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TRUST GAMES

(SEPTEMBER 2014)

Just three short months ago, I believed the Cairo experiment would transform me into a stronger woman—a woman with superhuman powers despite her rotten past. My hopes of finding that strong woman within me had disintegrated down to a pile of white numbing powder I sought out daily. My mission to come to Cairo, prove my independence and worldliness, stop playing the victim to my past, and become a more stable woman had taken on an entirely different trajectory of self-destruction and co-dependence to the wrong people.

The girl I found at the end of that first cocaine line from Alina was brilliant—far exceeding Lucas’s expectations. She was free to be weak, and I hated being strong. She was hurt, and I hated treating my wounds. She didn’t want to figure out her life nor did she care about anything or anyone, and I was exhausted from figuring anything out or caring about anyone.

It felt like I had removed my full black hijab, revealing who I was behind the veil: a product of pain. I finally met the Kateryna within me, the inmate I had been avoiding for years. Kateryna was ruthless and reckless, like a train on the verge of derailing. She was that muddy little girl running through the puddles in Ukraine, but

instead of smiling, she was disrespectful and destructive. She yelled out her needs and demands, no longer silenced by her mother's expectations. She played the rightful victim to her childhood traumas, seeking answers to why her parents had given up on her and why she wasn't loved. She wanted to know why they were so weak and irresponsible. She cried out for her mother, who had never been there for her emotionally. She blamed her father for leaving her so early in life, reasoning that his actions had instilled in her the belief that she deserved to be used and disposed of, which made her fall victim to men and their abuse.

Kateryna needed to rebel after being locked up at the age of twelve, when she was forced to become a woman. I never had the luxury to rebel and be a child, an adolescent, or a moody teen; I was always figuring life out for my mother, ensuring my sister's safety, or dealing with Lucas's noncommittal, adventurous lifestyle. Rebelling against everyone felt wonderful; for the first time, I was free from expectations. I finally asked, *What do you need, Kateryna?* She answered, *More drugs.*

As any brilliant engineer would advise, you must disassemble the machine into its pieces, study them, and understand their interactions to grasp how the machine functions as a whole. Before attempting to fix it, you must understand how a machine operates. So, I began Kateryna's much-needed deconstruction, piece by piece. I had to explore this other side of me, study it, befriend it, make all the necessary mistakes, and hopefully avoid ending up dead in a ditch somewhere. I knew this was a dangerous game to play, but to fix myself, I first had to allow myself to break down completely.

In the month after I entered Alina's drug world, I learned a lot in my Cairo playground. In Egypt, you could be two people at the same time—a sinner and a saint. A pious Muslim might snort cocaine, or an educated foreigner might have low morals. The male harasser on the street who commented on your ass might also walk his sister to school to protect her from other males. I fit right in as the closeted

drug addict who wanted to use a man for her own pleasures all while wishing the man she loved back home would come and save her.

“Do as I say, not as I do” really summed up life in Egypt. My roommates and I enjoyed picking apart the double standards. We questioned and judged the wealthy, ‘come from good families,’ A+ class people, knowing their hidden drug and alcohol use. We were not, however, superior in any way. Myself especially. I became the double standard I mocked all day, and I loved it! This new party environment was perfect for my inmate Kateryna to flourish in. She pushed me aside and set out to become the hero of the day. I let her be free to do as she pleased.

Everyone had their own social currency on the streets of Cairo, exploiting their desired traits for a cost. Watching my roommate’s lifestyle, I quickly learned my social currency was that of a non-virgin foreigner who could take advantage of Muslim men for a meal at minimum and drugs at maximum. My survival power was as easy as being me—a White, blonde, Western woman who said Egyptian words like ‘Inshallah’ and ‘Mashi.’ My local boy-toy would do anything for me: take me on trips to the Red and Mediterranean Seas and to any party and nightclub I wanted, buy me any food (including groceries), and most importantly, provide me protection from harassers. In return, he got to raise his social currency by hanging out with a foreign girl.

Egyptian couples had to wait until marriage to have sex, so courting rituals between Muslim boys and local girls could last for years during which the boyfriends provided for everything. While some marriages were arranged, wealthy parents often planned their daughters’ futures by sending them to affluent schools, ensuring their only options for partners were other wealthy boys from wealthy families. This followed Islamic traditions; even though Prophet Mohamed married women from all ‘castes,’ money still married into money, and the classes couldn’t cross.

We knew this and demanded much more from the men we allowed to court us: more experiences, better outings in forms of

trips, and, in my and Alina's cases, more drugs. Honestly, we were selling ourselves short, but since our end goal wasn't to marry (unlike the local women), we took what was given. These men knew we were deflowered just based on our skin tone, and their chances for consensual sex could come at any moment.

