

January 2019

Connor and I met in our Social Psychology class at Sinclair College. We bonded over the laughable conspiracy theories that our professor tried to preach as we walked to similar parking spots in the college parking garage. We also were very open about our mental illnesses from the very beginning. He told me that he had bipolar disorder and possibly OCD; that didn't scare me, some of the sweetest people I know have those conditions. I told him that I have depression, generalized anxiety, and ADD. We bonded over depression humor, something that only people who have been in the throes of it really ever understand and find humorous. Joking about personal mental illnesses is one of the biggest coping tools in the mental health toolbox.

So, when he started joking about his dark thoughts, I understood. Dark thoughts for someone with a mental illness are just a symptom that we have to learn how to manage. Joking about wanting to hurt people was just heard as, "I have uncomfortable thoughts that are inappropriate to express, but I need to joke about them otherwise they're too scary and real." People who do not have a mental illness do not understand this sense of humor. They take it too far. But I didn't, so he trusted me.

He trusted me with so much of his darkness that I forgot most of it. Another thing between mentally ill friends: the capacity to forget things can be a blessing if the person is telling you something in confidence. Forgetfulness equals trust. So, when people try to get mad about my gaps in memory, then they don't understand why Connor would have trusted me with his secrets in the first place.

March 2019

Connor and I kept our relationship on the downlow due to the polyamorous nature of it. I was engaged to another man while dating Connor, and all parties involved knew about the situation. Everything was consensual, even if it was a bit of an adjustment. Connor didn't know that when I first asked him out for coffee, though. He didn't drink coffee, so we went out for drinks that night instead.

We went to Bar Louie at The Greene Town Center in Beavercreek, OH. To our surprise, there was a red light/green light party going on. (For those not hip to the youngins culture, it's a party where people wear glow bracelets: red for stop, yellow for it's complicated, and green for single and ready to mingle.) He initiated me to my first gin and tonic, and having anxiety, I sucked that puppy down fast. Throughout the night, he mingled with strangers, charming them with his big smile, baby blues, and intellect. I had more fun than I had in a while being with someone so outgoing and electric. We ended up getting into a political debate with a Republican. Connor really knew his stuff and he was impressed when I knew mine. Looking back on that debate was one of my favorite memories.

A couple drinks later, Connor asked me if I saw the video of the synagogue shooting. As someone who makes a point to never watch those videos, I hadn't. So, he pulled out his phone and I was too drunk to care that I was watching it. Thankfully the bar was too loud for me to hear what was going on. Connor gave me the play-by-play of what was happening. Even then, I did realize that that was a weird thing for a first date, but not too weird given the context of our class. In our Social Psychology class, we regularly got off topic to talk about serial killers, Ted Bundy was a hot topic given all of the media attention he was getting. A psychology student being

fascinated in the horrors of humans is not an abnormal thing. It weirded me out because it was definitely not my focus with psychology, but it wasn't a weird thing in general.

By then end of the night, I was trashed from accidentally drinking too much from anxiety. He seemed way more sober than I was. So, we left my truck at the parking garage and he drove me home. On the way, I asked if it was a date. He asked what I wanted it to be. I told him that I asked him first. There was a pause. I told him I wanted it to be a date and explained that I'm polyamorous. He smiled and said that it was a date, then. We got to my apartment, and he walked me up. We lingered outside my door. I told him that I wanted to kiss him, but I wanted to kiss him sober. He chuckled and said that that was sweet. And we left it at that.

He was a perfect gentleman throughout our relationship. He never pushed me to do things I didn't want to do. His biggest concern was that I was comfortable. Polyamory is confusing for everyone involved, but luckily he and my fiance at the time were both understanding and consenting.

Our relationship mostly consisted of us going out drinking and talking about our mental illnesses and him telling me about world tragedies and me talking about TV shows. There were a couple moments, though that stuck out to me.

March or April 2019

There was one night in March or April that he called me. He was out in Illinois playing a gig with his metal band, Menstrual Munchies, and he got super drunk. Most of the time I couldn't understand what he was saying. Connor was naturally a mumblor with a low voice, but then to add drunk slurring on top of it definitely made it a struggle to understand him. I did catch bits and pieces among his topic jumping that he wanted to hurt a lot of people. He didn't have

any specific plans. I wrote it off as being a sad, drunk man who was afflicted by unchecked symptoms of mental illness. Under normal, sober circumstances, I didn't believe he would feel like that.

