

handout

Breathing Underwater (Excerpt)

In *Breathing Underwater*, Nick, the sixteen-year-old narrator, recounts his relationship with Caitlin (also called Cat), whom he abused physically, verbally, and emotionally for most of their relationship. In this scene, Caitlin and Nick, who have been dating for a few months, are in Nick's car, driving over a long two-lane bridge. Caitlin has just told Nick that she feels they need to talk about the way he treats her. Nick fears that she is going to tell him that she wants to end the relationship.

Excerpt:

"I heard you. I'm deciding how to respond." She could not leave me. As I hit the word respond, I pulled to the left, veering into the southbound lane. Then, I floored it past three cars. A southbound Volvo station wagon slammed its brakes within yards of us. The driver was honking, yelling. I pulled back into the northbound lane and flipped him off. I looked at Caitlin. Her mouth hung in midscream. I laughed.

"Do you trust me, Cat?" She was silent. I leaned closer. "Did I ever tell you about my mother?" Caitlin recovered enough to shake her head no, and I said, "I was four, five, I'd like awake nights, listening to her and my dad fighting, him hitting her." I looked at Caitlin. "You want to hear this?"

She nodded.

"I thought we'd pack up and leave someday, her and I lived for that day." On the wheel, my knuckles were white. "Then, one morning, I wake up, and she's gone, never came back. She ran from the monster and left me there with him."

Caitlin removed her sunglasses. "I'm sorry, Nick."

"So you talk about trust, it's pretty important. I mean, when the one person you trust just picks up and leaves..."

Caitlin's hand slipped across my shoulder. I tried to shrug her off, swerving left into traffic, then back. Terror filled Caitlin's eyes. Her nails ripped my flesh.

"Trust me, Cat?" She could not leave me. I swerved again. "Cause if you haven't figured it out, life doesn't mean much to me. Without you, it's worthless."

A flock of seagulls headed across my windshield. She could not leave me. I swerved again, this time counting three before I veered back. She could not leave me. Caitlin screamed at me to stop.

"What's the matter?" When she didn't answer, I swerved again. "Oh—this. Maybe you're right."

I straightened the wheel, looking beyond her to the orange and green water waste of the bridge. Silence. I didn't swerve. Nothing. We were halfway across. Caitlin relaxed.

Suddenly, I said, "Think I could make a right here?" Right was into the water. I made like I'd do it, crash through the guardrail, then down. Caitlin screamed. She grabbed for the wheel. I shoved her away so her fingers clawed the air. She tried again, gripping both my hands. The car swerved left into the path of a Bronco towing a boat. I pulled it back. My mind knew what she was doing, but my eyes didn't. I couldn't see her. She was shrieking. God, shut up! Her voice deafened me, and it was all around, in my ears, making me lose all control. She tried to grab the wheel. Blind and deaf, I drove, sun hot on my face. I had to get her off me. God, I just had to get her off me. Get her off me! Get off me! Get off!

Next thing I knew, I was driving on land. I couldn't tell you whether it was minutes or hours later. Caitlin hung across the seat, head cradled in her fingers. My hand throbbed, and I knew I'd hit her. I'd hit her. I was tired. She'd worn me out, but the anger inside me dissolved, replaced by that regret. But I'd had to stop her. She'd been irrational, overwrought, shouldn't have touched the wheel. She could have killed us. I looked at her. The seat was the length of a football field. Caitlin faced the window. She was so beautiful. Ahead was a red pickup with a Jesus fish. It was going at a good clip, but when we reached the next passing zone, I overtook it and a few other cars. Car stiffened. I merged back into traffic and reached to stroke her hair.

She lifted her head, cautious as a runner stealing home, and stared.

"Are you all right, Caitlin?" I asked.

When she didn't answer, I repeated the question.

She shook her head. "You hit me."

I told her no. I hadn't. I mean, she was grabbing the wheel. We'd almost creamed the Bronco. I had to get her off me before we got killed.

"Because you were driving off the bridge," she said.

I laughed and said she knew me better. . . I'd never do it for real. Besides, we'd have crashed the guardrail, and I'd have gotten killed for wrecking the car.

"But you hit me, Nick." She leaned out the window toward the sideview mirror to see if her cheek was getting red.

And it was. I didn't expect it to be red, but it was—a little. I hadn't hit her hard, just enough to get her off me. I said, "Don't you know you shouldn't grab the wheel when someone's driving?"

"But I thought—"

She was pretty shaken. Mad maybe? I pulled her closed. "Sorry I freaked you out, Kittykat. I forget you aren't used to guys. You don't know we play rough sometimes." She kept protesting, and I said, "You know what I was thinking? I wanted to buy you a ring. You know, like a symbol, since we're going together. What's your birthstone?"

Still, she stared like her life was flashing before her eyes. "You hit me, Nick."

I kissed her. She drew away, and I pulled her back. "Your birthday's in February, right? I'll ask the jeweler what the stone is."

I held her close until she stopped struggling. The sun was down, but it wasn't dark enough for a moon, and we crossed bridges connecting the islands, Big Pine Key, Plantation Key, Key Largo. Then we drove through mainland Miami a while. When we reached home, the sky above Rickenbacker Causeway was black, and Caitlin slept on my shoulder.