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## INTRODUCTION

I am so tired. I have written this post, and rewritten this post, then started over completely, then tried to edit, then had to start over again because something changed or I wrote too much, or...

The worst part is I keep catching myself thinking, "What a crazy story this is! Who would ever believe it? I have to remember to tell Sonny when I get the chance; he'll think it's crazy too." And then I remember I can't tell Sonny any of this, because he's the reason we're even here.

I know this is a long post and I'm sorry I'm such a wordy person that I don't know how to make this shorter. There are so many years involved in this that it's hard for me to be concise. There's a lot I mention in this that I never planned to talk about publicly at all, because I was convinced that to do so would hurt others. But in everything that has come out in the past week, it's clear a lot of people have been hurt regardless. And especially when I saw #SHConfessions, I knew that as hard as it is for me to talk about some things because I still somehow inherently feel like I'll hurt someone and I hate that, ultimately it was because of those people who posted their confessions despite how terrifying it must have been that I feel like I have to overcome my own worries, too. It's been difficult for me to figure out what to say, how to say it, anything; it's easy to feel overwhelmed and not know how to help. I don't know that anything I have to say will ultimately help anyone. But I knew I couldn't stay silent, if for no other reason than maybe if there's even just one person out there right now who doesn't believe the confessions on #SHConfessions, maybe something from my perspective will help change their mind.

If I sound calm in any of this, it's because I'm exhausted; I'm tired of trying to deal with this and I'm tired of trying to write this and not knowing what to say. And it's because I have my dog who has helped me with my emotional stability, anxiety, depression, all of that, simply by always

being there and always loving me endlessly. Right now, with everything else feeling so flipped on end, that at least feels consistent, and gives me some sense of balance.

If you don't know me, I'm sorry that our first introduction is under such circumstances, but it's nice to meet you. My name is Ais. I write LGBTQIA+ stories, because they're stories I like to write, and because I'm an asexual lesbian so they are also stories that feel close to me.

The reason I have to write this post at all is in part because online I'm probably most known as the co-author of *In the Company of Shadows* aka ICoS, a dystopian-ish m/m series that was 5 books long, over a million words, and was written over the course of around a decade. Not quite a decade but I'm too tired right now to get you the exact year range; you can find that answer online if you want. The reason any of that matters is because the person I wrote the series with was my friend Sonny, who later came to be known as Santino Hassell, a writer mostly of m/m romance stories. He wrote a ton of solo books and co-wrote other series with other people and/or did other collaborative works. But I'm someone who's known him longer online than almost anyone, at least for those who had remained anywhere near the same genre, and so there are some things people probably believe I may know more than others.

Culminating mostly around Thursday March 8, 2018, it came out that Sonny, or Santino, may not exist.

There were three separate accusations that came hand-in-hand:

- 1) that he is a catfish (or at least not his own separate human being) and that the person/people operating his accounts/writing his books have been who I've always known to be his roommates Alicia and Marvin (Mike as I know him so that's how I'll call him);
- 2) that he may have lied about health issues such as having liver cancer; and
- 3) that he had been bullying or abusive in some form to various people within the genre or fandoms, including to fans.

Since that Thursday, Sonny has posted some things on his site that I know of, one post which went up around Friday March 9 where he said he was married (which was against the knowledge many people, myself included, always had of Sonny as a divorced single dad) and he posted some pictures of various medical bills saying he does have some sort of unspecified health issue and he talked about a few other things I've since forgotten. He took that post down at some point, but it might be on his Patreon now, I don't know. Then a few days later he put up another post, this one verifying that Sonny/Santino Hassell was a persona, saying he'd just kind of been an asshole who trolled around back in the day and didn't expect to continue having those friendships for any period of time, but that some things are the truth, and then he talked about a few other things. That post was up and then, as far as I know, was later removed. It may also be on his Patreon. Again, I don't know. If you are interested in those statements you should find them in their entirety elsewhere because I could be misrepresenting something on accident and you're better off reading it directly to form whatever opinion you may have.

I have no idea if he's said anything else publicly. I have no idea what all information everyone is working with. In all honesty, I've been avoiding the majority of the conversations because I'm already exhausted going into all of this. I just can't handle more things on top of everything else. I've already spent a week consumed by trying to understand this bizarre fucking situation I've found myself in, and a week trying to form some sort of coherent response. Every time I try, it gets so long. I'm a wordy person anyway, so it isn't a surprise, but I keep trying to make it more succinct for people who don't want to read a lot. I did make a separate, 2 page statement with the shortest response I can give so if you want to only read that instead, please check for it.

Despite Alicia or Mike or whoever verifying that Sonny doesn't exist the way I know him to, I will continue to call him Sonny and 'he' in this solely because it's easiest for me, since that's how I've always known him, and because at this point I genuinely have no idea who I've been talking to at different times. Or even, I suppose, who I wrote with.

If you don't know me, you might not know that generally I am someone who values their privacy. I really hate getting involved in negativity, I don't want to hurt anyone or see anyone be hurt. It stresses me out and it upsets me and I start worrying about how I can't help anyone even though I so strongly wish I could. Because of so much stress I've been feeling over the years from social media, from the genre, to be honest even from just trying to be Sonny's friend, long ago I started distancing myself from all of those things. I have barely talked to Sonny for years, except here and there when we needed to work on a project or for short stints, but back when we first met we talked constantly.

There was a time I thought of Sonny like family. He was like a brother to me. He was a best friend. He was the person who was there telling me it was okay when I started to realize my sexual orientation. He was the person who didn't judge me for all the things society had always told me was wrong about myself. But he was also the person who, whether intentionally or unintentionally, hurt me probably more than any other friend has, because it happened in so many big and small cycles that over time I felt drained and drowned and I grew so tired I wanted to give up and eventually had to step away.

All I ever wanted was to just be his friend, but for a lot of the time we've known each other, I felt like even that was asking too much. I always thought so many things were my fault. I hate hurting others, and I hate seeing anyone else be hurt. I didn't want to hurt him, I didn't want to hurt anyone who liked him, I didn't want to hurt anyone. I just wanted things to be okay.

Sonny was sometimes wonderful to be around, sometimes someone who made me feel accepted in the pieces of me that were so hard for me to accept on my own. There were times he talked me down from the ledge, times he reminded me to value myself, times he told me it was okay to be who I was. There were times, especially back when we first met, that I felt safe around Sonny. That, no matter what, Sonny would always be there. And there were other times that Sonny stood silently by while my suicidal ideations got worse and worse. Times I felt like I had nowhere to go because everywhere I turned, I knew if I tried to reach out, everyone would

side with him. Times I was in such distress and despair and so completely unable to function, I was breaking apart bit by bit in a way I didn't dare voice too loudly because I was too afraid of hurting anyone else. Times I'm honestly a little surprised Sonny wasn't a contribution in the death of me.

I have no idea at this point what he ever told me was the truth and what wasn't. All I know is I met Sonny in 2002, in the Gundam Wing yaoi fandom. I was 19 and in college, and I was in the ongoing process of figuring out who I am. And he was someone who was there while I did.

I have always thought Sonny made me a better person, despite all the heartbreak that's been involved. In part because of his behavior over all these years, it taught me to eventually stand up for myself, it taught me to overcome some of my biases, and it taught me that I can't control other people and shouldn't even try. It isn't healthy or happy for anyone. All I can do is live my life by the Golden Rule, treating others the way I want to be treated, and try to bring whatever positivity into the world I can, to counteract whatever negativity there may be. And if it gets to a point where I realize I can't do anything and it hurts me more to stay than leave, I have to do what I feel is best even if sometimes it's very hard.

Because ultimately, I control my own narrative. And another person's actions don't have to dictate the way I choose to live my own life.

I know people want quick answers in all of this, but I really don't feel like I have any. And I've never been someone known for being succinct. For those who want to hear more on any of this, you can read beyond this first part. But for those who just want the answers to the main three questions you might have, this is all I can tell you:

- 1) Yes, it seems Sonny doesn't exist as a separate human being, as he himself has now verified. I had no idea. Right through Thursday March 8, I didn't even question that he existed. There were many reasons I never questioned that, but the short answer is he had been so consistent in all the years I knew him that it seemed too crazy otherwise. Who the hell is expecting that in GW fandom? A pseudonym, sure, a fake username, yeah. But to stick so strictly and consistently to an entire life and persona, to maintain that in private conversations for years, even while writing an entire series together? It didn't seem possible, so I never even conceived of it, but now I have to accept it's true.
- 2) I genuinely, at this point, have absolutely no idea what's going on with his health. I have no idea what those medical documents were for, no idea what he does or doesn't have. The information I had is old, and since so much else I was told was something he has recently self-admitted wasn't entirely truthful, I now have no clue what, of anything I was told, was completely true, partially true, exaggerated, or completely fabricated.
- 3) As for the stories of bullying and any sort of abuse, what I've heard is what I saw when I was linked to the confessions on the #SHConfessions twitter thread. I feel absolutely awful for everyone and wish I'd known what was really happening in the background. I had absolutely no idea about any of that until Saturday, when I was linked it. And reading it brought in me a dawning horror, because it's enough to realize someone you

thought existed didn't. But to realize they also weren't even the kind of person you thought they were, and then on top of that, to see yourself in the words of that thread... It's surreal. But if you read nothing else from me, please at least know this: I fully believe that every confession there is true, and I think you should too.

I am so, so sorry for everyone who was hurt in any of this. I wish I'd realized any of this was happening, I wish I could have helped someone, or stopped something, or just... I don't know.

I've felt guilt this past week after realizing the extent of everything; a feeling like somehow this is all my own failing, because I met him back in those GW days, because together we came into the m/m genre, because ICoS was what I loved (and still love) so dearly and together we were honored and blessed enough to have a small fandom who fervently loved our series. I feel responsible for each and every person who interacted with him, if they had a bad experience, if he hurt them or if something went horribly wrong. Like somehow it's my fault he did any of this. Somehow, it's my fault I didn't know he was hurting others. Somehow, I should have seen it.

