

## Jane Eyre Was Underage

The first time my high school English teacher kissed me—something I had fantasized about for over a year—was under a cold December sky on the night of my eighteenth birthday.

Reader, I married him.

For years, I would tell people, “He waited until the day I was legally an adult. He was just being smart.”

It wasn’t until two decades later, after we divorced and when yet another story was reported on the nightly news about an underage teenager getting involved with her teacher, did I reconsider that statement.

The case of Elizabeth Thomas, the fifteen-year-old student who, in 2017, ran away with Tad Cummins, her married fifty-year-old teacher with grown daughters, was more extreme than mine was. I did not run away from my family. There were no legal issues. My teacher was only nine years older than me and, while he had just gotten divorced, he had no children.

But maybe I’m just splitting hairs.

Elizabeth had been involved with her teacher for some time and left with him voluntarily. There are pictures of them sitting in his classroom, the desk between them belying their connection.<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Harriet Sokmenser, “*Tenn. Teen Elizabeth Thomas Might be 'Very Attached' to her Teacher Who Allegedly Abducted Her: Psychologist*,” PEOPLE MAGAZINE ONLINE, Sept. 27, 2017, available at <https://people.com/crime/elizabeth-thomas-attached-tad-cummins-alleged-abduction/>

I remember when that was me.

In the beginning, I thought Mr. Marsden was just being nice—like a mentor—though I hungered for something more. I would stalk him in the halls, then casually step in beside him to class. I worked hard on my stories in order to please him. I made up excuses to go see him after class, sitting in that chair, his desk a barrier between us, once sobbing in lovesick frustration and making up some stupid reason for it.

He told me to exercise more, bang a tennis ball against the wall.

I was a Jane Eyre reader from an early age and I felt Jane’s despair keenly when Mr. Rochester, twenty years her senior, toyed with her feelings. Like her, I wanted to say to Mr. Marsden, *I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is my spirit that addresses your spirit!*

I’ve been thinking about young Elizabeth Thomas and what she thought she knew about love and life before running away. When she and Cummins were finally tracked down and he was charged with federal crimes against a minor, Thomas said she was a “fully grown woman” who should be entitled to date her former teacher.<sup>2</sup>

Having been there, I can’t help but think I know her.

I knew what I was doing back then. I was the master of my universe. I believed it in the core of my being. Many of the other girls at school had crushes on Mr. Marsden, but I knew, for me, there was more to it. At least on my side. And when it happened—starting with that kiss—it was so intoxicating, so exhilarating, so...sublimely daring.

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<sup>2</sup> Amee Florence Payno, “Tad Cummins and Elizabeth Thomas News: Kidnapped Teen Claims to Be in Love With Abductor,” THE CHRISTIAN POST, May 12, 2017, available at <https://www.christianpost.com/trends/tad-cummins-and-elizabeth-thomas-latest-news-kidnapped-teen-claims-to-be-in-love-with-abductor.html>.

For the rest of my senior year, Mr. Marsden and I sneaked around right under the noses of his coworkers (my other teachers) and my classmates. Now amazingly *Greg* to me, he wrote me passes for being late to 1<sup>st</sup> period on those days I went to his house before school to make love. When I was in his class later that day, I would try hard not to stare at him, remembering a joke he had made while we were tangled in his bedsheets that morning.

It was the most glorious, delicious secret I could have ever imagined and I lived off its glow for a long time.

I have two friends, Catherine and Mercedes, who were underage when they became involved with older men. In talking to them recently, I realized our language had a universal feel to it, as if we had been in some sort of secret society whose members didn't know each other but had common initiation rites. All of our lives we had been told by parents, by teachers, we were intelligent and mature, but what we really were, in the high school hierarchy, was strange and unusual. Or as Jane Eyre as a young girl put it, *It's only because I'm different. I'm different from you all and you won't forgive me.*

"I knew everything back then," Mercedes told me.

She is still married to her older husband and is somewhat reluctant to talk about that time, as if it had been shameful. As if she should be ashamed.

