

# The Night She Took Her Dignity Back

by Christina Canalizo

She lingered by the front door with her hand gripping the doorknob, second-guessing her decision before she even placed a foot out the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked, appearing from the bedroom. The cotton pajama pants that she bought him last Christmas hung low on his waist, and his hair stuck up in the back.

"On a walk," she lied. It could be believable. She was buttoned up in her winter coat, her purse slung over her shoulder, a cup of tea in her mittened hands.

"At three in the morning?" he asked.

She met his eyes.

*You won't leave. You fear leaving more than you fear staying.*

The truth stung. She had 'gone on a walk' every night since the night he proposed to her. Each time, she made it a little farther. But the farther she walked, the lonelier she felt, and thoughts of him holding her hand or telling her how beautiful she was eventually sent her retreating back home. She always returned. She had endured three years of abuse for those hot, fleeting moments of tenderness—just enough warmth to keep her second-guessing the bitter frost. Now the ring promised a lifetime of biting back her pain.

Her gut told her to leave, but her heart ached to stay.

How many times had she sighed when she had seen couples holding hands? How many nights had she laid in bed alone, wishing there was someone beside her? How many afternoons had she groaned to her friends about the lack of good men?

And then—Hallelujah!—her friend hooked her up with that fair-haired muscular beauty next door. Isn't this what she wanted?

This may not be a healthy relationship, but it was **a** relationship. Didn't she deserve the criticizing and the belittling? Not once had she stood up for herself when he had said something hurtful.

She glanced at her reflection in the window. She loathed the woman who allowed herself to be pushed and ignored. She had thought, somehow, that having a man love her would teach her how to love herself too. If he thought she was beautiful and intelligent and worthy, than she would think she was beautiful and intelligent and worthy. In all these years, she had confused those two types of love.

“Actually, I'm leaving.”

His eyes darkened. “Why?”

“You don't respect me, and you never will respect me,” she said, “because I don't respect myself.”

She grabbed the car keys from the hook. The door swung open, blasting her with snow and ice.

She braced herself for the storm.