But if I'm going to be truly fair to myself in a way I've rarely allowed myself when it comes to Sonny, then I have to acknowledge that his actions have never been my responsibility. I did try to stop things whenever I heard about anything, but the story I heard was always so flipped around from what it seems the truth might have been, that I thought I was trying to help the person who was the victim. And even then, when I think back to my advice, if he had been able or willing to listen, it might have still been able to help stall some of these destructive cycles. Because what I was always trying to advise was a way out of these situations that kept exploding. I still wish I could have helped him if he'd needed it, because maybe in doing so I could have helped others. But I offered that help, over and over, so maybe I never had a chance to help this at all.

Probably the hardest thing of all of this for me is letting myself even accept the idea that I was hurt at all. I knew I was, many times, but I really hate contemplating things like that, because I inevitably feel like I should figure out how it happened, and to do that I want to understand everyone's motivations, and I will never know someone else's intentions entirely, so then I can rely only on my own. And since I know my intentions are not to hurt anyone, I naturally want to project those intentions on others as well. So then it's easy to accept the idea that things happen through miscommunication, or misinterpretation, or yeah it was on purpose but then they had this or that reason, and if they had this or that life experience which led them to that point, it does not at all excuse or condone that behavior, but how can we move forward after that damage has been done, to try to ensure no one else is hurt similarly in the future?

I spent so long trying to find reasons for Sonny when he wouldn't provide them to me, that it's incredibly difficult for me to allow myself to simply feel sad or upset or even grieve anything. It's very difficult to simply let myself be heard without silencing it like I grew so used to doing. It's very difficult to accept all the kindness that has been sent my way without trying to take responsibility for the fact we're in this situation in the first place. But to try to take that responsibility for something I didn't do and would never have agreed with or encouraged or

condoned, something that I myself felt the pain of many times, would not be fair to me. I guess my problem is I find it so much easier to try to be fair to everyone but myself.

I want to thank every single one of you who turned to me after this with patience and understanding and kindness. And, especially, the support. The private support was so meaningful to me. The public support was beyond anything I ever expected. I had grown so tired and so removed from everything that I didn't really feel connected to a lot of things online. I never even conceived of any of this happening, but if I had, I would have believed everyone would hate and blame me instantly. I would have expected to be told it was my fault. I would have expected anger and rejection and I wouldn't have been able to blame anyone because I can't tell people how to think, how to feel, and I've been so radio silent and so unable to be consistent for so long, who could blame anyone for thinking I'm not reliable or maybe it's somehow my fault? I blamed myself long enough, it's never been a difficult leap to assume others might do the same.

The fact that when my world was unexpectedly turned upside down I wasn't met with more condemnation from every corner is something I honestly cannot possibly thank every one of you enough for. Seeing messages which didn't blame me or hate me but said it's okay to take my time to figure this out... I didn't reply to anyone right away because I was overwhelmed and I was trying so hard to write this first, to compile my thoughts, to comb through memories I'd long forgotten to somehow make sense of anything. But even though I didn't reply right away, I read them. Your messages meant the world to me, more than I can ever say. Thank you so much for that kindness. It let me breathe during this week without stressing out even more, thinking again, again, I was letting everyone down by not instantly being able to say anything. I hope someday I can return that kindness to you as well. Not for anything near the same situation, though, I hope.

I don't hate Sonny, although I know many people may not understand that. I know many people are very upset, and may have their own feelings to contend with right now which may be very powerful. They might confuse my lack of hatred as me agreeing with any of his choices in any of this. I don't condone any of this. None of this is okay at all. But I also don't hate him. Or them, or whoever. I just wish none of this had happened. I wish there had been something I could have done to help everyone, even knowing I did everything I could, when I could. I'm just so sad it came to this, because I feel like everyone loses in the end.

I hope everyone affected can find a way to find some sort of value in any of this which will allow them to take back control of the situation internally, allow them to shift their own narrative, find their own meaning, bring their own power to something that may have made them feel powerless. In small ways and in big, I hope you find the closure or peace you need.

I believe every person always has a choice, and they keep having that choice every moment of every day. They may make choices which are hurtful or hateful or cruel, and they make those choices over and over again, but there's always another choice another minute after that,

another hour, another day. And that time they can make a different choice. And that choice may become a path that leads somewhere much better than where we are today.

Everyone has a choice this moment, even Sonny--or rather, even Alicia and Mike. They will continue to have choices every moment of their lives going forward. I hope they start making better choices, for their sake as well as everyone else's. They still have the power to make something positive, eventually, from all the negativity they created. I hope they don't abuse that power like they have before. I wish them the best, and I hope they can get help, because I hope that in them gaining some stability, there will be less instability reflected on everyone else around them.

Please make healthier choices for everyone, Alicia and Mike. I don't want anyone else to be hurt again. That includes you, and especially includes everyone around you. Seriously, dude, just. Please.

To everyone else: your voice, your choices, your words and your power, do not need to be dictated by anyone else. You are valuable in and of yourself. What you feel now, what you feel ten days or ten months or ten years from now, they are all a sign of being human.

We are creatures capable of great pain but also great strength.

Humanity as a whole is not reflective of any one single human's actions or words, it's an ocean with currents that can pull us around, with tides that can overwhelm us and great crashing waves that sometimes drown out the voices of the innocent more than anything. But in that ocean there is also immense depth, the capability to always learn something new even in places we thought we understood, and, more than anything, there is life. Even in the deepest nooks and crannies of this world where you may think no living being could possibly survive, there is a creature who has taken those odds and evolved, and found a way to settle into their niche and only grow stronger. They don't just exist, they thrive, in a way no one else in this world can. They can do it, and so I believe you can, too.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Below I go more into some of the separate questions or topics, for those who still want a bit more context, or need a little more information. Please know that although I talk at large about many things, I don't go into super specific details on much, because if it concerns other people (Sonny, Noah, mutual friends, anyone), I don't want to publicly share anyone's private information. In Sonny's case, what I was told may or may not be true anyway, so it would only muddy the waters, and if it was true I wouldn't feel right sharing it. In everyone else's case, they already have enough they're trying to deal with, they probably already had to gather a lot of courage to step forward or speak out, so the last thing they need is me trying to help them but making them feel more raw by bringing up anything they specifically wanted to keep to themselves.

There is so much attention on this entire topic that I just want to try to be as careful and as mindful of the others involved as I can be. Because of that, I won't be answering any questions about more specific details about anything, because it's the only way I know how to help everyone as best I can while minimizing my hindrance in that attempt to help. If that makes sense.

If you understand my hesitation with others but wonder why I won't say more on Sonny, if you find that questionable... I know everyone is very upset, and I understand why--believe me, I do. What you're feeling is probably what I've felt in varying degrees, cycled over and over and over again, for almost 16 years. But maybe because of that, I've long ago had time to determine that it really doesn't matter what other people's actions are; their decisions in their own lives have no bearing on decisions in my own. And I live by the Golden Rule. Since I wouldn't want anyone to reveal any private details of mine, I therefore won't reveal anyone else's. I can't spend my time worrying about how someone else makes me feel; I need to start by feeling good about my own decisions, as much as I can. It isn't about what others would do for me if they were in my position; it's about what I think is the right thing to do now that I'm here.

## DID YOU KNOW?

I imagine the biggest question anyone might have for me is, did you know? And if not, why not?

I didn't know. My real life friends and family, myself, genuinely we all thought he existed. I had talked about him enough over the years that by this point, people felt like they knew him too. I mean, we all thought he could be a real fucking asshole sometimes, but I don't think any of us actually thought he wasn't his own human being.

I first met Sonny in the Gundam Wing yaoi fandom. We were telling the truth over the years online when we said we didn't quite remember what year we met, because I knew it was in college for me, but I never thought I'd have to remember exactly when. I used to think we met in a chatroom through a mutual friend, but recently I found some really old files and realized we actually first spoke when I emailed him back in 2002. Reading that first email exchange was bizarre, and extremely embarrassing because oh my god I needed to chill, but because even back then I was wordy and thorough as hell, I now know exactly what led to that email.

The short of it is, as we'd always remembered, we met because of fanfics. There were a few connections I laid out about other writers/fics/books we'd both read or liked or etc, but one of the biggest reasons I was emailing him was because at that time he was one of the people who posted fic recommendations on our mutual friend's GW yaoi rec site. That site was awesome, and super well designed, well run, and had some amazing recommendations on there. I found some amazing works through that place. Which was why I was so surprised when I saw that someone had recommended anything of mine. Not just that--this guy named Sonny had recommended multiple fics of mine. We didn't know each other, and I wasn't popular. As always, I was sort of a niche writer more than anything. There was no reason, I felt, to have known about anything I wrote, let alone any reason to recommend any of it. Which was why it



really touched me. I wanted to thank him for that. In the email, I also mentioned I was thinking of getting out of the fandom. He thanked me in return, and among other things he said he imagined I had reasons for why I would want to do this, but why did I want to leave the fandom? He said he hoped I would stay, because I was one of the few authors whose stories he actually looked forward to reading. He said I was a very good writer.

I don't know if we talked a lot after that, or if we just had a short interaction and didn't really talk again until that chat I remember. I just know that at some point, we became friends.

In retrospect, it's kind of prophetic that when I first used to tell IRL people years ago about Sonny, more than one person looked at me askance and said, "That's probably a catfisher." I said they were crazy. That stuff mostly only happens on TV, I told them, and that was how I felt.

