

Crossing The Line

Kjersti Story

AGE WHEN INTERVIEWED: 28

BORN: Hanoi, Vietnam

INTERVIEWED IN: Grünerløkka

Kjersti (b. 1992) is part Norwegian, part Vietnamese and sámi, raised in the northern part of Norway. She is currently working as a photojournalist, based in Oslo, Norway. As a photographer she is often drawn to seek projects deep within the personal sphere, or just Kjersti is a mother and a dog-owner. Often, she feels everything at once or nothing at all, but most of the time - fractions of all the feels in between. And when the spark goes out, and life is too much, she often turns to the ocean to find clarity.

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I'm always picturing my soul in my head like a landscape. It is colourful and has the infrastructure that is good for me. But with him, it was like he just came into this landscape of mine and was planting poisonous seeds that don't even belong there, you know? They grew big and the roots of these things were settling down in my landscape. I knew I had to find some way to get rid of these things. But it's not easy to rip something up from their roots. It took some time before I could just rinse this landscape of his poisoning plants - and rise.

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I am born in Vietnam. My adoptive parents travelled down to Hanoi to pick me up when I was five months old. I grew up in North of Norway, and I was always aware that I was adopted. I can't remember sitting down, to have this 'we need to tell you something'-conversation with my parents. I don't look like them, so I just always knew. I was just always aware.

My childhood was normal, I guess. But I had some problems during my primary *school-years*. I got bullied a lot from the 4th to 9th grade. It was some hard years, and *I when I was 10, I'd rather be dead than alive*. I wanted to die because I felt so

different from everyone. We always had immigrants in my town, so I've seen people of colour but there was no one in my position. They weren't adopted. I didn't have any adopted friends. I was the only one in my class.

I think I was so afraid of abandonment. It was this feeling I have had all my life, always afraid of being abandoned by my parents, other family members, friends, or anybody for that matter. It might be because I'm adopted. I don't know. But I've been told it's a trauma. Even though you are five months old and can't remember, it's hard to be taken away from a birth mother. These thoughts were things I didn't think of at that time. I was too young. And then I had this psycho friend who was a control freak. I was eight when we became friends, and she was manipulating me a lot. That was my first meeting with this kind of personality.

But things got better when I started high school.

After folkehøgskole, I moved to Oslo to study arts and design at OsloMet. Later I got accepted into photojournalism degree.

I guess I was in my second year when I met him.

We grew up in the same city. I knew who he was from before, but he was five years older than me, so we didn't hang out with the same people. It was not natural for us to meet anywhere. But we had been talking briefly on social media before we met face to face. I remember we always laughed every time we texted. He was very funny, and a good listener. He was charming and seemed kind. He always talked about food because he was very curious about new foods. So it was just normal conversations, you know, never anything alarming. I could never think of him as a psychopath. He didn't seem like a predator. He was just normal. Just a calm, nice, and funny guy. It's so weird now because he was this whole other person.

When I met him for the first time at a party of a mutual friend, he was this little quiet guy in the background. His mates were more on, and that was quite funny, actually, because I went home with his friend. I didn't know they were friends or even close friends at the time. And we did that a couple of times. And when I met him later on, he was a little bit upset because I had chosen his friend over him that night. And he used this thing throughout our whole relationship. "I'm just the sloppy second and you didn't even like me that much. You wanted my friend". And I was always thinking, "Yes, I wish I chose your friend" but I didn't say that to him. I had to make him understand that I chose him. It was bad for him to know that one of his best friends had been with me and that we've been booty-calling each other. But he was more

charming, and this other guy was just after sex. So, we started dating and it was nice. Very nice. I even got a dog and drove a long way from Oslo with a friend to pick it up. And I remember he was very interested in this dog, and he wanted to get to know her.

I think we started dating in March of 2014 and moved in together maybe in August. It was summer, July or August. I can't remember which one of them. But I can remember we washed out his apartment and then he moved in with me. I don't know, you know, you just do that. Now I'm like, you don't need to move in together to be together. I think it's good to have some space, especially at the start. But we did that because he was living in this filthy place. He wasn't happy there and I had an apartment for myself, and we were there all the time. So, why not? Why not just move your clothes here? Now I realise how much that actually means for the relationship when you move in together.

Damn, I regret these things.

After a few dates, he started asking me all sorts of questions, why did you choose me now and not before? I was like, "I didn't know you or I didn't think of you like that before". He was constantly asking me these questions, and at first, I thought it

was normal because, OK, I slept with your friend and now I'm sleeping with you, so I can see why you're asking, but then they came up maybe weekly. And that was after maybe we had dated for two, or three months.

