnote

Written for WRT 422

Baker: He Feels Bad about It



# *He Feels Bad about It*

Victoria Caroline Baker

**V**iolin in hand my freshman year, resting on my thigh, I feel his eyes on me. I try to ignore it, I try to focus on the teacher, but it feels like my back is on fire, like someone is poking me with a thousand little needles—so I turn around.

I make eye contact with him, and my body goes numb. My heart races.

I put my violin down and excuse myself to go to the bathroom to catch my breath.

I never catch it—I'm still trying to catch it.

*He cries every day.*

Since we'd been friends for so long, I'd assumed when I told you what he did to me, you'd hug me, you'd tell me you love me—you'd take my side.

I don't remember what you said.

I remember you hugged me, but I also remember that, after I told you what he did, I saw you talking to him after the final bell rang.

And I saw you hanging out together in a group at Doug's Fish Fry.

And I saw you post for his birthday that year, like every other story that flooded my phone.

And you did it again the year after that.

And the year after that.

It got to the point where, on April 14, I turned my phone off for the entire day.

I still do that.

*He feels bad about it.*

I walk into my creative writing class on the first day of my senior year. I sit down, excitedly taking out my laptop, happy to be

back in the classroom that I know so well.

This is where I hold Writers' Club—the club I run, the club I joined freshman year, the club that gave me the final push to pursue a writing career.

This room is my safe haven. My teacher has artwork by his students covering the walls from floor to ceiling. Sunlight pours in from the left and heats up the already overheating room—and I love it. I've had to wait eight other periods for this class. Before today, I waited four years to take this class. It's finally time, and I know that there's nothing, *nothing*, that can ruin this for me.

Then I hear his name.

I turn around and he's walking in, with the smirk on his face that I've seen so many times before, and it makes my stomach churn.

I feel like I'm going to throw up.

I excuse myself to go to the bathroom.

He doesn't even like writing—he knows that I do. Did he do this on purpose? Is his calling in life to make mine hell?

I'm overthinking again.

I take out my phone from my pocket as tears drip onto my phone screen, making the email I'm drafting to my guidance counselor much harder as my fingers slide around, forcing me to retype over and over again. I finally give up and just hit send.

"Hello,

Can we please meet about one of my classes? It's urgent."

She answers immediately.

The next day, I walk in and explain

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everything. I'm 18, so she doesn't have to report it. I tell her what he did to me in as much detail as I can manage without crying. I feel my throat closing as I talk, but I keep going because I have to.

I explain the harassment, the phone calls, the assault at 14, and when I'm finally done, wiping away a singular tear off my cheek, she takes a deep breath and says, Thank you for telling me. I can't imagine how hard that was, and I'm so sorry for what you experienced.

I nod, already feeling another loss.

But, she says hesitantly, I can't take him out of the class. If you want, though, we can move you out of the class, or to an online version of it?

I feel my cheeks get hot.

He can assault me, harass me, gaslight me, abuse me—but *I'm* the one who has to leave the class?

"No," I say, "that won't be necessary."

I've been in the same room as him for years, what's one more?

I leave the room and wipe my eyes, focusing on my breathing.

I feel his eyes on me in the hallway.

*He cries every day.*

I'm pushed against a dumpster. I focus on the stream in the background, the water running, the birds chirping. I try to focus on them.

I feel his hand running down my thigh, trying to move my yellow dress up.

I fall into a state of acceptance and dissociation.

The word "no" means nothing to him.

I make a mental note never to wear a dress again.

*He feels bad about it.*

My phone rings from a number I don't recognize. I'm in the car with my dad next to me. I told him about this just a few weeks ago, the summer before college.

Something tells me to answer the phone, so I do.

Hey, I just wanted to tell you about...

"Who is this?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

It's me.

I hang up.

He texts me—

Fair,

—and texts something about my brother. I ask how he got my number. He says he still has it saved and got a new phone, which explains why he wasn't blocked.

I put my phone face down under my thigh. My chest tightens, and I feel my face getting hot and my eyes starting to water. I wait for my siblings to go inside, and Dad notices that something is wrong, so he sits in silence, waiting for me.

My knees give out on the cement of the garage, and I slump into my dad's arms. He already knows who it was, but I tell him anyway.

After Dad calms me down and I go to my room—I can't help myself.

Before I know it, we are texting back and forth. I'm grilling him about unresolved trauma that I thought was resolved. Now it feels like it happened yesterday.

"Do you even feel bad about what you did?" I text, knowing that he feels bad about it, that he cries every day, but he says none of that.

I feel bad about nothing. You're crazy. You've been telling everyone lies.

I never even touched you.

We go through a series of empty threats, each saying we'll sue the other. He threatens to blackmail me and demands that I tell him who else says they've been hurt by his hands—I'm not the only one—and I refuse. I take the harassment because I know that if I gave him a single name of anyone who told me they had the same experience, he would target them, convince them that they made it up, that they're crazy—or that I'm crazy.

