

ERIN
FAY
THE BIG JERK

The hug is odd. I am expecting “the church hug”—the kind of hug that lasts less than three seconds, involves no chest contact, and typically ends with a quick pat on the back that signals, “Okay. That’s enough.” It’s an obligatory hug, one that doesn’t mean all that much. But this hug is different. It’s just a little longer than it should be. My ex-boyfriend is holding me rather closely, and both his enormous hands are trapping me in this seemingly never-ending hug. What makes it even stranger is that my boyfriend Ryan is standing less than a foot away watching.

In a box in my room marked “Stuff I Want to Save” is a small picture of a freshman boy with light blue puppy dog eyes and short brown hair. His round cherubic face suggests innocence, but a tiny smile tugging at his lips shows his mischievous side. On the back of this photo are these handwritten words: “Ian Sinclair. 2nd boyfriend. **BIG** Jerk.”

Our relationship began like most high school romances. Casey told Rick who told Janie who told me that Ian thought I was cute. Soon, we were exchanging notes in class. Among these notes were romantic gems such as “Your awesome :)” How could a girl resist such declarations of love? Then, he let me wear his sweatshirt. I accepted the ugly, rust-colored sweatshirt as if it were a diamond ring. We held hands when we watched movies at my house, always letting go whenever my father popped his head into the room. Everything was going well, until January.

In January, he started acting strange. He would bail out of dates at the last minute with very convincing excuses like, “I can’t go...something came up.” Then he began acting incredibly cocky, to the point where I could barely recognize the person he’d become. Not long after this, I learned that he had lied to me about how many girls he’d kissed. Although this may seem petty, it was something that

was important to me at the time, and, more importantly, left me wondering what else he had fibbed about. After a month of the new Ian, I finally came to the conclusion that I had to break up with him. Unfortunately, this decision came a few days before Valentine’s Day, and I didn’t want to be That Girl That Dumped Her Boyfriend on Valentine’s Day. So, I decided the decent thing to do would be to wait until after Valentine’s Day.

Three days later, I sat in science class, contemplating my dilemma. How would I tell him I didn’t want to go out with him anymore? I would let him down easy, I decided. I pictured the two of us outside, rain pouring all around us, a violin playing softly in the background. “I’m sorry, Ian,” I’d say, taking his hand in mine. “But I just can’t do this anymore.” He’d look at me with those blue puppy dog eyes filled with tears and collapse into my arms. I’d rub his back as he cried on my shoulder. “Don’t worry, Ian,” I’d offer. “We can still be friends...” Content with my scenario, I looked over at Ian. Poor thing.

But as I watched Ian and imagined him mourning the loss of such an excellent girlfriend as me, I saw something that made my stomach drop. He was flirting with Britney Adrian.

Britney Adrian was undoubtedly the most popular girl in the school. She had been attending our small private school her entire life, and she had the whole place wrapped around her perfectly manicured finger. As much as I hated to admit it, I had envied her since the fifth grade. She seemed to have the perfect life. Her mother owned a salon and her stepfather was a state trooper. She wore Coach sneakers and \$500 rings on a daily basis. Not only that, she had the confidence of a model and perfectly smooth dark brown hair. *And* she was an expert flirt.

This was what I was up against. Scrawny me, with my unruly hair and ten dollar Payless shoes. I didn’t stand a chance. I had to sit there in silence for the entire class, watching the two of them flirt with each other. Their flirting was sickening and upsetting at the same time. I didn’t know whether I wanted to throw up or cry. Time seemed to drag on. When class finally ended, I felt like I had a lump in my throat the size of a tennis ball.

I went home that day and did the only thing I could think to do. I listened to my All American Rejects CD, sat on my bed, and cried. In an especially dramatic moment, I tore up every note that he had written me. For a moment, I felt better. But then I pictured the two of them flirting with each other and began bawling all over again. I unwrapped the heart shaped box he had given me just three days ago and began devouring the chocolates. Bizarrely enough, in that moment, I was completely aware of the irony. But I didn’t care. As I sat there on my bed, alternating between wiping my tears and shoving chocolates into my mouth, my mother opened my bedroom door.

She took one look at the sad scene — me, sitting cross-legged on my tissue-covered bed, hugging my childhood teddy bear, with a face covered in tears and chocolate — and burst out laughing. She tried to

apologize, but unable to stifle her giggles, had to leave the room for a moment to gain her composure. When she returned to the room, biting her lip to keep from laughing, I was the one who started to laugh. After a heart to heart with my mother, I began to calm down. But after gorging myself on an entire box of Russell Stovers, I wasn't exactly chipper.

