



# The Lifesaving Power of Kindness to Strangers

*One day you will tell your story of how you  
overcame what you went through and it  
will be someone else's survival guide.*

*~ Brené Brown*

December 30, 2016. Seat 22H. Non-stop, San Francisco to Reykjavik.

Despite a delay of more than a dozen hours, the excitement was contagious as the passengers boarded the plane. The flight attendants greeted everyone with a smile and didn't look like they were being paid to give it. I overheard the phrases "Blue Lagoon," "northern lights," and "dog sledding" repeatedly as they exchanged pleasantries with the travelers.

We were all going to the same destination, but I felt worlds away from everyone else on board. My wishes for this trip were much different than my fellow passengers, who were looking forward to making memories on a once-in-a-lifetime vacation. In my case, I hoped that a change

of scenery would fix what had become not just toxic, but scary.

I turned to look at the tall, extremely good-looking man next to me and admonished myself for even thinking of those words about him. I flashed back to our first several months together, marked by intense physical and emotional chemistry like I had never felt before. He had easily earned the approval of my friends and family. It had felt like a dream, but it turned into a nightmare.

It didn't happen all at once, but gradually. The man who made me feel like I could accomplish anything began to make me doubt myself. He stopped telling me I was beautiful and started to compare me to other women. When I asked him what had changed, he turned the tables on me and said that I was to blame for his behavior. When I got defensive and said I was doing nothing differently, he took me by the hand and calmly explained that the point of a partnership is to make each other better. He claimed that if I listened to his suggestions, our relationship would bounce back to when things were good.

Unfortunately, the abuse only worsened over time. My self-esteem was at an all-time low and I felt like I needed to look to him for direction. When he said that going to Iceland might improve our relationship, I immediately booked the trip as a Christmas gift.

Just before take-off, I leaned in to take a selfie of us to commemorate the start of the trip, but he grabbed my phone to stop me. "I don't want people to know I'm here with you, okay?"

On that long flight, cut off from the world, there was no audience of friends to perform for. We could be our true selves, which for my boyfriend meant being cruel and vindictive. Among his litany of insults was that no one else would want to date me and that no one, not



even my family, could love me as I was. Tears streamed down my face for the entire flight, and as I thought about what those around me must be thinking of me, it was hard not to believe him.

Midway through the flight, he stood to go to the bathroom. He looked down at me, my face red as I continued to sob. "You look ugly," he whispered before he walked away.

I was thirty-six thousand feet in the air with hundreds of strangers, but I had never felt so low and alone. I was an ocean away from anyone who cared about me.

I was lost in my thoughts when a note on a cocktail napkin slipped through the space between the two seats in front of me. At first, I didn't want to open it because I was certain it was about my in-flight breakdown, which would only make me feel worse, but curiosity got the better of me. I read it quickly and put it away, terrified he would see it when he returned from the lavatory.

*Dear girlfriend,*

*I know the Lord had me overhear your conversation to let you know you are a very beautiful young woman, that should have a man that makes you cry with wonderful laughter, not bullying. You are being abused and he will never love you like you deserve. I'm very concerned about you and I'm praying for you.*

*Run from him. Get help and protection.*

*He doesn't care what you think or say or do. He is a very sick man and will make you sick if you stay with him.*

*Please take this to heart and get help fast.*

It was a punch in the gut being told he didn't care about me. It was a wake-up call he was abusive. It was a warning that my life was in danger.

It was justification for his comments causing the emotions I displayed. It made me believe I deserved more. It was a reminder that there are good people in the world.

In the end, just over a hundred words written on a cocktail napkin by a complete stranger outweighed the countless acts of physical, verbal, and emotional abuse I experienced with my ex-boyfriend.

She left her contact information and one of the first things I did after the breakup was reach out to her. She told me she almost didn't write the note, and that after she passed it to me, she second-guessed her decision. She said she often wondered what had happened to me. And I got to thank her for saving my life.

It took time to comprehend what had happened, and keeping it a secret only made it weigh more heavily on me. Long after the breakup, as I edited an old photo of myself in a bikini poolside for Throwback Thursday, I realized that I couldn't remember what year it was taken or where. It felt disingenuous to be presenting overly filtered, long-forgotten days to the world as if they were the most significant, when in reality the day I remember most is December 30, 2016, when a stranger slipped me a handwritten note on a cocktail napkin on a non-stop flight to Iceland.

Judging by my newsfeed, my friends couldn't empathize with difficult times, so I devoured self-help books. Nothing impacted me more than a quote from my favorite author, Brené Brown, who said, "When we have the courage to walk into our story and own it, we get to write the ending."

I realized that if I wrote about how a random act of kindness saved my life, it could serve as a reminder to look out for each other. I shared a photo of the note and received dozens of mes-