### Reasons I didn't realize:

- One of the first things I knew about Sonny was that he was self-described as brutally honest. Although at times the blunt wording could be startling, overall I actually really appreciated that. At least I always knew where he stood. And there were times he stood up for me when I was afraid to stand up for myself. To have someone so clearly state you aren't at fault for something you worry about is a huge relief. I figured because of that brutal honesty he seemed to value, that at least the truth that he existed as he told me was something I should be able to believe.
- Sonny told me his full real name, first, middle, last, and his date of birth. He told me the story behind his middle name as well. At one point, he told me the area in Italy where his family had immigrated from. He also told me the full first and last name of his friend/wife. And, later, his roommates. From the start, Marvin Hassell has always been Mike's real name to me. It had never been anything else. I've known that name for years.
- When I sent him packages forever ago, I had two different addresses he gave me, and I addressed those packages to the names he'd given me (his ex-wife, and his name). The packages got there, so I had no reason to believe that was incorrect, because the postal office never told me there was no one at that address by that name.
- He told me his entire life story, in varying details, over the course of years and years. His story never changed, the details never shifted. If I forgot who exactly a person was and asked, "Was that person this or that?" he would always remind me and I'd be able to say, "Oh yeah, I totally remember that person. So what's the update on them?" He kept me updated for years on friends, family, their health, their deaths, he told me about his wedding and what he'd worn, when his wife got pregnant he kept me updated on that, and then their births, and then about the kids, their school life, and more. He told me about the various problems happening in his life. I knew about the things he struggled with. So many of his behaviors, whether good or bad, tracked so perfectly as coping mechanisms of someone who had been through all that trauma that it all made sense. And he always had an answer, whether or not I felt like the answer was one I liked.
- One day when I messaged him, his cousin answered the IM instead. His vernacular and way of writing was completely and totally different than Sonny's and was exactly the way

I imagined it would be, based on everything I knew of him. I knew a lot about this cousin after years of hearing about him, but I'd never spoken to him directly. The cousin said he saw the message pop up when he was sitting around at Sonny's house so he decided to answer. It amused me because he clearly didn't know how to internet. I found out the reason he was there was Sonny's wife was currently at the hospital having the baby, or something (I've forgotten exactly). We didn't talk long but I was fond of him. Later, I forget if it was hours or days later, when I next saw Sonny I mentioned I'd talked to his cousin. He seemed surprised and then a little irritated but mostly embarrassed. Like, "god, what did he say?" The same way you'd feel embarrassed if your awkward dad suddenly answered a friend's message instead of you.

- One time, I talked to Sonny on the phone. He seemed exactly the way I expected him to seem, based on the years of knowing him. We even joked about it online afterward.
- Sonny used to tell me about things happening in the lives of people around him, so sometimes I got stories of what was going on with Alicia or Mike, like their jobs or whatever. At one point, he gave me some contact information for them in case something should happen to them. I don't remember if I ever really directly reached out to them much, if at all. I didn't want to randomly involve third parties if it might make them feel awkward, but I always liked Mike and Alicia based on the stories I was told.

There's probably more, but that's the overview of the main points. We did stop talking as much and as closely after a few years, and probably the last 10 years or so it's been a lot more hit or miss in how much we talked about our personal lives as much. Sometimes we would talk a lot, other times we'd go months and months without really interacting at all. In the spheres of the internet and genre where I wasn't, there may have been information floating around which contradicted what I knew. I don't know. All I know is whenever I was told things directly, it always fit exactly with everything I knew from all that time ago, and the times there was something that didn't, it was always little enough that it was as simple as we hadn't talked for a while, so why would I know that new update now?

One thing I feel I should make clear, for what it's worth: at least with me, Sonny never scammed me out of anything. I mean, yeah, I sent him gifts, but now and then he sent me things back as well. He didn't take any money from me, even when he could have. He even sent me some of his merch and signed one of his books and sent it to me, saying I didn't need to buy it when I said I was going to. Saying it was dumb of me to spend that money on him when he could just give it to me instead.

We had a lot of problems over the years, but another reason I never questioned that he existed was because the only indication he'd ever really given me was that he could be a thoughtless jerk sometimes, not that he was trying to take advantage of anything with me. There were many times I offered things to him he didn't accept because he didn't seem comfortable with it. And other times I offered things he did accept, but I don't really care about it because I offered those things genuinely wanting to help, so if he accepted then it's not a problem to me.

I'm not saying anything about what he may or may not have accepted from others or whether or not they felt they would have offered it had they known everything. I really know next to nothing about all the rest of that, about any of those stories, so I don't want to speak about anyone else's experiences or how they may or may not feel. Only they can truly relay those stories. I only mention this because I realized there may be questions about that from my end. And for me, one of the reasons I always struggled with feeling like Sonny's friend vs not, is because for as much of a raging asshole he sometimes was to me, he also was always very good and exceedingly fair about other things.

Now that I know the truth of all of this, when I think back, there are times Sonny could have super fucked me over if he'd truly wanted to be malicious against me, by simply accepting help I offered in good faith. But he didn't. He thanked me for the thought, and said it was okay, I didn't need to do it. I don't know what that means, if anything, but it's another part of all of this, for whatever that is worth. I don't feel it would be fair of me not to mention it.

## CANCER

I honestly can't tell you what is or isn't true about any health-related issues. Anything I know is based solely on what I was told, and since I was never told that Sonny doesn't really exist, clearly there's a lot of information I "know" that isn't true. Still, I was told this is an important point for other people, so for them I can at least relay what I remember.

I don't remember when I learned he had liver cancer, but I'm pretty sure it was one of those things I heard through someone else that eventually trickled to me. If you wonder why he wouldn't have told me something so important directly, it's because of the timing (more on that later), and I guess in part because of the cycles our friendship would get caught in over the years. From long ago, but not always consistently throughout, it became an exceedingly common thing for me to never know important updates on Sonny's life; to only learn about it when he publicly posted something, and then I'd have to go to him to ask for details out of concern or interest. Sometimes he would answer me, sometimes he wouldn't.

If anyone knows the time when he first posted publicly about it, I probably heard within the months following that, whenever that was. I feel like I recall hearing about it because someone messaged me concerned about him, or because I happened to run across him posting about it publicly online, and I think I remember contacting him later directly because I was worried. I would assume that was around 2007 or 2008 or maybe 2009, given what else was going on around then, but I genuinely don't know for sure.

At any rate, I was really worried about him and asked him for updates over the years on it. At first I was terrified he would die right away, but as he continued to be around I was relieved. Eventually I did research on things he had told me about how the cancer had developed, and it all tracked completely with information I found online.

Because I was genuinely concerned for his health, for his safety, for his life, sometimes I looked around to see if there was anything I could do to help. I mean, how do you help with cancer? But maybe I could learn of a new treatment, or maybe something else. It was through that research I had a revelation that gave me hope: I hadn't realized that liver cancer allowed for living donations. He'd told me for years how he was on the transplant list and because of various reasons he wasn't always high on the list, and other times he was taken off it entirely, and that freaked me out.

But if I could donate my liver, then he wouldn't have to worry about that list at all. Because it turns out in situations with an unhealthy liver, the patient gets the whole thing removed, and it's replaced with a portion of a healthy person's liver. Apparently the liver regenerates itself, so the donor's liver would eventually regrow to full size, and the patient would eventually have a full, healthy liver.

I'm terrified of needles, and I really, really hate going to the doctor or hospital, but generally speaking I'm pretty healthy. I almost never drink, I never used drugs or smoked or any of that, and I've been vegetarian/half-vegan for about 20 years. So I thought maybe my liver would be particularly healthy that way. I offered to go to the hospital, to get whatever tests done he needed me to do, to get my blood type checked or, I mean, I have no idea what it is they do. And I didn't know if me being a woman and much smaller than him would make us incompatible. But I figured it wouldn't hurt to check. I just didn't know what his doctors needed me to check and I didn't know how the whole process worked, like, would I have to find enough time off to drive down to Texas and check myself into the hospital or something? Or could they do the surgery where I live and somehow transport it quickly and safely to him? How much downtime would I need after the surgery, did I need to start hoarding vacation days? Assuming, of course, I was even a match.

I mentioned the idea to him a few times, and asked what he thought, what he'd need from me, etc. His reaction was exactly the way I was used to Sonny acting any time someone did something unexpectedly nice for him-- a little awkward, a little shyly thankful, but very hesitant to accept. At least, that's how I interpreted his responses. But he told me he didn't want to do the surgery, because he was worried about it going wrong for various reasons. And for various reasons from stories he'd told me in the past, I understood that extreme hesitation. But I still said I hoped he'd reconsider, because it could help extend his life. Sometimes he also brought up he didn't want anything to happen to me on the surgery table, either, and I told him I'm generally pretty healthy so I wasn't worried. The surgery wouldn't be fun, but I'd be happy to do it if it could save a friend's life.

We weren't talking super often all the time even by around this time, so although I brought it up a few times, and he said thank you but it's okay, it was spread over a time period I can't even remember. Eventually, I forgot about the offer because we stopped talking as much, and since last I'd known his health wasn't terrible, I hoped that meant he was still doing well.

That's the last I know about anything related to that. I don't know how long ago any of this happened. Maybe a couple of years ago, maybe longer, maybe shorter. I just figured he knew the offer was standing, so if he ever was in dire straits, he knew all he had to do was contact me and I was willing to see if I was a match. And if I was, I would do whatever it took to get him that second chance on life.

If I'm going to be truly honest, my feelings of friendship were already very strained by this point after all the years that had preceded it. Based on the information I had at the time, I thought there was a very real chance if I was able to donate to him, even if it went perfectly, he might go right back into his same destructive cycles, and might end up right back where we started. But I felt like I knew I'd always cared more about him than he cared about me, and despite everything, despite the fact that I was so tired of all of our own cycles, I just wouldn't feel right with myself if I didn't offer and make sure he knew I was serious.