At the core of my degradation, and between doses of drugs, an ember of hope still burned. Hope that maybe someone would notice my fall and rescue me. I didn't want to completely lose myself in the desert or overdose at some random house party; I simply wanted someone to care enough to notice that Katya was not well. Not just anyone—I wanted Lucas to notice.

More and more time passed between my check-ins with Lucas. I had nothing good to report, and I did not want to tell him the truth of what I was doing most weekends. I knew the right thing would be to tell him everything, to confide in him and ask for help, to let him know I was afraid and wanted out, but then I remembered how he'd told me to let go of my victimhood mentality. His beliefs about me were set in stone: no matter what I said or did, I would be playing victim to my past when I should have been working on fixing that character flaw. Complaining and asking for help would only backfire, rendering me even weaker in his eyes.

"Who are you?" I asked my bathroom mirror one morning as I got ready for work. "No, really—what the fuck do you want?" I directed this question to my codeine-constricted pupils after taking six pills to recover from a cocaine hangover from the night before.

There was no reply. I couldn't see into my soul through my pinhole pupils. I took another drag of my cigarette and blew smoke onto the mirror. After slicking my oily hair back into a low ponytail, I flushed the toilet without noticing that it might clog. The addiction took a toll on my body; my stool was dark, rock-like, and came only every ten-to-twelve days.

I decided today would be my last day at Reach Out Academy.

Samir, the manager, had crossed too many lines, making it harder to show up each day. At first, he'd persistently invited me to dinner after almost every shift; I'd quickly shut down those advances. The occasional inappropriate body scans and side winks were something I could ignore, as I faced similar attention daily on the streets below. But last Monday, he'd called me into his office for my monthly review and locked the door behind him. He'd approached me and grabbed my chin for a kiss; I'd ducked and told him to stop. "I like that you play hard to get," he'd said. I'd reminded him that I would not go out with him and warned him to leave me alone or I would report him to Mina. "You think he'll believe you or me?" Samir had asked.

My phone rang; it was Ahmed, my current boy-toy.

"Yella, I'll pick you up after work today, and we're heading to my friend Ashraf's house. Plan to stay the weekend. Bring a change of clothes and a swimsuit," he said in his usual cold, sultry voice.

"Sounds good. I'll be ready at 4 p.m. downstairs from Reach Out Academy," I replied.

Ahmed often picked me up from work to grab food, go dancing while high on ecstasy at prestigious nightclubs, or take road trips on weekends. We had already been to Taba and Ras Shetan, small Bedouin towns on the narrowest part of the Red Sea and near the border with Israel. We rode camels, slept in bungalows, and snorkeled in the Red Sea, halfway to Saudi Arabia. We had stayed with many of his friends at the Mediterranean Sea development for elite Egyptians called Sahel, in villas right in front of the clear turquoise sea. My favorite outing with him had been the prior week, when he'd taken me horseback riding among the pyramids at sunset.

I'd met Ahmed through Dasha about a month ago. He'd taken us to Cairo Jazz Club—a place that didn't play any jazz, only electronic music, and served Heinekens in glass bottles and Johnny Walker on ice. Ahmed looked like an Arab version of a young Robert De Niro, right down to the mole on his face. We both liked Metallica. His cold, mysterious demeanor and lack of emotions somehow turned me on.

His English was almost accent-free, and he dressed in luxury-brand clothing. Like me, he did blow three-to-four nights a week and always had some on hand. He offered me a line as soon as I sat in his black KIA the first time I met him.

Our relationship was very sexual. I'd broken Alina's rule of waiting as long as possible to sleep with someone because I couldn't control my impulses. Ahmed was into BDSM, and I hadn't realized how much I would crave that. He needed to tie me up and spank me, and I needed to feel used and contained. We had a symbiotic relationship, and with the cocktail of drugs in my system, I didn't care what happened or how it happened.

He had a sweet side, too. The first night I'd stayed at his apartment, which resembled a vampire den—cold and dusty—I hadn't been prepared with any toiletries. He'd woken up and, without saying a word, gone out to buy me supplies. He'd returned with two bags, one filled with three different kinds of toothbrushes, Panadol, Dove shampoo, and body wash, and the other with a variety of breakfast options. He'd also brought me my first latte from Starbucks in almost six months.