"At sixteen, I was a thousand years older than anyone else in my high school. Superior—in certain ways. To be finally acknowledged by an older man was amazing. He treated me like the grown up I felt I already was. It was a grand romance. It was transformative. But, you know, I think Jane Eyre primed us for it. We were ripe and ready. We were these weird flowers no one else saw, but these men saw us."

Catherine was seventeen when her teacher kissed her, definitely underage, but he waited until the evening she graduated from high school.

“I was unsure of where my place was and I couldn’t imagine why Mr. Griffin, a teacher, an elder, was interested in me or found me the least bit attractive. But he made me feel worthy and, more importantly, he made me feel seen. Valid. Safe. And he liked my poetry. That was the icing on the cake. It was earthshaking to the seventeen-year-old me.”

Six months later, his dismissal of her and their relationship was soul-crushing and, even now, like I’m doing here, she still writes about it.

When Tad Cummins was sentenced in January 2019 to twenty years, Elizabeth Thomas wrote in her victim’s statement, “You made [me] feel safe and loved because you saw what [I] needed and made [me] believe you would be [my] protector.”<sup>3</sup>

I remember those feelings and how it felt when Mr. Marsden praised a short story I had written, that rumbling of the ground underneath me, making me feel seen and appreciated. Then his role as teacher and friend became increasingly blurred. We should have kept those parts separate and distinct, but what I needed from him got mixed up with his own needs and wants and I didn’t have the experience to have any forethought.

Now, with decades of distance, I wonder about the girl I had been. Yes, I had been a girl, certainly not a woman and, in some ways, a child, even though I had been endowed with the legal status of adulthood. I can’t help but speculate about a parallel universe. What would have

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<sup>3</sup> Chris Harris, “*Tenn. Teen Confronts Teacher Who Kidnapped, Abused Her: ‘What You Did to Me Is Unspeakable,’*” PEOPLE MAGAZINE ONLINE, Jan. 17, 2019, available at <https://people.com/crime/elizabeth-thomas-tad-cummins-abductor-sentenced-prison/>

happened if I had had the chance to grow up a bit more? Learned a little more about life on my own. Maybe I could have figured out how to be a better kid before I tried so hard to be an adult.

I suppose everyone can say that about their life, but is there a marker of psychological adulthood? I insisted, back then, that I knew what I was getting into. I didn't—and, actually, still don't—want to make excuses for my decisions. They were mine and no one else's. Or so I want to believe. In so many ways, I don't think I've ever been as confident and certain about some things as I was then. Looking back, I also realize that Greg, at twenty-seven, all things considered, was young as well. But he wasn't really, was he? He was my teacher and I was his student. I was his to mold, to “educate” in the ways of life and love. He was my Svengali, my mentor, my guru.

Maybe the line of adulthood is somewhere in there—gaining enough experience to have forethought. But that's the rub, isn't it? How are you supposed to gain the experience to have the forethought without doing something stupid or something you know nothing about? We can't always be always so careful.

As Greg and I aged, we became peers or, at least, I thought so. But the imbalance of power in that teacher/student, mentor/mentee relationship is so formidable and beguiling. Who wouldn't be seduced by it? And who wouldn't miss the adoration when it was gone?

With only two years of perspective, Elizabeth wrote in her victim's statement, “the effects [of this experience] have been devastating and permanent and they are not over.”<sup>4</sup>

No, they are not over and I hate to tell her some of them will never be, but then again we never escape getting hurt in this life.

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

I do wish Elizabeth and my young self had been a bit more like Jane Eyre. More aware. More self-protecting. *I do not think, sir, you have any right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience.*

But what I have also discovered is that I love that young woman I once was—lack of experience, forethought, and all. While I honestly believe I am wiser, kinder, stronger now, I am in awe of her: so determined, so daring, so passionate, so pigheaded. I wish I had more of her gumption.

I hope Elizabeth Thomas will feel the same way in twenty years.