I felt like it would be petty of me to wish him an early death if I could help literally save his life, no matter how upset he had made me in the past, because other times he had also made me happy. But I also knew it would stress me out to watch him go back to those self-destructive cycles if we went through the surgery, so I thought maybe this could be my last thing I did for my friend, for the person I remembered all those years ago who I'd retained loyalty to through times that I nearly gave up and, eventually, mostly did. I would feel like I did the right thing, I would feel like I did everything I could, and I would know that nothing that happened afterward was my fault because I'd tried my best.

If any of the decisions he'd been making had been a result of a fatalistic outlook on life, feeling like he had a literal deadline he couldn't escape so he was making decisions based on that anxiety and fear, if that was the reason behind some of the things that had been so upsetting for so long... then erasing that cut-off date by giving him more time to live was the best thing I could do for him, for me, for his family and friends, for everyone. At that point the ball would fully be in his court. His decisions wouldn't have to be informed by something so ominous and unmovable. He would at least have a chance to make different choices, and whatever those were would fully be on him. I thought that if I gave him my liver, if he didn't change afterward, then maybe, finally, I would allow myself to feel okay with walking away for good. He would be able to do whatever made him happy in his life without feeling like death was around every corner, and I would be able to do whatever made me happy in my life without feeling like I was a terrible person for not wanting to be involved in things that only made me upset.

## NOAH

This and the next part are the absolute hardest parts of all of this for me to write. I've debated which part I need to put first; whether I need to tell one of my own stories, so you can understand my mindset by the time Noah happened, or if I should start with Noah.

I think it's more important to start with Noah.

You may notice a tonal shift in the way I write the rest of this. It's because it's from another version of this post I tried writing, one that was more emotional/memory-based. I tried to keep a more even tone in this version of the rest of this post because maybe that will help follow my thoughts throughout it all. But when it comes to Noah and when it comes to some of my own situations from about a decade ago especially, I shouldn't try to even that out.

So here's what I wrote before, originally written mostly Sunday March 11/Monday March 12:

In the course of all of this after Thursday March 8, as I was starting to realize over Friday March 9 that it might actually be true but I had a hard time believing it, I haven't been able to read much online because it's too much and it's too hard. But I kept hearing references to bullying or abuse and so I asked a friend what people meant by that.

The story I'd always been told, consistently by Sonny, was for years and years he was the one who was periodically bullied or harassed or had people suddenly betray him by going crazy on him. I have stayed out of the m/m genre for the vast majority of the time I've been online, so I mostly only knew things when people told me. Usually it was Sonny relaying information, but sometimes it was other people. My two primary coping mechanisms are avoidance and humor, so for me, over time I just came to avoid the majority of social media, the m/m genre, everything, because that felt like the healthiest way for me to move forward.

But there are two things Sonny, or really anyone, should know about me if they've talked to me for any length of time: I have no patience for bullying, and I am honest almost to a fault. I hate lying, hate misrepresenting anything, hate misleading people, because I see that all as hurting people. It's not like I literally have never lied in my life but generally speaking I'm shit at it because I don't like doing it.

Sonny knows I feel very strongly about bullying or abusive behavior, and that it's a topic on which I will speak out if I feel I actually know enough about the situation to fairly represent anything. There are so few things I feel I can say with any certainty in this world, because there's always another side to every story. There are too many times I thought one thing going into a situation and later thought something else entirely when I got more information. But there are times when I do feel I can 100% say something with certainty, because it involved me, and I am certain I remember things well enough to be able to comment on them.

For me, that certainty came with a startling swiftness in the #SHConfessions thread on twitter.

This was sometime on Saturday, March 10. I had never seen or heard of that thread before; I was linked that when I asked a friend for information on the bullying/abuse. I wasn't reading everything, I was only looking at the actual confessions themselves which were screenshots. Because Sonny had always told me he was a victim of harassment/abuse/bullying, to hear that there was a thread of people specifically calling him a bully or abusive was something I felt I needed to read. I wanted to understand their viewpoint and their argument, so I could figure out what I knew or what I thought about any of it.

At the very least I thought maybe I could directly relay the concerns to Sonny (who I still thought might exist at that time, but I was much less sure) in a manner that would get their concerns across without him feeling attacked. Maybe it would do something to help. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

So with that thought, I wanted to see what was being said in their own words, so I would know if I felt I could say anything at all. That's why I didn't read the commentary in between, I just wanted to form my own opinion based on the actual confessions themselves.

I thought it would be... I don't even know what I thought. But the very first confession I read was an anonymous one, and what struck me more than anything was it was like I was reading myself writing about my own time with Sonny. That seriously threw me off. I guess I just... I don't know. I guess I assumed the behavior people were referencing was going to be something alien to me, something where I would have to take a lot of time to figure out what I thought about it all before I could fairly say anything. But aside from the overt sexual nature of the confession and some of the fallout from that which wasn't reflective in my story, every other behavior was 100% things I had experienced with Sonny, often multiple times, over the course of our friendship/partnership.

I don't even know how to describe that feeling. It was shocking, I think. It was confusing. It was a lot of things I did not expect to feel at that moment. I thought I would be defensive of Sonny if anything, but instead I felt like someone was speaking words for me I had rarely said. I can't even properly explain how completely unexpected that was, and how just completely fucking bizarre. These were the people I'd been told were the enemy, so why did they sound like me? How could they say words I knew they would have no way of repeating from me, because I'd told almost no one those words myself? How could I know it all as anything other than the complete and honest truth in that startling moment?

I scrolled down to see the next confession, and in the interim between the confessions I kept seeing people mention a name, saying if this was true then... It was clear whatever they were talking about felt particularly fucked up to them, but they were only commenting and reacting so I didn't know the context. I had a little bit of a feeling of... I don't know what, maybe something ominous.

But then I got to it. The second confession I read. The one that really got to me.

Because that confession was signed. And I remember the person who signed it.

This is the confession: <https://twitter.com/sweetsakuradoll/status/972031764766994432> And I think you should read it before you read any further in my post.

I need people to know from the start that I believe Noah, and I think—no, I *know* you should too. I don't know anything about the books being written about his life, because I haven't read those books, and I didn't know all of the details of Noah's situation. But I believe him without question, because even though I didn't know a lot of what was happening, everything I do remember fits exactly with what he said.

Let me tell you about Noah. Noah was lovely. He was a sweetheart. I really, really liked Noah.

What I remember is that Noah had liked photography, and maybe had some on his tumblr. I thought that was really cool. I'd started my tumblr blog with photography only; I had these grand plans of sharing photographs I'd taken and writing little vignettes about them. It didn't take long for my tumblr to degrade into a bunch of random reblogs, but for a short time it was photography.

He was the first person I remember seeing who had a bunch of photography too, or maybe he commented on mine. I don't remember. I remember we kind of nerded over photos so I even, at one point, made a tumblr post of photos I'd taken of nature so I could show him. He commented about how beautiful it was, made a reference to another conversation we'd had. I remember names he mentioned in his confession. Honestly, I kind of remember all the references to his life he made, although I don't think I ever knew many details. Just a general overview.

I remember that Noah and I talked on and off, and I always liked him. He seemed like a great guy. He's absolutely right that he didn't come into anything as a sycophant, that the fandom was kind of small back then, and from what I recall yeah, he was the only guy. There had been other guys before him, but they were mostly on our forum on our old site, not really in the tumblr arena. He was a little shy; he wasn't used to talking to writers of stories, but he never did the thing I'd seen people do around Sonny where they kind of acted like he was a god who could do no wrong. At least, not that I saw. He didn't treat me like anyone other than another human being. He was just a guy talking to us about whatever we were talking about.

I remember I wanted to be friends with Noah. But a lot of times what happened was this: if people met Sonny or me alone first, long before meeting the other, it usually became a situation where if they remained friends, they remained friends with the first person they knew.

But if someone met both of us around the same time, inevitably they always gravitated to Sonny. And I usually felt like I didn't really have the right to keep trying to push things with people because I was aware that I was less interesting than Sonny. I usually felt like I wasn't as good of a writer, I knew that people liked his characters more, he had more fans and followers, and his fans were more hardcore than mine. (I don't really like the word 'fan' but it's the easiest way to convey the concept in this entire post so I keep using it for that reason)

I felt like it was inevitable that they would always want to be Sonny's friend more than my friend. I understood that; he was always a lot more vibrant than I was, and in the m/m genre, I felt that people also thought he was more special because he was a bisexual man and he was charismatic but also would say controversial things. And I was just another chick writing m/m, and not even an interesting one at that.

He was very New York, and I am very Midwestern. People call his home the Big Apple and know of it worldwide as something glamorous and intriguing; people call my home "flyover country" and dismiss us like country bumpkins who don't exist. So even though it made me sad every time this happened, especially with ICoS readers I genuinely really liked and connected with and wanted to be friends with, I didn't want to impose on anyone. So I just tried to connect whenever people were interested and if they lost interest in me, I understood and I still liked them and saw them as a friend but I didn't want to bug them by tracking them down.

This sort of thing had happened so often by this point that I just expected it. I've always felt a little bit invisible so it made sense to me this happened with a bunch of different people over a long time period. I just thought they liked him more, and they interacted with him more than me completely of their own volition, completely in their right mind, because who wouldn't choose Sonny over Ais, really?

That was how I felt for many years, and certainly around that time.

Anyway, so Noah and I talked enough for me to heart him as a human being, but at some point Noah and Sonny talked way more than I ever talked to Noah. I remember that Sonny mentioned



things now and then. I wish I remember more details, but I don't. But I do know I was given indication they were flirting or they had some sort of thing. I don't know for sure because it's been so long, but if I had to guess I'd say I was probably told Noah instigated it, because that was usually the story.

Regardless, I'm almost positive Sonny referenced them being a thing because I feel like I remember thinking that seemed not good, for many reasons, not the least of which being Noah was so young. I thought he was 22, but still, that seemed too young to me. But then again, who was I to judge two people who liked each other, regardless of age difference? I didn't care about the amount of age difference between two consenting adults, it just seemed like in this case, it put Noah in a more vulnerable place. But what did I know? I was always told I was wrong.

