

WOVEN: I've Met You Here Before

written by Guest Contributor | August 5, 2020



WOVEN is an Entropy series and dedicated safe space for essays by persons who engage with #MeToo, sexual assault and harassment, and #DomesticViolence, as well as their intersections with mental illness, substance addiction, and legal failures and remedies. We believe you. If selected for the series, we want to provide the editorial and human support such that our conversation continues long after the stories and names have changed. You can view submission guidelines for WOVEN [here](#).

Reread the [archives](#), always.

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1.

If you knew, in those first few inscrutable seconds that the person you'd just met would do his best, everything in his utmost power to hurt you, would you choose to enter a relationship with that person? Would you, if you knew in advance, subject yourself to sabotage and damage? To manipulation? Abuse?

I hope your answer would be no.

I am a firm believer in choice, and that individuals take responsibility for their actions and are accountable for those actions. Unless you have a loaded gun pointing at your head, and there is threat of imminent death, you always have a choice.

Choices rely on facts. You make a choice safe in the knowledge that you know what you know.

If you do A, then B will happen, resulting in C.

But what if that choice was taken away from you, based on a false premise that is presented to you as facts?

What if the person you are about to fall in love with was lying to you from the beginning about who they were and what they wanted?

How can that be a choice?

How could you have known?

How could you have protected yourself?

2.

Before I dated Hiem, I was black and white about abuse. There were no shades of grey.

"If someone hit me," I would say, "that would be the first and last time. Ever. I would walk away immediately. I don't understand why anyone would stay."

It was clear cut. You're hit, you walk. End of story.

But like Jon Snow, I knew nothing.

I knew nothing about emotional abuse, that insidious, acidic erosion of your essence, your spirit. The wearing down of you by someone who purports to love you.

I knew nothing about how slowly I was being boiled in my own emotions and vulnerabilities and weaknesses by a man who used them against me for his own sadistic pleasure.

How can you walk away when the abuse is unseen?

When you don't understand what's happening?

When you are blind to what's going on?

3.

I met Hiem in a seedy bar in Hanoi that I'd frequented only twice. He insisted that he had met me already in that same seedy bar, and I believed him because it seemed true.

"You're the writer from Australia," he had said.

Indisputable facts. I was indeed a writer, and from Australia.

"How do you know me?" I had asked.

And it was then that he told me he'd met me there before.

I didn't doubt him because his story seemed credible.

But I racked my brain turning it inside out, searching in hidden corners and around bends and under pleats and creases, and did so over the ensuing ten months, trying to remember him, but I couldn't. This was unusual, because I remember everyone I meet in Hanoi. Maybe not their names, but definitely their faces, especially if I've met them more than once.

Nope. Nothing.

I drew a blank.

Until I discovered that his kind always choose their targets.

And they always lie.

4.

I grew up in a violent household, and it was my mother that was the perpetrator. The person who was supposed to love and protect and nurture me did not. She had a hit first, ask questions later parenting style, and I have vivid memories of her chasing me with her shoe, a wooden spoon, or whatever the nearest implement was that would inflict maximum amount of pain. She would hit and hit and hit my small, skinny body, new purple and blue bruises layered over old mottled yellow and green and brown bruises.

By my ninth birthday I had wised up, and I protected myself by running and hiding under my bed clothes, pulling the covers over my head to soften the blows. Stronger than me, she would rip the blankets off, even angrier. I would curl up into the smallest ball to minimise the surface area of my body, trying to deflect her blows.

Eventually, fury depleted, she would slink away.

It wasn't until my late teens that I defended myself with a punch that gave her a black eye. I moved out the next day and she was forced to wear sunglasses for a week.

Even after that, well into my thirties, I still sought her approval, her love.

Until I gave up and realised that it was a game I was never going to win.

But the damage was done.

This first lesson in love, the important education I received from my mother about what love is and how it should be, has scarred and dented and underpinned my entire adult life.

And primed me for my relationship with Hiem.

Like an infection lying dormant.

5.