Did I feel guilty for being with Ahmed? Of course, I did. Did I care what would happen? Not really. Did I love Lucas? Absolutely. With Lucas, I'd always had to show my strengths because I was afraid that he would leave me if he saw my weaknesses. I'd pretended to be okay just to be good enough for him, and the pills had helped me maintain that facade. I wished he would stop worrying about what was good for him and give me the space to be vulnerable, hug and pity me, and love me for my weaknesses, too.

Throughout most of our relationship, Lucas was fixated on creating a travel blog where he could share his insights about different countries and their people. Yet, he'd never let me reveal my truth—the addict I was, the girl who would give him anything, the fighter with high expectations for herself. He'd overshadowed me completely.

Emerging from a troubled youth, I hadn't been prepared to run

the marathon with him. He had life figured out while I was still searching for the reason my mom had never given me unconditional love. Growing up, I had been expected to be strong, working early in my teens to support my mom and help raise my sister. Now, it was my turn to hurt and be vulnerable.

If you find someone who makes you happy, be with him. Lucas's words echoed in my mind. That memory pushed me to take another shot of cheap vodka, swallow a fourth pill of codeine, stay out until sunrise, and seek out a lover to fulfill my needs.

With Ahmed, I craved the attention Lucas never gave me. The difference was, I felt free to be weak with Ahmed. He only needed me to be his submissive sex slave while Lucas wanted me to be like his successful entrepreneur mother. With Ahmed, I didn't have to be my best self. I could be the victim—the same victim Lucas had told me not to be but with whom I deeply identified. This path to self-discovery was dark and twisted, and I hadn't hit rock bottom yet. But guilt was creeping in faster than my drugs could numb it.

Ahmed arrived on schedule that Thursday and picked me up from Reach Out Academy. I received my last paycheck of three hundred sixteen dollars, with two hundred dollars going toward next week's rent. After two months of working, I had only managed to save around one hundred ten dollars toward my ticket back to Reno.

"I quit," I told Ahmed as I slammed the door of his freezing KIA shut.

"Why?" he asked. He accelerated to fifty miles an hour and took an illegal U-turn.

"Because," I mumbled with a cigarette between my lips, "they are rude. Nothing else. Let's go to Ashraf's house!" I changed the subject.

If I told Ahmed about the sexual harassment I'd experienced from Manager Samir, I wasn't sure Ahmed would believe me; he might think I provoked Samir or that my tight clothes had invited such behavior. I'd decided to handle the situation myself. After Samir had grabbed and smacked my ass, I'd elbowed him away and

stormed into Mina's office, demanding my final paycheck by the end of the day. "Why don't you ask Samir why I'm leaving, sir?" I said as I exited his office for the last time.

I also had to end it with Ahmed after the weekend. I was numbed and in a constant state of drug withdrawal. I was spiraling faster and faster out of control, and I couldn't keep this up much longer. "Fuck work, and fuck this boyfriend; I'll figure it out later," Kateryna rebelled. Maybe she'd had enough of this lifestyle and had a better plan for getting out of Cairo. I followed her instincts, hoping they would lead to a better outcome.

September 25 marked a very special day for me; it was Lucas's birthday. I promised myself I would leave Ahmed before then as a way to lower my guilt for being such a monster. Our 'girlfriend experience' relationship, in which I used my 'boyfriend' for a wallet, meals, parties, and drugs, had to come to an end just thirty-two days into our whirlwind summer. Ahmed was getting too close by introducing me to his parents and staring too long into my eyes. Perhaps he was even falling in love. That was uncomfortable, as I didn't have any feelings toward him.

I felt guilty that Lucas and I weren't communicating often, and when we did communicate, I lied to him and said I was working hard to save money. Since I was technically cheating on him, I wondered if Lucas was seeing someone else, too. Even if he was, he wasn't out sniffing cocaine and popping ecstasy pills with random women.

'Hi Lucas, how are you? Any plans for your birthday? I hope we can Skype soon. I have a lot to tell you about Egypt! I miss you. Hope all is well! Love, Katya.'

I wrote him that email from my iPhone 4 as I rolled out of a double-king bed at Ashraf's house in Katameya Heights, New Cairo—a very affluent part of town. Ashraf was a famous shaabi (Egyptian rap) artist. His home featured a double, spiraling, marble staircase around a Greek statue in the foyer, just like what you'd see in the

movies, and a huge outdoor pool surrounded by palm trees and a vine wall.

I got up to leave the cocaine den, stepping over other men passed out on the floor. Ahmed was still asleep, snoring loudly, with two other girls lying next to him and a guy on the edge of the bed. The closed curtains created complete darkness, with only the large digital clock on the headboard providing light. It was already 3:45 p.m.