Honestly, I can't remember if I specifically said anything to Sonny about Noah, or if by this point I was tired of saying things and knowing he wouldn't hear them or he would make me feel like I was overreacting or misinterpreting. I started believing I was probably wrong in my intuition, that I probably didn't know what I was talking about.

Even so, when I felt I could say anything, I told Sonny I didn't think it was appropriate to be so sexual with people, and I told him to stop posting such sexual things so publicly. I remember one time on tumblr he said on some Q&A that he'd fuck a fan if they wanted or something and I was like dude that's not okay. He said it was fine.

Because he came to me often enough with stories of him being the unwanted victim of someone's attention, but I also had seen and knew at least a little how he interacted with some people, I'd tell him that he could come off as flirtatious sometimes, that it might lead people to think he felt something other than he felt, and that if he just pulled away or stonewalled them when he didn't want to deal with them anymore, of course they'd get upset. I told him the best way to avoid that was to be more careful going into conversations or relationships. And I tried to recommend he have a conversation with the person about how he felt, to set boundaries, before just dropping or blocking someone. But I felt bad having to say this to the victim, even though I also felt that I *should* say it to help him in the future, because I felt that the flirtatious aspect of his personality was probably a factor in this cycle always happening.

He used to do things like where he'd post something even after I said I didn't think it was a good idea, and then I would later find out he posted it, and I'd be like dude you should probably reconsider, and he'd say everything is fine, and I'd say no but I'm worried this or that will happen, and he'd say you're overreacting, you're paranoid, you don't know what you're talking about, and we'd just get caught in this cycle until I stopped saying anything because I felt like a nagging jerk. Sometimes he'd ice me out if I said too much or wouldn't stop, sometimes he'd make me feel like an idiot for it, sometimes he'd seemingly agree but then do exactly what I recommended against later, sometimes he seemed to listen, sometimes he seemed grateful.

But I always felt like an asshole to have to keep saying things over and over. It made me feel like maybe he thought I was patronizing or condescending to keep saying these things, especially because from what I knew he was someone who had dealt with a lot of trauma in his life so that made me even more of an asshole friend, trying to dictate how he coped. And yet I felt like I had to keep saying them because he was my friend and I wanted the best for him, and I didn't want things to keep getting fucked up because the same cycles would continue to play over and over. There were a lot of times where I felt like he just wasn't listening to me anymore, but because sometimes he still did, I still said the words when I could. Other times I just silenced myself, tired of the argument. After a point it gets exhausting being even on the sidelines of

those cycles, because you always end up watching someone be hurt and you can't do anything to stop it.

I was never comfortable with being anything other than very careful, respectful, and kind to fans, though. I don't think I knew to frame it in my mind at the time as a power differential but I feel like that's what it is, inherently. Until everyone feels equal, I feel like you have to be very respectful in order to be truly kind to that other person. I'd felt that way all throughout ICoS, and would have still felt that way at that time with Noah.

We'd finished posting the last chapter of ICoS in early 2013, so the series was probably over by the time Noah arrived. I feel like even after Noah and I stopped talking as much directly, I still heard references from Sonny that he was around, and I think I still saw him on my tumblr feed.

In the course of writing this, I found an old chat from 2014 where a mutual friend and I were talking about the anonymous hate messages people received if they were perceived to be too close to Sonny. My friend Ashley got it a lot. I rarely did, which always surprised me. And in that chat, I commented that Noah was getting attacked, too. I don't remember how I knew that, whether he told me or I saw it on my feed, but either way he was once again collateral damage like so many other people had been.

Based on that chat I can see that apparently at that point, when Noah was still around, we'd already been told a story by Sonny of why we weren't hearing about him as much anymore. It was a story which made Sonny a victim of lies Noah told. I can see in that chat that I didn't believe it. I thought it didn't make sense because I felt like I knew Noah to some extent. I thought it was a case of miscommunication and probably Sonny misinterpreting evidence I was told about but I never saw. Even in the chat I told the person I liked Noah.

Somewhere along the line, it transitioned and I didn't see or hear about Noah as much, and then eventually I didn't hear about him at all.

I wondered where he went. It made me sad, because I liked him. But Sonny was convinced he was a liar and I felt like I was in the same weird position I always ended up being--able to see both sides, feeling like a jerk if I tried to be devil's advocate, never knowing the full story but if I knew both people, finding reasons to understand how things got to that point without either side being malicious.

Sometimes I felt terrible feeling like this but ultimately, I knew that for many people, after a point of knowing Sonny, it might be healthiest for them to just step away. I knew I'd wanted to do that at times but felt like I couldn't mostly because of ICoS. For me, I always found reasons to believe in him again, or when I didn't, I just maintained whatever balance I could. But we always had ICoS between us, while back then no one else had that connection they couldn't break. I felt that if someone else felt healthiest stepping away, if they disappeared because they liked Sonny more than me but then Sonny made them too upset to stay, I wasn't going to interfere and try to bring them back into anything which might make them feel unhappy. I figured they were doing what made them feel happiest, and for that I wished them the best.

It wasn't that I saw Sonny as a pariah or anything, because the stories he told me always framed him as a victim, but I knew exactly how Sonny could make you feel at times, I knew exactly how upsetting that could be, and I also knew that if he was telling the truth and things weren't distorted accidentally by misinterpretation, then it was healthiest and best for everyone involved if distance was created between the people involved in the latest destructive cycle.

Eventually, I never heard from Noah again. That had happened with other people too, and it always made me sad, but I thought maybe people just stopped liking the series, or maybe they got out of the fandom, or maybe they got busy in real life, or maybe all sorts of reasons because people come and go from the internet all the time. I was sad because I liked Noah, but I thought maybe he was less stressed wherever he was or whatever he was doing. I thought that if Noah left, it was because he was making the best choice for himself instead of getting caught up in something that would only upset him.

Over time I forgot about it all, until I saw his name on that twitter thread. And I read his confession, where he explained what was actually happening on the other side of things.

All I could think was what the actual fucking HELL?! And I was so fucking infuriated.

That is not okay on any level. Nothing at all about it is okay. No one deserves any of that, so to say Noah didn't deserve it is in a lot of ways an obvious statement--but also, because I knew him, because I liked him, because this is one case where I was involved just enough to actually know background information that fits in perfectly with what he's saying, because of so many reasons and more--

*Noah did not fucking deserve that.*

It makes me want to cry. It's super fucking hard because I hate that I was in such proximity and didn't know he was so hurt. I hate that I didn't realize what actually was happening. I hate that I didn't know to reach out and be like "hey bro, where'd you go? I like you." But at the same time, because of my connection to Sonny, I also understand completely how even if I'd thought to do that back then (or maybe even if I did and I've since forgotten), he would have had good reason to say nothing or want to avoid me just for his own mental health.

Noah, if you ever see this: I hope it's okay with you that I said any of this at all. I can't imagine how difficult it must have been for you to go through all of that, or how much courage you had to muster to write it all down, to submit it, and to even include your name. If I were in your place, I can only imagine I would have been terrified-- thinking maybe I wouldn't be believed, maybe somehow I would now be attacked, maybe all sorts of things. Everything has blown up so much after all of this that I don't know if you feel relieved or terrified right now, or something else entirely. I hope I didn't make anything worse for you or make you feel even more uncomfortable by highlighting any of this. I tried not to include any details which may make you feel like I was saying anything publicly you would not have said, yourself. I hope it wasn't too upsetting to bring up any of this, even to know vaguely the story Sonny was telling on the other side.

The last thing I want to do is hurt you further in any of this, but at the same time, I wanted people to know you aren't lying.

More than anything, Noah, I am so, so sorry I didn't know about any of that, at least not in the way it was really happening. I am so sorry something you cared about was so affected by all of this. I am so sorry you felt voiceless and alone. I am so sorry you had to deal with anything like this, especially without feeling like you had someone to back you up. I am so sorry I wasn't able to help you. I am so sorry your trust was taken, and then your life story was taken and used for profit. I am so sorry for all the pain you went through at that time, and any repercussions that may continue to affect you even now. I hope you were able to get help to deal with any of this.

I am also so proud of you for making that post, and being willing to put your name on it. Because you did, I knew immediately who you were. I was able to immediately recognize you, remember you and how great you were, how much I liked you. That gave me the opportunity to back up what I can of your story, which hopefully means for people who are anonymous who gave similar stories, maybe it will help people believe them too.

And I want to thank you, Noah, and the person behind that twitter thread. Because of you, for the first time I allowed myself to recognize some things that had happened in my own life. For the first time in a long time, I let myself believe I wasn't crazy or an awful human being for being upset about things that had happened. For the first time, I felt like I would help more than hurt others if I ever shared my story. It's still difficult to do, because this is all still new information to me so I still feel caught in a strange position, but I can't hear your words and pretend part of them were never mine.

## THE YEAR

How do I even tell this? So many years have passed and I spent so much time doubting my own thoughts that it's difficult to know where to start. I have also felt such loyalty to other people and who they can be that I've always felt reticent to publicly say anything that could hurt anyone. I can't possibly talk about everything, and everything cycled so much that things weren't always constantly one way or another. But there are some highlights, and one incident in particular that changed a lot for me and my blind trust in Sonny.

Before I say anything, I want to make one thing very clear from the start: I love ICoS. I absolutely love it. I love the story, the world, the characters, I love how fun it was to research, how fun it was to write (even if sometimes it was also stressful). I love all the people I had the honor of meeting all around the world as a result of it. I love the stories you told us, and the inspiration ICoS provided some of you, and the incredibly talented creative works of art made in honor of the series, from music to fanart to fanfics to even tattoos.