The decision I made next is one that I will always regret. I decided I was going to write a letter to that lowlife and tell him what I really thought of him and his new squeeze. I wrote the first draft of the letter, made a few changes, then wrote the final draft. I remember being especially pleased with myself. In the letter, I condemned the way he had behaved and warned of how Britney would use and discard him just as she had all her other boyfriends. At the time, I considered it the most scathing piece of correspondence ever exchanged.

I imagined his reaction to the letter. Seeing the error of his ways, he'd meet me at my locker and beg for my forgiveness. He'd heed my warning about Britney and stop pursuing her. He'd ask to remain friends, and we would hug one last time, with the understanding that we were both mature beings who could rise above our issues.

Of course, that's not how it went down.

The next day of school, I slipped the letter into Ian's locker and awaited his response. What I got back was a note saying, "I think we should stop dating." No kidding, Einstein. I spent the better part of that school year attempting to avoid the budding relationship between Ian and Britney. I'd sit at the lunch table beside his and watch them with disgust. In fact, I had this recurring fantasy where I'd grab his lunch and smooch it into his smug little face. And there were times where I came dangerously close to doing so.

The next year, my two best friends transferred to another high school and I was completely alone, forced to witness the couple together. During that time, I found comfort in scribbling my thoughts in a notebook. Though I didn't realize at the time, writing in my notebook was a good outlet for me. Getting all my thoughts out on paper made me really look at what was truly bothering me.

It was over a year before I realized the true reason I was so upset about the break-up. I wasn't upset that Ian didn't want to date me anymore. I had already wanted to end the relationship. What was really bothering me was that he was pushing me aside for someone who I already felt was superior to me. To me, it was like getting close-lined by Ian, then having Britney kick me in the stomach with her damn Coach sneakers.

To me, Britney represented this unattainable version of myself — a me with perfect teeth, straight hair, and a better wardrobe. A me who wasn't intimidated by boys. A me who didn't trip over her own feet all the time. Ian choosing her over me shattered what little self-confidence I had. Though it seems silly to place that much importance on one boy's opinion, that was how I genuinely felt.

This blow to my self-confidence really kept me from living my life. I

was so worried that I would face the same rejection that I was afraid to get close to anyone — romantically or otherwise. I hid behind this theory that dating in high school was pointless. "After all, what are the odds that you're going to stay with someone all the way through high school and college and then marry them?" I'd say. But it was just an excuse for not opening myself up to anyone. It got to the point where even my teachers began to notice the way I isolated myself from others.

That all changed one day, when I began talking to another boy in my class named Ryan who was, coincidentally, Ian's best friend. I had always thought he was cute and funny, but I was always scared to approach him in school because he was always with Ian. One day, I struck up a conversation with him online. The more I talked to him, the more I liked him. But what I liked most about him was his confidence. He was, by his own admission, not the cutest guy in the world, but he didn't let that keep him from being himself. He wasn't afraid of anything, and it really inspired me.

Then one day, while talking to him online, I had this strange epiphany. Instantaneously, I felt butterflies begin to flutter in my stomach, and I felt my cheeks redden. "Oh my God. I like him!" I tried to deny the feelings for months. I told myself that I should just be friends with him, still terrified of being hurt again. But after many months of being friends, we began to date. Now, almost five years later, we're still going strong.

Now, I would be lying if I said that I didn't still struggle with my confidence. Feelings of inferiority creep up on me all the time, but I've learned how to push past those feelings and tell myself that I have a lot to offer. And that time I spent sans boys really helped me discover things about myself, such as my love of old movies and my interest in screenwriting. All in all, I came out of this episode of my life one baby step at a time. I came to realize that it was my own feelings of inferiority that were the problem — the "big jerk," if you will.

If you're wondering what happened with Ian and Britney, they did end up dating. In fact, they dated for over a year. Britney eventually left Ian for someone else. I've since apologized to both of them for what I said in the letter, and they both forgave me. Ian even apologized for hurting me. After his apology, I added another inscription to the back of his photo: "Ehhh...not that bad."

Now, years later I am at Ian's graduation party. He has joined the Air Force and is now dating another girl named Mindy. As I'm stuck in this awkward hug, I remember my old wish that Ian and I could simply hug and agree to be friends. Then it dawns on me that my wish has come true. I smile, and hug back.