I certainly feel crazy.

*He cries every day.*

I tell my therapist what happened, months after the fact.

Do you want me to report it? she asks.

“No,” I say, more out of fear than anything else. No one will believe me. Everyone at school will hate me.

I don't even know if I believe myself.

I know I hate myself.

He's denied it to my face every time. He said I made it up. He said I lied.

I have no proof that I didn't. All I have is my memories, and even those are fading—they're jumbled, like scrambled eggs. I know they're real, but they disappear and come back when it's convenient for them.

No, don't report it.

It would only make it worse.

It would make it real.

*He feels bad about it.*

Dad and I have this journal. It started when I was depressed in middle school—it's always been really hard for me to talk about my feelings, but it has never been hard for me to write about them.

After hearing my dad talk about my Medusa tattoo and how he thinks I should have waited to get another tattoo, I decided to write to him in the journal.

I explain what Medusa has come to symbolize today: a symbol of protection for sexual assault survivors. And then I write everything: it started in eighth grade, I was very unstable and easily manipulated, I was gaslighted into not trusting myself, therapy helped me, I didn't want to live...the only thing I don't write is who did it to me.

He hugs me later that night. A long hug—the kind that makes you cry.

While he's holding me in his arms, he whispers, *I like Medusa too.*

*He cries every day.*

I walk into the first dance of high school wearing a black dress with Converse and a denim jacket, thinking I'm hot shit. Excitement radiates off of my body as I realize I'm living the life that those Disney stars do—I'm in high school for real now. No more playing pretend or fantasizing about my high school career. I let myself feel the rush of it all. I let myself really dance for the first time.

Until I walk past a group of guys, and they yell his name at me.

At first, I think I imagined it, because when I turn around, most of them turn away too, except for a few looking at me and snickering.

Then they do it again.

And again.

And again.

And finally, he does it to me. He yells at me to come over, to talk to him—I don't, because I'm scared.

I feel like everyone is staring at me wherever I go. It's like I have a red 'X' on my chest.

I leave early.

*He feels bad about it.*

You say that to me while I'm sitting on your bed. You must've noticed the photo I

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keep looking at on your wall—the one of you and him smiling at the camera. I asked you to cover it. You didn't.

It baffles me—you know everything, and you keep a photo of him in your room?

“He *should* feel bad about it,” I say honestly, and you're taken aback by the directness of my voice, because I'm usually so good at being quiet.

*He cries every day.*

I lose so many friends because he got to them first. They believe him. They think I'm crazy, making it all up for attention.

But who wants this kind of attention?

Who wants to feel like this?

*He feels bad about it.*

I never had to tell Mom about what he did to me.

I think she looked up what Medusa symbolized and figured it out herself, or maybe Dad told her, because on one random afternoon while I am sitting by the counter doing homework, she surprises me.

My grandparents are talking about tattoos, and my grandma says, Now, why would you want something so scary like that?

I answer my rehearsed response: “It's a symbol of protection, the story of Medusa is a good one, I like Greek mythology, etc.”

Gran says I could have gotten something else to protect me, something less scary, and while she's talking, Mom says out loud, I love her Medusa, then hugs me and whispers, I think Medusa is beautiful.

*He cries every day.*

I wake up with tears on my pillowcase. I have scratch marks on my arm from trying to scratch away the skin he touched. I pray for the skin cells to replace themselves already so

I'll be new—Google says that will take seven to ten years. That's seven to ten years until I can be my own person again. Until there's skin that truly feels like mine.

I'll be a junior in college—I don't even know if I'll make it that long.

*He feels bad about it*, you said in a long spiel that followed.

“So do I.”

You know, I wanted to scream at you. I wanted to yell and cry because it just doesn't make sense to me.

I considered you one of my first friends. I would have murdered someone if they treated you the way he treated me—and I certainly wouldn't have a picture of that man on my fucking wall. I certainly wouldn't have been friends with him. I certainly wouldn't have associated with him—and I certainly wouldn't *still* have had photos of him on my Instagram.

And yet, here we are.

I get it, you're friends...but, then, what were we?

Your words ring in my ears every day. I can't forget them—I never will.

It's funny because I know that even after I cut off contact with you, your words will still haunt me. It'll be like you never left.

*He feels bad about it.*

So should you.

You should feel horrible. At first, you had the excuse of being young—I had to grow up fast, you didn't, and I can't fault you for that. But now, as a sophomore in college, you're out of excuses. You've been exposed to what life is like in the real world, what it's like for other women, what it's like for sexual assault survivors, and I see no sign that you've changed in the slightest.

And I'm all out of second chances.

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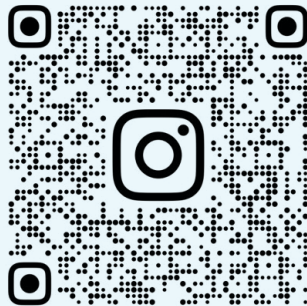
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