You are all, and have always been, completely amazing. I have always wanted to continue writing in that world again. Although I know everything recently might change how you feel about the series because of how you feel about Sonny, and although that would make me very sad to know you had something you loved or appreciated be affected by any of this, I also understand and won't blame you. You need to do what is best and healthiest for you. Please always keep your stability and happiness as your top priority.

One of the reasons I never planned to talk about any of this publicly was because I didn't know if anyone might possibly be upset or hurt by it. I've always especially worried about hurting ICoS fans. If they were hurt, upset, or disappointed by any of this, it didn't seem worth it to me. I preferred to deal with things quietly on my own instead, I guess thinking I was protecting others in some strange form.

But now, because of the current circumstances, I feel like I'd be doing more of a disservice to some people if I didn't say anything. I still feel like I have to apologize in advance, and don't know if that's dumb of me or if I'm a jerk not to.

I don't want this preamble to make it sound like what I'm going to talk about is more dramatic than it really is, it's just that I had a decade of telling myself that it's fine and I don't need to mention it ever, so I feel really hesitant to say anything at all.

Regardless, please don't doubt how much I have loved and continue to love ICoS and everyone involved. Just because the background of it all wasn't always the best situation for me, doesn't mean it takes away any of my positive and grateful feelings for the series as a whole. I'm still very grateful I had a chance to be involved in something that was so detailed and complicated and spanned such a long period of time, which gave me the opportunity to meet so many people from literally all around the world. If you ever sent me or us anything, by the way, and if it ever made its way to me, trust me, I have it still and I love it still and I have it on display or I've placed it somewhere that makes me happy. I continue to value it, as I value you.

Just know that is a truth before you read the rest.

I should give a little context about how things were for me going into this incident. In the process of looking for some information to write this post, I ran across some old diary entries. I'm not sharing them in their entirety, but two of them seemed particularly relevant. In a bizarre twist, the two entries I'll excerpt here were 11 years and 10 years ago, almost to the date.

The first entry I'm sharing started with me talking about one of many arguments Sonny and I had. This time, I was upset that I felt like he was dismissing and discounting my experience in something which I felt he had a bias against. I felt he was being unfair to this topic, and it upset me because I felt that even though I wasn't going to tell him how to feel about the topic itself, couldn't he at least take into account my personality, couldn't he know that I generally try to be a fair person, and so if I have experience in something which was directly opposed to his assumption of the greater whole, could he not at least be willing to take that into account and not attack the entire topic as a lump sum? Couldn't he accept, like I could, that the situation was therefore more nuanced, and we could discuss it and find a way for both of us to be telling the truth about our own life experiences without acting like one of us had to be right and the other wrong, and of course the person who was right was Sonny? It upset me because I felt like I was more willing to listen to him and his side than he was willing to listen to mine. That's where this entry's excerpt starts below, after I was explaining that entire situation.

Also, I've always been more of a dog-person than a people-person. Our dogs have always been my greatest emotional support, like my children. My family's beloved dog had been killed by a car unexpectedly sometime within the year previous to this entry, maybe within months. Sonny should have known, because I can't imagine I didn't tell him when it happened.

\* \* \*

*3/13/2007, 9:11 pm*

so i was irritated and i was talking to sonny and all pissed off and then at one point i said

i wanted a warm summer rain and a dog.

i went to light my candles and incense and i just broke down. the word 'dog' made me remember that my dog is dead and suddenly i realized i didn't have anyone there to comfort me. my roommate had to go somewhere and sonny was there on aim but all distracted. i was seriously distraught and angry and idk. i always ask him how he's doing and why he's upset and i'm always really patient and i do honestly care. sometimes he does the same to me and other times i can tell he's just too distracted. which is fine. but sometimes... im really freaking out and idk i need someone to ask me one more time if i'm ok, or care to ask me why i'm acting like i am.

i started crying. i just... couldn't stop. i cried loud wrenching breathy sobs and then i'd breathe heavily, try to stop, take a second and then cry again. i dug my hands in my hair but there isnt enough to properly hold. i kept hunching over, i dropped to the floor at one point, i kept trying so hard to stop.

id find myself whispering, "It's ok, it's ok," but then i'd start crying again even harder. that happened several times before i realized i couldnt say that anymore. i started whispering, "it's NOT okay... it's not okay..." and that made it worse because it was true. i tried to say "you're fine" to myself but i knew i wasn't so i just cried more. i tried so hard. i kept fucking trying to stop and it kept coming back. i couldnt breathe through my nose; i was having a fucking minor breakdown and i couldnt even say why. i wrote a few things to sonny but i dont think he understood what i meant because he didnt respond. or else he was too busy. or just didnt care.

finally i realized i just. i had nothing i could do.

it was sort of scary or maybe just sad. i couldnt think of a single thing that would make it better, that could make me forget. it was when i was kneeling on the ground very carefully putting socks back in my drawer and shoving it shut, and the thought crossed my mind that too bad i wasnt alcoholic because then this would be easier but hey there was vodka in the kitchen i could always try, that i realized i was seriously fucking upset and fucked up and needed to do something.

i went back to the screen, hoping i could html shit and forget about it. i was absently looking at chapter one and saw 'truman' and realized harry from later chapters was the same guy. i told sonny i hadnt realized that and he responded immediately - "really".

...

id just told him i was seriously fucked up today, other shit i dont remember, he said nothing. then i make some totally inane comment and he responds immediately.

idk. that really upset me. sometimes it's like... he's the only person i ever feel like i can talk to but. i dont think he cares as much when it counts. there have been several times when i was sitting right there at the comp and he's online and active and im fucking freaking out and just fucked up and i dont feel like i can talk to him about it. because he's hanging with mike or playing WoW or watching fucking Iron Chef. because he's on the phone with someone and bitching to me about how much he hates them.

idk.

i sound mean and im not trying to be. because the bottom line is, i'm the one not reaching out. i'm the one stopping myself because i perceive that he has something more important going on. yet at the same time im resentful that he's spending time on

what i see in the midst of my crisis as trivial things. but..

i dont know.

i think i must be stupid for thinking that if im seriously breaking down that it's still not important enough to bother someone from watching a show they dont particularly care for. i have that little feeling of worth sometimes.

so i told him i couldnt fucking handle this i had to go i didnt know where or when id be back and i disappeared for an hour. i walked up and down the apartment, trying so hard to control myself and i'd start to be ok and it'd start to hit me again. and i didn't even know why i was so upset but i couldnt stop it. so i finally rather desperately put in Family Guy and i watched a few episodes and they finally distracted me enough that i was evened out, back in control.

able to come in here and write this without even a hint of tears like before.

an hour ago i was wailing and hunched over gasping for breath in this same position and now im staring at the screen impassively writing about it and not feeling anything.

is there something wrong with me?

\* \* \*

During the time I had known Sonny, especially early on, I had genuine reason to worry about his health and safety based on stories he told me about what was happening in his life. And what made it worse was he would be around a lot, but sometimes he would just disappear with no warning, and then come back some time later. Sometimes something dramatic had happened, other times it was much more mundane. I used to ask for his phone number because of this; I wanted to be able to text him just to make sure he was okay. But he was really uncomfortable with that, and said he hated talking on the phone. In all fairness, it was kind of weird to exchange phone numbers at that time online, so I understood his hesitation. But I was so worried that I would always end up bringing it up again, because he was my friend, and I wanted him to be okay.

In the midst of my constant worry about his safety, one night we were talking late into the night about who knows what. Out of nowhere he said to me, "If I ever stop coming online or stop answering your messages, I could be dead and you would never know it. You would just never hear from me again."

I was stunned and extremely upset. I think soon after he must have been like, "Well, goodnight!" or something, because for whatever reason we didn't talk about it that night. Or maybe I was just too shocked by the whole thing. It felt so scary and upsetting to have him so bluntly put that out there and give me no way to mitigate it by still refusing to give me his number.

The next time I saw him, I brought it up. I don't remember my wording but it was along the lines of, "Hey, what was that about?" He acted like he had no idea what I was talking about. So then I brought up what he said and he was adamant he never said it. I was frustrated he would be so blatantly certain of that when he knew it was written out, he knew I saved almost all our chat logs, I could go back and freaking quote the damn thing. In fact, maybe I did. I don't remember, I just remember this was one thing I was unwilling to let slide, to let him tell me I was remembering things incorrectly or I was wrong when I knew damn well I wasn't.

When it became clear I wasn't letting it go and I just wanted to know why he would say something so hurtful when I just was worried about him, he eventually said, "Oh, well, I was so high last night I don't remember what I said."

He used to do that; he would say something misleading or kind of mean or whatever, and later tell me he was so drunk or so high he didn't really remember. Given everything I knew of Sonny at that time, that made complete sense, but it still felt shitty to expect me to be okay with him saying or doing hurtful things just because he decided to drink or use.

But that was the thing about Sonny; he was very upfront about his situation, his problems. He always made it feel like if you had a problem with any of it, it was up to you to not get involved with him in the first place. I liked him as a person, he was a really good friend to me most of the time in the beginning, so I just had to always let it go, because I never knew if he would be dead the next time I reached out. I never knew if I would just suddenly, without warning, lose someone important to me, and never even know the truth of whether he was dead and gone or if he had simply decided I wasn't important enough to bother telling he was going offline for awhile.

It left an undercurrent of anxiety and uncertainty in me for many years, because I cared about him, I wanted him to be happy and okay. I wanted him to get better. But after a point in our friendship, I always felt like he held more cards than I did. I was always just a little lower in the scale, so I had to be careful to maintain the balance for both of us.

I don't know exactly when the story I'll tell happened, but based on the original release dates of Evenfall and Afterimage, and based on my memory of part of it occurring around the same time as something in my life, I think it probably happened from before October 2007 through around January 2009. I'm pretty sure it didn't go all the way back to 2006 but I can't say for certain. I may be off on the timeline a bit, but I think it happened around there. I'm not going to read through all my files to find out exactly, because I don't think that's healthy, helpful, or productive.