After four months or so, we went on our first trip together. We went to Göteborg, a city in Sweden, three hours away from Oslo. We wanted to do something else outside Oslo and it was nice. But then we had this first sexual... what do you call it... experience it was weird. He got irritated at me because I didn't do something or I wasn't doing it the right way, and then he got mad. I could see that he was so irritated by this. And I guess that's the first time I was like, OK, this is not good. Is this how it's supposed to be? I saw him wanting to have control and the control wasn't healthy, you know, it's not a kinky control, it's more like control over you, over your soul. And the red flags just kept coming after this.

I could see him changing into this jealous control freak. He wanted to check my phone and went through my things in my apartment. I had some stuff from an ex there, some clothes and things he left behind. And he found these things because I had put them in the back of my closet, and when I came home from school one day, I was looking for something and then I went to the closet and I saw that everything had changed place.

Someone had been there and gone through it. And he was the only one in my apartment that day. I confronted him with that,

I said, *“Did you go through my things?”*

He was like, *“What?”*

“I had a shoe box there with a few things.”

“Yeah, I saw you had a shoe box but there's no shoes in it, it's a lot of other stuff.”

“Yes, it's my private stuff.”

“OK, whose shirt is this?”

“You're telling me you didn't go through my things, but you know exactly what's in here, so can you say to me that you've been going through my stuff?”

I remember I felt like I had to throw the shoebox with all the memories away. So, I did.

And then he read my diaries, and that's how he came close to my inner self, you know, the landscape that's only mine. He was putting things in there. He was like, *“Who is this? Who is this person you're writing about here? Who is this? And I was just coming out from... it wasn't a relationship... I was dumped... I was heartbroken when I met him. I was very sad and.... these things were precious to me. He was like,*

“Why do you need this stuff? Do you like him?”

“No, I don't.”

“But why do you keep them here?”

And then he made me throw everything away. In the same period, I stopped writing diaries.

I was very fragile in the period I met him. I was acting out. I needed safety. I was just 21. I was having some issues with myself from the start that I didn't deal with. I got so into that relationship, I became unaware of my surroundings. I lost a lot of friends. I even lost one of my best friends, because she was sick of the situation I was in. I didn't have a lot of people to lean on. And he was always telling me to not go out and if I was coming home late, he would always question me,

“Did I drink? How much did you drink? Who did you talk to?”

You know, and then I just lost myself in this because I couldn't find or do the things I liked to do. That's how you lose your interests and what's important to you. Everything was changing for me in these two years. I got more insecure. I am insecure as a person, but with him, I was insecure about everything; how people talk to me, how I talk to them. Did I seem like I was flirting with them? Was I just being nice? I have always been a nice

person, but I was questioning all of these things because he questioned me every day.

“Why did you smile at that guy?”

“He was smiling at me”.

I'm a smiling person. But I just stopped smiling and then I became this empty person without close friends because I couldn't tell them everything, it seemed. I was scared of how they would react, and everyone was like, “Oh, you need to go, you need to get out of this”. And that was not the thing I needed to hear because I tried. I tried to break up with him several times. And now I can see that a lot of these things happened because I always did what I had to do for him to stay happy and safe. It was like his thoughts, life, and meanings were more important than my own. I didn't want him to get upset with me, because when he was happy, everything was good. And then I came to realise that when I was insecure all the time, it made him angry, but I was insecure because of him. So it was this unhealthy circle. But he was always complaining, why don't you do this? Why don't you do that? Why aren't you more passionate about me? I was trying, and later I was faking it. In the end, I was faking everything. And then I think you get so much emotional distress inside yourself that you can't cope with your own emotions anymore. So when I was sad, I didn't know if I was sad because he made me sad or if I was just not able to feel anything.

It became sadness and in the end – a deep depression.

A bad relationship tears up a person. And I hadn't realised what I was in, what relationship I was in. It took some time. But I was like, “No, this is not happening to me, you know?” I was young and had not experienced it like this before. And I wasn't as social as usual and people were like,

“What is wrong with her?

She has changed.

She is not the same anymore”.

And I totally agree, but I couldn't see it myself. I felt like I just stopped talking and stopped feeling. I didn't tell anyone what was happening at home. I felt like an actor. An actor in my own life, trying to avoid talking about him because if I did, it would just come out. Everything will make sense to them and to me. And some friends left me.