Tolerance for unhealthy relationships is set in childhood. If you have come from a loving family, you generally have less tolerance for unhealthiness in all its many and varied manifestations, so you are more likely to walk away early. You'll spot attempts at manipulation and control and exit quickly, knowing that it's toxic and dangerous and not for you. Your boundaries, which you learned as an infant and strengthened as you matured, keep you safe.

In a not-so-loving family, you have greater tolerance for all kinds of bad behaviour because your understanding of what constitutes a healthy, loving relationship is warped. In a not-so-loving family, like mine, love was intertwined with violence – and mother's version of love prepared me for physical abuse. On an intuitive level, I could spot the signs and have managed to keep away from physically violent men.

Emotional abusers, though, not so much.

6.

When I arrived in Vietnam, I was eager to reinvent myself. Bored and frustrated and angry from years of career neglect, I was determined to embrace every opportunity that came my way. So I said yes. A lot. I said yes to work and dinners and events. I said yes to motorcycle trips and casual flings and happy hour margaritas. I said yes to travel and eating weird food and surrounding myself with fascinating, new acquaintances.

I trusted Vietnam and for two years believed we were aligned, that the country was my spiritual home, my soul mate. That I was cared for by its kind, warm people, watched over by the friends I'd made, valued by work colleagues.

The opportunities that I said yes to made me I careless, and my boundaries, the "get off my lawn" signage that kept me safe from miscreants and interlopers and vagrants had all but disappeared.

7.

I knew something was wrong from the beginning of my relationship with Hiem, but I couldn't put my finger on it. There was too much below-the-line subtlety at play, hidden from sight by my unfamiliarity with Vietnamese culture. I had trouble unpacking and deconstructing what was cultural... and what was him.

He seemed so reliable, so kind, so into me yet, at the same time, he became more covertly controlling. After three months, I had not met any of his friends or family nor had I been to his house. I had a vague idea of his street and district, but nothing concrete, despite countless requests for his address. Given that I was significantly older than him and Western, I figured it was a Vietnamese thing and he just needed time to integrate me into his life. To get his family used to the idea of me.

He saw me only once per week—on a Saturday night—and any attempts by me to see him on other days were met with passive aggression: a yes, then a cancellation followed by an excuse. Not a reason. He was tired, or had to work early, or the weather was bad, or he was going to a wedding.

He would leave early on Sunday morning because he had “many things to do”, and which included always having lunch with his parents. I was never invited. Rarely would we spend the entire Sunday together, and if we did, it was because he was making amends for something I called him out on, which I did—and often.

8.

The last time I saw him, he had promised to spend the day with me—it was a public holiday in Vietnam, and public holidays, like clean air in Hanoi, are rare. He would ride his bicycle to my apartment in the afternoon, he had said, and the next day we would go for brunch, a bike ride and spend the day together.

When he arrived at my apartment with his motorcycle helmet, rather than his bicycle helmet, it was obvious what was going on. I asked him why.

“The weather,” he said. “The weather is not good.”

I felt my stomach turn like curdled milk, and panicking, I said: “But you promised. We agreed.”

He shrugged. “I can't do anything about the weather.”

“So are we spending the day together tomorrow? Or not?”

"I'll have to go in the morning," he said. "Early."

I was pissed, but let it slide, as I did so many things with him.

The next morning, while I was making breakfast, he took a phone call from an old friend. Hiem agreed to meet him later in the day for coffee.

"Hang on," I had said. "You won't spend the day with me like we'd planned, but you're going to go to meet your friend?" I knew that what I was saying made me sound needy. And probably crazy. I could feel the chemicals from my brain hijacking my system as I went into high alert, and tears pricked my eyes. I fought them back.

"Sorry," he said, smirking as he put on his shoes.

Just before he walked out the door, he tapped me lightly on my nose and said, "Don't cry."

9.

That morning I turned to Google, trying to make sense of what was going on in my relationship. I stumbled on a blog post about intermittent reinforcement, which, I subsequently found out, was one of the most psychologically manipulative tactics in the Cluster B personality handbook, and down the rabbit hole I went.

I discovered that I was a lab rat, and Hiem was feeding me just enough of the love and attention and care that I craved—pellets—to keep me dangling. I was starving. I was also addicted.

This article also mentioned that it was a covert narcissist who would be most likely to torture his partner this way.