What happened was this: for many, various reasons (including situations like the entry I shared above), I had felt for some time that I cared more about Sonny than Sonny cared about me. It wasn't a love thing, I just saw him as a very close friend, and sometimes I thought he felt the same way, and other times I felt like he didn't.

This whole thing had been building in me for some time, and I felt really confused about it all, because I didn't like feeling so upset all the time, and I couldn't figure out what I was doing wrong, and I couldn't decide if I was being an asshole by expecting more of Sonny. It seemed unfair to be the way I was being, so I kept trying to stop myself, but I also felt like just wanting to be friends and write the story we were writing shouldn't be too much to ask.

I guess I didn't realize things were so strained for me even going up into the situation, but that entry above tells me it was. I have no idea how many upset or distraught days I've blocked from my memory in the years since.



What I know is one day Sonny said something that startled me because it was really unusual for him, something he'd never aimed at me. I didn't know how to interpret it, and although it was framed as something on his end, as usual I figured it was somehow, through a twist of logic, my fault. He wasn't blaming me for anything, it was just a statement he made that threw me off. He didn't mention it again as if he'd forgotten he said it, but it stuck in my head.

After a lot of thinking, I thought I had figured out what our problem was, why we were so strained. Maybe this or that thing had been my fault, maybe I was making him uncomfortable by him thinking I was implying something, and if so that was an easy fix.

I wrote him an email basically saying I was sorry if I had done anything wrong/been misleading, and that when this or that thing happened I realized afterward he might have interpreted it this way but I meant it that way, and so on. Basically assuring him he didn't have to worry, I'd figured out how I was the problem but now I knew so I could fix it. He had always been big on brutal honesty, so even though I tried wording it as best I could and I think I even reread it a few times to make sure, I figured it wasn't a big deal. We were friends. If he didn't get something I said, it was easy for him to ask questions to clarify and I could easily answer. I thought I was making things easier on us by realizing a lot of this was probably my fault.

Except, my email had the exact opposite effect I expected.

He interpreted it as me saying a lot of shitty things about him, and he got pissed at me and shut me out completely. The email he wrote back was pointed and furious and said I was way out of line. I don't remember if he said it outright or if it was clear from inference, but he didn't want anything to do with me from then on.

In the course of one email, I went from what I thought of as a good friend and co-writer of years, to someone who was dead to him.

I was really surprised. I tried to tell him he was interpreting it the exact opposite of what I was saying and I was sorry if my wording had been that shitty but couldn't we talk? But it didn't matter. He ignored anything I said, and only interpreted my words in the worst possible way. Then he stopped listening to me at all. If I emailed him, messaged him, anything, he ignored it as if I didn't exist.

Thus began the long months of me feeling worse and worse and worse.

Here's where it can get particularly long from going too much in detail, but suffice it to say, I was iced out completely. During that time, he hung out publicly all buddy buddy with people he'd previously told me at length how he hated or didn't trust, and started working on other projects even though we were supposed to still write ICoS. But we couldn't now, because I wrote that email.

Although ICoS had originally started because he had asked me one night to write a story with him, and although he'd had the idea to share it online, over time I took care of the majority of the public work. I maintained and owned the website, coded and posted the chapters, answered almost all the emails to our shared inbox, did the majority of the talking to the readers except

cases where he directly talked to people. As the years passed, it fell more and more on me. This wasn't a bad thing, because I like talking to people, but I'm also an honest person who hates lying, so when I can't be truthful about something it stresses me out.

Before this long period, we had finished posting the first book (Evenfall) and were talking about writing more. Now, I was caught in a situation where we had kind people from all over the world who had read our story and wanted to talk about it, wanted to ask for more, and I didn't know the answer to that question because Sonny hated me now, but I thought maybe things would change once he realized he'd misinterpreted it. I didn't want to disappoint the readers, I didn't want to make them sad or hurt them, and I also wanted to write more in the series. So I couldn't tell them any of this. If I said anything privately or publicly, I felt like I'd be betraying Sonny as a friend. And I felt I would be all but guaranteeing we'd never be able to finish ICoS, because then Sonny would really be pissed, and all I'd be doing was upsetting or disappointing people in the process. That didn't seem fair to anyone.

Sonny had left to do other things, but I stayed behind to talk to others, to try to remain as kind and grateful as I could to everyone, to not let the readers feel left behind as well. I just wanted to be his friend, I just wanted to write ICoS, I felt like all of this was my fault, I felt like I was letting everyone down.

The longer that went, the worst I felt, and the more I felt like I couldn't tell anyone.

It may sound like a small thing, but I was already not in the best mindset before any of this. And I loved ICoS; it was my way of having fun, of releasing stress. And I had thought Sonny was a best friend. So to suddenly be caught between all these loyalties, to have to keep going back to the thing that had been my escape and now represented my greatest anxiety and stress, while not lying to anyone but also trying to thank them and be as kind as possible and not worry anyone, over and over again without telling anyone about any of the background... It was tearing me apart. It was difficult and depressing, because I didn't know how to fix it since I still wasn't fully sure what I'd done wrong in the first place.

For months, I tried to maintain this balance. It was hard, because as time passed, as I saw more things happening online with him acting obviously joking and normal, as I saw new emails pop up from such sweet people who just wanted to share their love and ask for a continuation, I started feeling more and more despair. I didn't know what to do. I felt trapped by trying not to hurt anyone. I just wanted everything to be okay again so the readers could be happy, and I could have fun writing again, and I wouldn't feel alienated in my online life now because that was the place I had first run to so I wouldn't feel so Othered like I often did in real life. And of course in addition, during all of this, I was working my full time job trying to deal with all of that stress, too.

I've had suicidal ideation multiple times in my life. More than once, I detailed exactly in my head how I would kill myself. I always tried to figure out the perfect way to end my life while minimally invading others' in the process. Sonny knew this, too, of course, because I told him everything.

I think this was the time period where I got so close to figuring out all the details that I had a moment of panic. I don't remember enough of that time to be able to say more than that, except to say I never did perfect my plan.

But that was my state of mind, so completely off-kilter, so completely feeling trapped and not knowing what to do, so lost, so upset, so everything so completely. I'm not even describing it well enough because I think I felt it all so intensely that even now I kind of blocked a lot of the emotion from my memory.

I think it was during this time that I finally got so desperate I needed to go to someone, to just one place, to tell me the email hadn't been so terrible it deserved all this. But where could I go? My real life friends knew some of what was going on but they only knew Sonny from my stories, and most of them thought he was an asshole. So if I tried telling them about all this, they may say it was his fault, but they didn't really know him. I didn't know if I'd been misrepresenting him, so could I really rely on that as objective feedback to tell me I wasn't so horrifically in the wrong that I deserved this? I couldn't go public about the issue because I didn't want to upset anyone or hurt anyone, I didn't want to ruin the chances of Sonny being my friend again, I didn't want to disappoint anyone—not about myself, and not about Sonny, and not about anything. And I didn't want to throw private things out into public for a friend regardless of the rest; that just didn't seem right.

We had limited mutual friends at that point. Most of them didn't talk to both of us enough for me to feel safe. The majority of them had become, as always, more Sonny's friend than mine. So I couldn't go to them. Some who I might have tried talking to weren't around, or else I was too worried for some reason, so I couldn't go to them.

But there was one person I thought of, a mutual friend who had sort of remained both our friends, even though he was a still a little more Sonny's than mine. But he and I got along well, I thought, and I'd talked to him alone many times, and he was a guy so maybe he would understand all of this. Maybe he could help me somehow understand what was happening, maybe he could help me figure out how to fix it. I hated to pull anyone else into it at all but he was my friend too and I was so desperate and so raw and just flailing around for anyone to back me up in any way that I finally thought maybe it would be okay this one time to reach out.

I sent him a message, asking for help as fairly as I could, not going super into detail but overviewing it just enough so he would truly understand why I was so desperate. It took me so long to figure out the wording on that message, my heart pounding as I stared at it, as I dared hit enter. But he was the only one I could ask. I just wanted to hear someone say whatever was going on was something they were willing to hear me out on, willing to tell me at least that I wasn't wrong in questioning the intensity of Sonny's reaction or if they did think I was overreacting, be willing to tell me how and why and just let me find some sort of stability in any of this.

But he just immediately shut me down. I don't remember exactly what he told me other than that it was inappropriate for me to reach out to him about any of this and I shouldn't have done it. It sounded like he was disappointed in me, and kind of upset. Because, yeah, he talked to both of us but he was Sonny's friend more than mine and now I put him in an awkward position. I shouldn't reach out to him again on this. "Bros before hos," he told me, a little apologetically, but just as bluntly all the same. I can't even describe how I felt, seeing that.

Somewhere I think around here, I learned through online or someone messaging me that Sonny had liver cancer. He didn't tell me himself. I emailed him about it eventually, worried about him, but I don't remember if he replied to me right away or if it took a few times before he answered.

If you can't tell by now, I really hate being vulnerable in public. I absolutely hate crying in front of anyone. Usually, the more genuinely upset I am, the more I automatically block my expression. The only times I've cried at work have been related to Sonny, because I was so upset even my natural coping mechanisms weren't enough. I think one of the times was around here. I just remember one day suddenly it was too much, and I couldn't contain it, and that horrified me because I couldn't stand the idea of crying at my desk. I had to walk out of work and go sit in my car where I could cry where no one could hear or see me. And even then I was worried my coworkers would go by, I was worried I was inconveniencing people by being gone, I was worried my eyes would be red and my makeup would be smeared and I wouldn't be able to get it together to go back in there in a normal amount of time. I was worried I couldn't just get my fucking shit together and deal with this like always.

It'll be fine, I told myself. Just stop crying and you're fine. You'll figure it out. You always do.

