

TOO SWEET

Songs for Setting Boundaries

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Publisher's Note: This is a memoir. It reflects the author's present recollections of experiences over time. Some dialogue has been recreated in a manner consistent with the character of the person speaking. All person's within are actual individuals; there are no composite characters. The names of some individuals have been changed to respect their privacy

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Introduction

*You called me honest
Said that made me dangerous
If that means you're safer further from the truth
Then it's good to be nothing but honest to you*

“Honest,” by Laura Marie, 2016, *Stars Apart*



In 2012, I wrote the song “Honest.” It was the first song I intentionally wrote about setting boundaries.

Writing “Honest” marked a conscious decision to be painfully honest with myself and to live in such a way that my thoughts, words and deeds aligned. In the second verse of “Honest,” I wrote, “I just don’t want my life to be one lesson learned on repeat,” referring to my tendency to lose myself in other people. I would often risk my integrity, hoping to please them and earn validation or a sense of safety I thought came from outside

myself. Before writing that song, I lived in quite the opposite way at the expense of my mental and physical health. I felt powerless and out of control, and frequently found myself in complicated messes of my own making. Amid the worst of those messes, I decided honesty was the only option I could live with; the only way to unburden myself of all the mistakes I was trying to bury.

Philosopher Will Durant said, “We are what we repeatedly do.” Who was I? When I finally dared to look at the truth of what I’d done and who I’d become, all illusion fell away, and my world fell apart. It was traumatic. Every relationship in my life was deeply affected, and I wasn’t sure I’d survive. But I kept choosing the truth, which told me I couldn’t go back, things didn’t just happen to me and I wasn’t a failure. I’d simply been telling myself lies and freely giving my power away in service of them. Writing “Honest” was me taking my power back. I decided that if I can’t be honest with someone in my life, they don’t need to be in my life.

But that was only the beginning. The songs in this project represent a deconstruction of relationships built in my default mode of no boundaries. Some dislike the idea of boundaries, especially now that it’s a self-care buzzword. I get it. The existence of boundaries implies limitation, and many people don’t like having limits — especially when it comes to others. But that doesn’t work well for me. There’s a balance to strike, and it’s not a middle ground. It’s wherever healthy exists for each person. Survivors of childhood trauma often grow up not knowing what safety feels like. As a survivor, I can tell you that when you don’t feel safe, you have difficulty creating security for yourself or anyone around you. I don’t want to live a limited life, but people like me, who have had boundaries violated at a young age and in some significant way, need to establish them. So yes, boundaries. I’ve done much work rebuilding them, and a fair amount of maintenance is required.

This book is an account of events that inspired the songs on my same-titled EP, and a reflection on lessons learned. Each chapter shares a title and begins with lyrics from its corresponding song. They are sequenced in the same order as the songs on the EP, which flowed in a way that just felt right. I've altered names to protect those involved. I hope readers will consider that everyone's behavior in life is subject to change. People grow, learn and behave in different ways with different people. I sincerely hope the people I've had challenging encounters with have found their way to healthier circumstances and relationships, because everyone has that potential.

My deepest wish is to empower survivors to overcome the often debilitating consequences of trauma and sexual abuse. Writing my story has helped me heal. I hope it helps others understand the lifelong impacts of trauma and sexual abuse, and how those events alter the behavior of survivors in relationships. I hope sharing what I've learned will encourage other survivors to set healthy boundaries. And I hope that by practicing self-compassion, self-forgiveness and self-trust, we survivors can disempower those who use shame to belittle us, as well as those who try to benefit from our silence and unhealed trauma.

Disclaimer/Content Warning

The following material contains subject matter that could be triggering for survivors of mental illness, disordered eating, alcohol or drug abuse, self-harm, suicide, molestation or rape.

A songwriter friend recently posted a screenshot of misogynistic social media comments made in response to some selfies she'd shared. She looked lovely, and it was clear she needed a moment to feel lovely, but a male follower of hers took the opportunity to insult and belittle her instead. I knew she'd been struggling, so his comments infuriated me. I wanted to lessen the sting and show my support, so I shared my opinion of him, laced with anger. Another man then responded to me, insisting he didn't condone the first man's response but pointing out that my

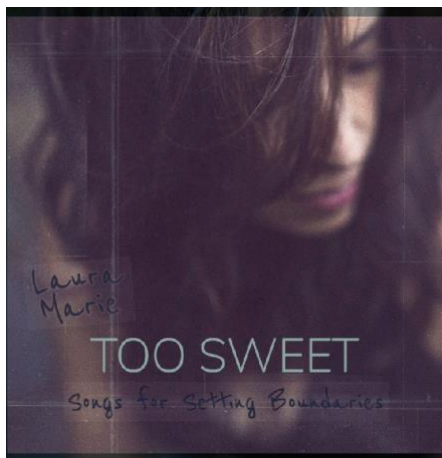
response wasn't considerate of the pain the misogynistic commentator and men like him go through to become that way. He said I was only thinking of what women go through. True. I can't speak for misogynistic men. The most I can say in raising two boys is that I am aware of and sympathize with the difficulties men may experience when relating to women. And yes, I was thinking of what women go through, and I listed the many reasons why (well, the big ones anyway):

- I was regularly catcalled, sometimes flashed, and even followed walking home throughout grade school and as a young adult.
- At age 8, I was sexually molested by a family friend.
- I was sexually harassed by my middle-school teacher, a co-worker and a boss.
- I was forcibly kissed by another co-worker who also trapped me in a walk-in freezer in an attempt to assault me further.
- I've been groped publicly in crowds on at least three occasions.
- I was drugged and date-raped at 19.

The discussion ended there. The misogynist's defender did not respond. And I didn't even list the other incidents, such as when a man on the street asked me what time it was, then grabbed my arm and tried to force me into an alley. It happened in front of people waiting at a bus stop. They did nothing to assist me. I also forgot to mention the guy who took my hand to help me offstage and then licked it from wrist to fingertip. Then there was the time my bandmates couldn't hear me screaming from the bathroom of a venue after a man followed me in and trapped me in a stall. He was twice my size, and drunk. Thankfully, a bartender came to the rescue.

My experiences aren't even that unusual; many women have endured similar ones. I also know people of other gender identities who can relate to much of what I've written here. This book is for anyone who has lost the ability to feel safe at home in their own bodies, who often can't see where they end and others begin, and who feels unseen, unheard and unknown because of it. I've met so many people who have had their boundaries violated. How they learn to respond and heal determines every aspect of their health and ability to maintain healthy relationships. Survivors of abuse are not to blame for the abuse, so I write the following with the deepest love in my heart: It is our responsibility to heal. When someone violates our autonomy, we must do the work to repair our sense of self and establish healthy boundaries. Otherwise, we risk endangering ourselves and others emotionally, spiritually and physically. This project is about doing that work.

THE EP
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