May 2019

The next red flag was the letter. We had plans to go grab lunch one day, and he asked if he could drop off a letter to one of his friends that had just moved into town. I said sure, that's sweet. When we drove by the house, though, there was someone working in the yard outside. He pouted and said he wanted the letter to be a surprise. So, I suggested that we come back after lunch. And that's what we did. Sure enough, there was still someone outside. I told him to just deliver it anyway, but he got frustrated. When I pushed the subject further he told me that that was his ex-girlfriend's house that he found through a picture on her Facebook.

Then I asked to read the letter. I don't remember the exact words, but it was something to the effect of "Welcome to the neighborhood. You can't outrun your past. Signed, Your Neighbor." I asked him about that, about if he knew how messed up that was. He tried to downplay it as a joke. But I knew it wasn't, so I pushed further. He admitted that sometimes he got uncontrollable urges to do things. The only other example of those urges that I remember is burning down an abandoned building with his friends. He told me that he always felt terrible afterwards. I took that opportunity to try and show him a coping method. We pulled into a parking lot, jammed the letter in a hole under a parking block, and lit the letter on fire, watching it to make sure the pieces didn't fly off and start a wildfire.

I knew then that I had to break things off with him, but I waited a few days to cool off. I wanted to wait until my fiance got back from a work trip, but then Connor started asking

inappropriate questions. He texted me to ask how often my fiance and I had sex, to which I told him I wasn't comfortable responding. Then he asked if I ever thought about killing myself. Now, we had spoken about suicide before. He knew that I had. This felt like he was trying to play mind games with me. In the gentlest way that I could, I told him that I didn't think he was ready for a relationship in the mental state that he was in. He needed to do more work on himself and find more coping mechanisms so he didn't become so dependent on other people. I didn't have the emotional capacity to be his therapist, and that wasn't my job. I just wanted to be his girlfriend and it was clear that he was not in a position that that was possible. He texted back a snarky reply to the effect of, "I hope you find peace and never have to stress about anything again." Honestly, it was a better reply than I had been anticipating.

I then reached out to his mother to tell her what happened. I wanted him to be safe and I didn't know if he would tell her. I didn't want this breakup to be a catalyst for unsafe behavior. But given that the breakup happened through text, there wasn't a good gauge for how he was feeling.

#### August 2019—Present Day

Two-ish months later and the shooting happens. As someone who was in Orlando when Pulse happened, the news of the shooting didn't hit me nearly as hard as it should have. Then I got a text from one of my old classmates from the class Connor and I shared. She asked if Connor was the shooter. I thought, "What a weird question to ask." Then my boyfriend Googled it. They had released the shooter's name and his name was Connor Betts. Everything just stopped. I went numb. Then I started crying and I still didn't have any feelings. I grabbed my

phone. I needed answers. Google. It couldn't have been Connor. Connor Betts isn't a popular name, but it couldn't have been him. 24-year-old from Bellbrook. It was him.

My ex-boyfriend was a mass murderer. My ex-boyfriend was a mass murderer. I still don't know how to wrap my head around that. That man who was so sweet to me and told me he loved me was a mass murderer. I kissed a mass murderer.

I thought I had decent judgement in character, but now I feel like my entire psyche needs to be scooped out and reevaluated under a microscope. I am beyond thankful that I have such a wonderful therapist to help me through this.

And then I found out about his sister. His sister. He liked his sister. Why would he kill his sister? He didn't like his parents. But that couldn't have been the cause. He was drunk at a bar and too impulsive for that to have been the cause.

I have no idea what his motivation was. I will never know. But there are a few things that I'm certain that it wasn't. This wasn't a hate crime. He fought for equality. This wasn't a crime of passion. He didn't get passionate enough. This wasn't very premeditated. He wasn't a thorough planner.

I also know that him getting shot is exactly what he wanted. He would have been the first one to tell you that he hated himself. He told me that twice he held a gun in his mouth ready to pull the trigger. He knew that he shouldn't have been allowed to own a gun, even though he loved guns. He believed as I believe that people with mental illnesses shouldn't be allowed to own guns because of people like him, people that turn into monsters. You don't know which people with mental illnesses will be the rare few like him and who will be in the majority of the completely harmless. But putting a gun in their hand could spark thoughts that they would have

otherwise never have thought of. It's not a risk that we should take, no matter how fun shooting one is.

He knew he was the product of a failed system. A system that stigmatized mental health and recovery. A system that makes the mentally ill feel broken and unworthy of help. He didn't want to seek help because of the stigma, he just wanted to better and he didn't know how.