They were like, *“I can't be your friend if you are with him.”*

I was like, *“It's impossible for me, I need time.”*

And they were like, *“Just tell him you break up.”*

“It's not that easy. He's having control of my home, my things, my everything. It has to be a plan.”

I was afraid all the time; afraid of what to say or if I said something wrong, if I upset him, or if I came home and he was in a bad mood, and then he would find something to yell at me for. And we had a lot of episodes where he left me in the city or by a store or he just went home or went to someone. He just left me. And every time he did that I was like “Oh, yes, he left. He's left me. That's perfect. Now I can get my life back”. And he did that a couple of times, but every time he came back, you know, and then I was disappointed because he was just playing around with me again. He was doing all of this crazy stuff to me. And there was this one time, he just...

It was the 17th of May, the Constitution Day of Norway, and everyone was happy and wearing their Bunads and party dresses. I was going to meet him after celebrating with a close friend. On this day, he of course was mad at me for something and then he tricked me into wandering around from one place to another. He told me he was there (at Sannergata, it's the stop before Alexander Kiellands Plass when you come from Helsefyr with the 21 bus), and then he was like, “No, I'm sorry, I was wrong, I was up at Alexander Kiellands Plass. Haha”. And then I went back and forth to find him, but he was at work all this time. I felt so alone and I was thinking, how can he send me back and forth? He just wanted me to feel lost and unwanted.

I remember that that was the day I realised that this was a bad relationship. This was not normal behaviour, or something I could be staying in. He crossed a line. And that was crucial for me because I didn't realise it until that day. And after that, it just became worse because I knew this. I knew what was happening to me, but I was so scared to leave that I couldn't, you know, you can't breathe in your own home. And if you try to do something for yourself, then you are the selfish one. It was so bad. But that day I realised I just had to go.

I remember sitting there at Sannergata. I was sitting there crying. Now I don't cry in public places anymore. I think that hardened me. But I was so fragile that day and I knew I had to do something because this wasn't good enough. This wasn't good for me. He wasn't good enough for me. I could see that now. But then I thought, maybe I am not good for him. I'm not good enough for this world.

He wanted me to learn a lesson. And the lesson I learned was, I need to get the fuck out of here. Then I was starting to make my own escape plans, but it was hard. I was always looking for a way out.

But I wasn't strong enough to go.

I had this exhibition at the end of my bachelor's degree. I was driving a car with one of my classmates and we were picking up a pile of books, the photostories made by our class. I had a lot to do that week. It was supposed to be a big opening and it was very nice celebrating three years of, and us graduating. He was telling me he was going to come. He was coming from Oslo by train. I left a few days before the opening. I was making a hundred spring rolls. Alone! I was very stressed. On the day of the opening, I got a text from him:

"I'm sick".

"OK, the exhibition is in two hours and the train to Fredrikstad takes almost two hours so you will not make it then?"

"No, I don't think I will make it."

"OK, fine. That's sad".

"Good luck".

This was important to me, and it was like something turned in my head. It was like, oh, my God, if you can't come to this fucking thing, which I've been working with the past three years, then you can just fuck off. And my family came! Oh, my God, my parents flew from Northern Norway just to see this exhibition. My sister and my stepsister and her children. Everyone was coming. And he was two hours away and didn't. He wasn't sick because on Snapchat he was going to a party. So he was lying.

I understood how bad he actually was. This thing was just too big for me because I was very proud of the things I've done, travelling in Asia, excited and proud of the work I did there. And if he was not going to see this shit, he really is a bad person. And I thought: I need to leave. At that moment I was determined; when I got home, I was breaking up with him. I think I got this strength from everything; from travelling, from working with my classmates, from the thought of a new chapter starting in my life. I understood that I was more, that there was more to me than just this empty, sad broken girl. This was my exit.

After the exhibition, we had this great party. And then I did something I've never done before. I turned off my phone. The whole night. I didn't turn it on until I came back to the hotel and the clock was like 5:00 am. It rang with texts. He had tried to call me several times, asking me what I was doing. Everything was the same. But I was like, "No, I can't handle this anymore". I don't know where the strength came from, I've been trying to figure it out all these years. How the exhibition made the whole thing turn. He had done worse things to me than not showing up to something that was important to me. Maybe I just had to find it within myself to just let it go or it was just something inside me or from the outside. Maybe one of the reasons could be because I had been travelling for months. Just being me, doing what I wanted to do, with him being a thousand miles away. I think that

that did something for me to discover myself again in small bits and then realising that he was not the center. And if I kept on going with this relationship, what if I got pregnant and had a baby with this crazy person. The thought made me sick to my bone. I just couldn't deal with it anymore. I'd rather die.