"Ahmed, wake up! I have to go home. I want to go home." I shook him. We'd been up until probably 10 a.m., snorting mountain ranges of cocaine and jumping in the heated pool. I ran to the bathroom to check for a nosebleed.

He drove me home in Ashraf's jeep since his KIA was nowhere to be found. We had probably misplaced it at a neighbor's house that night, too drunk and yakked out to remember.

"I can't be with you anymore," I said, blowing smoke out of the cracked window. We were just one street away from my apartment.

"What the hell are you saying, Katya? What?" He glared at me.

"I can't, and I don't want to. You know, I can't fall in love, I feel you are falling in love. I have to figure out how to get home, Ahmed. This is just fucked up. Where the hell is your car? We got so fucked up last night."

Katya liked blaming others for all my problems. It was Ahmed's fault I'd put almost two grams of cocaine in my nose.

"You're a bitch. You used me. You're a fucking slut! A washed-up coke-whore!" he continued.

True, I thought, I can't argue with that.

"Oh, you love me! I know that's not true," I said, unbuckling from the car. "I warned you! Don't date a girl who travels."

"Wow...okay. Fine, you're no one to me," he said, and there was a long pause. "Happy fucking birthday to me."

"It's your birthday today?" I asked.

"Yes, September twenty-fifth. Get the fuck out of the car. Bye!" he yelled, almost pushing me out of the passenger's side.

The coincidence of Ahmed's birthday also being Lucas's birthday felt like a sign that I needed to focus on Lucas. I didn't feel bad for dumping Ahmed on his birthday and felt zero remorse stepping out of the Jeep. I ran straight up to my room to check my tablet to see if Lucas had responded. With the time difference, it was the morning of September 25 back in Reno.

His response came later. He said we should catch up another day, as he was heading to Downieville to ride mountain bikes and have dinner and beers with his friends. Great. I didn't fully trust him to sleep alone, given that he'd jumped into bed with me on our first date and a few times thereafter while he was dating another woman. My post-cocaine-binge anxiety was no fun. I popped three codeine pills and opened a fresh pack of cigarettes. It was at this time that Alina, the storm, blew into our home.

"Oh, thank God you are home! Bitch! We're going out to a house party!" she announced in Russian, running up to me and hugging me.

"Alina, I literally just came from a two-day house party. I don't want to go," I said diplomatically.

"Don't be dumb, it's going to be so much fun! These guys, oh my God, these guys are so popular in Egypt. I've been wanting to go to their house parties for months now," she insisted.

"Okay. I'll go." I gave in so easily. Alina was in luck; my now five codeine pills had kicked in at the perfect moment. Plus, I was full of guilt and nerves, convinced that Lucas was out cheating on me just like I was cheating on him. Not talking to him on his birthday broke my heart. What was I going to do, stay at home crying? No. He was the one who was supposed to be missing me.

I never thought that going out to party with Alina, as I usually did, would lead me into the hands of a monster. The decision I made in my vulnerable state completely changed the course of my trip.

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It was easy to spot our ride for the party among the low-end sedans of our poor neighborhood. Just the walk to the car felt ominous as we made our way toward the halogen lights with emergency blinkers on—a predator signaling in the dark, luring its prey with Western luxury.

“Habibi!” Alina cried as we took our positions in the red sports car with plates that looked out of place. I took my usual seat in the back as the guest.

“Amla-eh?” a higher-pitched male voice answered her.

“Rami, this is Katya. Katya, this is my good friend Rami,” she introduced us.

He stretched his hand over his head toward the back seat for a shake. I touched his ultra-smooth, long fingers and gave the customary slight shake. In the Arab world, gripping hard on first introductions is rude. I once asked Dasha why, as in the West, a stronger grip shows respect. She told me that a slight handshake is more customary, less assertive, and shows humility, unlike the Western style, which can be interpreted as too aggressive.

Soft hands, I thought; *he hasn't worked a day in his life*. This was a trait of the wealthy I'd learned to notice. Right away, I could see he came from one of those privileged circles where money seemed to shield people from consequences. The watch on his wrist, the expensive scent of his cologne, the flashy car, and the little party box he slid from under the seat all signaled his status.

“Let's party?” he asked, reaching for the box.

“Yella!” Alina squealed.

Rami watched me through the rearview mirror, holding my gaze longer than I found comfortable, and I studied him back as he spoke with Alina. He had a boyish, almost nerdy look, even with a full beard. He could have passed for mixed European, his amused, mischievous stare giving him away. I sensed that he liked me.

We drove for an hour and a half in traffic to a wealthy suburb on the edge of Cairo. Rami's phone constantly buzzed with calls and WhatsApp messages, but he didn't seem bothered to check them. We