Further into the rabbit hole I dove, and what I discovered horrified me.

My kind, reliable, so into me boyfriend had all the traits of a covert narcissist.

Shell-shocked, I assimilated the knowledge that my entire relationship was a fabrication. Hiem was not who he said he was, who he'd made himself out to be.

It was lies. Our romance was based on manipulation.

How could a smart, mature, educated woman like me have allowed this to happen?

Why did I ignore all the signs, all the red flags?

How could I have been so stupid?

10.

My 10 month on again-off again relationship with Hiem—and it was always me ending it—was played out on Facebook Messenger. The whole, sorry mess.

That afternoon, I downloaded every single message and it was there—all in blue and white: the self-centredness, the grandiosity, the victim mentality. The subtle criticisms, the manipulation, the control, the intermittent reinforcement, the triangulation. The absence of empathy. The subtle boundary busting. The love-bombing, the idealisation, the devaluing, the discard.

I was his supply.

11.

Once you are involved with a narcissist, you are always involved with one. They are like the Terminator: they can't be bargained with. They can't be reasoned with. They don't feel pity or remorse or fear. And they absolutely will not stop because they need supply: your emotions, your attention, your humanity. Positive or negative, it doesn't matter. Supply is supply. You are a delicious, free appliance that they can plug into and extract all that goodness that makes you human.

You lose yourself in the process.

When he messaged, I made it clear to Hiem that I knew what he was doing. I sent him a video about intermittent reinforcement. I knew that calling him out directly would be a dangerous move on my part. And that the best strategy was to be boring.

After the video, he would send me messages and I would respond with, "Pellet."

Then, radio silence.

Two weeks later he wanted to go out for dinner.

I responded in the negative, although it was hard. The half of me that was drugged up on brain chemicals was desperate to see him. The other half (my gut) was repulsed by him. This time, I listened to my gut.

He didn't want to take no for an answer, so I got more direct, and told him that I knew he manipulated and controlled me the entire 10 months we were together. And it was over. I did not want to see him.

Fuck being boring.

Silence.

Relief.

Two more weeks went passed, and then more messages came from him, meaningless, empty messages that used to work on me in the past: *how are you, have a nice day, the weather is hot, take care, I'm sorry, I'm an asshole, you're perfect.*

He received the same response from me: *you manipulated and controlled me while we were together. This is over. I have zero interest in talking to you.*

And more meaningless, empty messages from him.

Until I blocked him.

Then he switched to text.

And then he started calling.

Ignore, ignore, ignore.

12.

Becoming involved with a narcissist was not a choice on my part. I would never have volunteered for any kind of abuse. I was targeted, seduced and groomed by Hiem. But I was primed by my mother. And, to a lesser extent, Vietnam.

Discarding the narcissist takes a monumental effort, because I am fighting a war with myself. My memories and experiences are built on a foundation of lies. I can't grieve for something that never was. I have to explain, with shame, that my "but he seemed so nice" boyfriend was, in fact, emotionally abusing me.

I am appalled that I could have been so easily fooled, so readily duped. My self-worth has taken a beating. I have to rebuild myself, redistribute and recalibrate what I know to be true about me... and human nature. Trust is now a shadow of its former self, and competes with fear and anger and horror and repulsion in the Diane Lee Hall of Shame.

What is true is that rebuilding takes time. And gentleness towards self. And courage.

Recovering from narcissistic abuse is not a choice.

Prevailing is a must.

Surviving is mandatory.

Thriving is not-negotiable.

Anything else, anything less, means he wins.

And I refuse to let that happen.

Not today, anyway.



Diane Lee is an Australian writer who has been based in Hanoi since late 2016. In her four years living in Vietnam, she has had all the adventures and then some. Her work has appeared in *Get Lost*, *Flung*, *Word Vietnam*, and *PS I Love You*, and she has been a contributor to *Southern China Morning Post*, *Elliot Advocacy* and the *Better Homes & Gardens Tastebud Traveller* podcast. Diane adores crafting personal essays and flash non-fiction, and dabbles in the occasional bout of teaching and poetry writing. She is an unrelenting survivor of narcissistic abuse.