I tried to figure out how, but I still don't know. Maybe it just came to that point where if I didn't leave then I would lose myself completely. And I'm very scared of dying. So that was not a way out. I truly thought I had to save my own life from him. And now I found the way out.

This was my way out.

I came home from the graduation and it took a month more before I broke up with him because it was a hard process. I can remember I turned cold. It was like a motor inside me had turned off completely. I wasn't scared of him anymore, not in that way like before. But he was crazy. So it took a while before I actually said the words: I'm breaking up with you. But I had decided in that I was going to do it. And I got my strength from my sister and my classmates and just the will to have a better life for myself. It was better than comforting him all the time. I think the possibilities of being free... I could finally see it, you know,

because I wasn't in this shell anymore. I was crossing a line myself now, stepping outside of the hellhole..

I was preparing myself for the breakup, trying to find a suitable day. I was so done with him, but I didn't know if he was going to make a scene, I knew that he would try to convince me to stay and everything. I knew this wasn't a walk in the park and I was scared of how we would react. I spent two weeks just preparing myself mentally for this. And then I had to organise it because I had to do it. I had to say, you need to go and you can't be here. He is not the person you want to be with when you're broken up with him, you know, that could be dangerous. He can just relapse everything and you're back together again. So I knew that if I did this, I had to say the words: I'm breaking up with you, realizing that alle the times before, I did never say those words. I don't want this anymore. And then just get him out. But that wasn't easy. I talked to my friend, and she was saying that,

“OK, just come to me, you can stay with me”.

“No, this is my house. This is not his house. He's not going to stay here and be comfortable in the situation. He is the one that's leaving. I'm staying.”

The day finally came. I was coming home from work. No, I was eating shrimps with my friends. And on the way back home I was like, “Today, I'm going to do this. I just have to do it today or else

I'm never going to do it." So I'm walking with my stomach full of shrimps and mayonnaise. I came home and he was there. And I remember it was football World Cup. So he was home watching games and I was like, well, I need to say something and then I just said it:

"I want to break up."

"What?"

He was so shocked. It was like a bomb was exploding or a strike of lightning. He was so, so shocked. "Why? What? Why?" And then he suddenly ran into the room, into our bedroom, and then he got this ring and he was suddenly proposing to me. And I was like, "No!" And then I laughed. He was pathetic. I remember I was nervous, but I was ice cold. I just had to do this because I could grasp the colours on the other side. I was so close to this life I wanted for myself and my dog. I was looking at him with hatred and I was looking at him with disgust. I was disgusted by him. So for me, I guess, part of the process was just thinking about him as a monster more than a human. And the ring was too big for me and I was like, "You don't even know how big my finger is. No." At this point, it all was kind of humorous. And then he said, "Oh, you can return it if it doesn't fit. But I hope you want it." I was like, "No, I don't want this. I don't want you. I don't want anything."

And then I ended up leaving my own apartment. So I didn't do the: "Oh, this is my house thing." I just couldn't do it. So I went to my friend to stay there for a little while, but I had to threaten him with the police and my dad for him to move out. He took so long, just to be in control for a little bit more. And then he had some stuff that was his, I put down in the basement and then he finally moved out. And I remember when I closed the door, he was saying;

"This is your fault. You did this!"

He gave me the keys, and I was like, "Yeah, I did."

I closed and locked the door and then I was free.

I guess it was for me, I can see it in two different ways. I can see it as a way to finally breathe again because I felt like I was holding my breath all the time, even when I was sleeping. I woke up and I was like, how is this damn day going to be today? How is he going to treat me today? And that ate me up from the inside. And not being able to have control over your own life anymore, your friends. It was like he had a grip on my inner self. And that was the hardest part, I think, because I didn't feel like myself. So I guess this was a chance to breathe again. Freely. And be able to take in everything I wanted to take into my soul but wasn't able

to do when I was with him because he was poisoning me. It was like waking up from the dead. I know it sounds black and white, but that's how it is.

It's like the line, one side is dark, and the other side is light. I was standing in the dark all these years and I lost all my colours. I lost my ability to feel and ability to know who I was. And I think if you lose your colour, you lose everything. And on the other side of the line, it was all colourful and I could see the ocean and I could plant my own trees. And here it was, my family, my friends, everything.

My life was on the other side of the line.