Time passed. Things didn't change. Until suddenly, it did.

Maybe it was because I was concerned about his cancer or maybe it was something else I've forgotten. Somehow, miraculously, Sonny was willing to talk to me again, but it was on very specific terms. What I recall is basically, we were allowed to continue writing ICoS, but I wasn't allowed to think of him as a friend. He would talk to me curtly about the plot or things related to writing, but if I tried straying too far into joking around, or if I tried asking about anything related to his personal life, or sometimes even if I brought up my own life, he coldly shut it down, and sometimes just said he was done writing for the day and we'd have to continue later.

In a lot of ways this was almost harder than not talking to him, but at the same time it was better. We were writing again, at least.

This entry seems like it was probably written around then:

\* \* \*

*3/17/2008, 11:28 pm*

I don't know what I'm feeling.

I'm confused. Resentful? Forgotten? Angry?

I close my eyes and think that I don't know if where I am is where I'm meant to be. I wonder where else I would go.

I feel caught by expectations and loyalties, within myself and those from others toward me, and when I imagine breaking it all off to go my own way I feel at once relieved and utterly lost.

I don't understand.

I don't understand what I want anymore or if I want anything from life.

I get caught in the obsession for productivity and perfection but I don't manage my time properly and I get tired, I get so tired, because all that energy spent around people

exhausts me and when I'm home I just want to sit. And rest. And be productive without activity.

When I think about it objectively, I feel as though where I am at is a place that the 14 or 18 year old me would have felt was ok. I have a pretty good job that pays pretty well, I'm going to classes part time, I'm working on a second "job" for family, and I've co-written a story that's over 1100 pages in Word that people love. I should feel as though I'm at a good place but instead I just feel.. a little empty, in a way.

We started working on the story again and we're both psyched about book 2 and this is all great, this is all excellent, but it keeps pulling me back into the same old cycle that I don't want to be beholden to anymore. I feel like I have to be on his schedule because we'll start with an unspoken schedule of writing on days off and for awhile it will work like clockwork but then suddenly he just won't appear.

And you know, it's quite understandable. Just because I always spend my time online doesn't mean others have to.

The trouble is that with these unspoken schedules I expect something that inevitably doesn't happen and then I feel frustrated and disappointed, and somehow it's as though I lose all will to work on anything that night because it's all a waste.

It's a fatalistic way of looking at things but I've always been that way. When I worked 3-11:30 at night, I used to feel like the day was a waste. I never did anything beforehand because what was the point? It would just make me excited about a day that didn't exist. I want to get rid of this feeling, this beholdenness, this spiderweb strand that never quite lets go and pulls me back subtly every time I think I'm free.

[...]

Do you know, it's sort of like playing DDR... When you start messing up so much you go into the red, and you almost fail but you catch yourself. Even doing all these perfect combos, things which would send the rating into the rainbow colors normally-- even that is not enough. The red remains, flashing, and it's like the debt is so large that even perfection keeps it from being immediately fixed.

I feel like the whole friendship was a mess of missteps and misses until it almost failed, and now even with all that, even with the present, it will take awhile to reach the equilibrium where it can shift over to simple green.

This is not to say he did the missteps or this is his fault or anything like that. It's just that my feeling of belief went into the red, I think, and I'm not sure if it's worth it to get it back to green. So I don't try and I feel like it's best if I keep being disappointed or if I disappoint myself in the situation because then I won't be as tormented.

What a cynical, fatalistic view.

Part of me wants to believe in others but another part doesn't see the point anymore.

Wonders why I should bother. Why anyone should bother with me, either. Why any of us keep struggling when it would be easier to just give up.

[...]

And as for myself?

I have the people who are disappearing one by one to better things. It makes me feel like I can keep retreating and retreating and retreating until I'm covered in shadows and everyone will forget I was here and I will forget that I can ever be reached again.

\* \* \*

Now we were writing Afterimage, which was a particularly charged story. Now, when we were strained in the background already, somehow the consensus online had shifted too. It became Hsin vs Boyd, and felt on some level like Sonny vs Ais. And in that fight, Boyd and Ais will never win.

Now, even when I tried going online at large, I felt like things were my fault because people were so upset with Boyd about different things, and he was my character which made me feel responsible, and I didn't think he was doing anything wrong but if there was such consensus that he was such an asshole, maybe that meant I'd been right all along thinking I was the one being an asshole to Sonny, too. I've always been different than mainstream. This probably showed once more that it was me who was in the wrong. It wasn't that I thought there was anything at all wrong or weird about people forming opinions about the story; I thought that was awesome, actually. And I knew that them getting into the story and feeling some way about a character had absolutely nothing to do with how they felt about me. It was simply that the timing combined with the background didn't help my own thought processes.

If you knew me back then, if you thought I seemed strangely sensitive to the whole Boyd vs Hsin or Sonny vs Ais thing, I'm sorry for any discomfort or inconvenience I may have created. At the time, I was unable to fully keep myself from projecting my insecurities onto that topic because I was so confused and heartbroken in my own life. That same feeling would rear again now and then over the years, if things started getting too intensely a certain way again, and if I felt like Sonny wasn't a reliable friend in the background at the time.

I started feeling more stressed out between everything, because I wanted to be a united front, but at that point it felt like I was lucky enough to be able to write at all.

I think it was during this time, or maybe one of our other falling outs, when I had another interaction. Was it with that same mutual friend as before? Was it someone else? It's hard to remember everything now. I hope any of these mutual friends, if they see any of this now, don't at all feel bad about having said anything. I'm only referencing this now because I remember these specific words and how they tied into my thought process at the time. They had no reason to know everything that was happening, because I didn't want to bug anyone. I'm sure I said a lot of stuff people remember, too, and for that I apologize.

Sonny and I had been on/off curt with each other for a long time but we were still talking so we could keep writing ICoS. For some reason, that mutual friend saw us interacting in a chat, and the reason he knew us in the first place was because he had been an ICoS reader at some point. I don't at all remember anything about the conversation, the context, even the year any of this happened. What I remember is this was another person I really liked, I wanted to be friends with, and again he was more of Sonny's friend than my friend. Which always made me feel like

there was only so much I could say before I felt like I was betraying someone, or else maybe the others in the conversation just wouldn't have my back. Anyway Sonny and I must have been particularly short with each other in this chat, although I don't recall it being as bad as it had been other times.

I remember the friend seemed really sad or upset and then he said something like, "I feel like I'm watching my parents fight before a divorce."

I felt like an extreme asshole. I felt like I was hurting him when that was the last thing I wanted to do. I felt like I was letting him down, letting all ICoS readers down. I felt like if I was going to have a fight with Sonny, I should at least keep it private so I didn't upset anyone else.

All this time, even while we'd been writing, I kept answering the emails, kept trying my best to stay thankful and kind to others, but now the super sweet, well-meaning people were so excited and involved in what we were releasing that they were commenting about where they fell on the Hsin vs Boyd thing. Which was usually on Hsin's side, but not always. Sometimes that included long explanations of why Boyd was the worst. But I was trying to field those emails while Sonny and I tried writing, while also having to act privately like he wasn't a friend I'd known for years because that was his requirement.

When I think back, I probably spent a fair bit of this year screaming internally, *help me help me help me*, but they were words I didn't dare say aloud, and so I silenced them in my own mind.

For some reason, when I look at timestamps, we posted Afterimage for 2 months then stopped for 2 months. I don't remember at all what that reason was. But it was probably because something happened, and I suspect it was something I wasn't happy with, because I remember my mindset one Thanksgiving which I'm pretty sure was that year, during that 2 month hiatus.

I just needed something permanent to save me. I wanted to kill myself sometimes but I could never figure out how to get rid of my body after I was gone without making someone else clean up, so my fucked up mind told me my best options were to fake my death and go to another country to start over, or to buy a house. Something that would save me, something that was tangibly different, that could give me something to hold onto so I could breathe, just breathe. I didn't end up doing either of these things, but boy did I apparently want to go to England at that time (because maybe I could get a work visa?), and boy was I accidentally a real asshole to a poor real estate agent who I called with such fervor to see a house on Thanksgiving Day that I didn't think about how I was making her leave her family, I didn't think about how I was inconveniencing her, I just knew I really needed to see in that house that day because if I didn't, this feeling would leave me and I'd have to rely on my backup plans that even then, in the midst of it all, I knew were a lot crazier, a lot more unstable.

It worked when we looked through that house and the other one on the block, briefly. I liked them, I thought that maybe I could do this, maybe if I just took this step. And then she asked me about how much I could afford, asked me what loan amount the bank had promised, asked me regular real estate agent questions but it was like two hours into looking at two homes. And I had to say wait, I don't know the answers to any of these questions, do I have to talk to a bank before I can look at a house? I thought I should see if I liked the house first so I knew how much to ask for. And she looked at me with such disappointment, I think so frustrated with herself for breaking up her holiday to show some moron some homes she couldn't even afford. She was nice about it, but I felt like the biggest asshole in the world as she locked up the homes behind

us, and as we parted ways. There I was, once again fucking up someone else's life with my inability to properly live my own.

Good job, self, I thought. You're getting real fucking great at that.

Despite my best intentions, during that no-posting period, I got to a point where I realized maybe it really was over. Maybe I was in denial. Maybe I should just give up. I hated to do it, because I loved ICoS and the ICoS community so much, but I was so tired.

I decided I was done.

I was going to stop thinking about a friendship that was clearly gone. Whatever the reasons that friendship had ended, whether or not I agreed with them, maybe I just had to accept it was over.

This wasn't the first time something like this had happened to me with someone close like family, after all.

When I was a kid, I had a childhood best friend for years and years. As cheesy as it sounds, we did that thing where we laid in the grass in her backyard in a warm summer wind, and at night we looked up at the sky and wished on a shooting star that we could be sisters. I'd always desperately wanted a sister and that childhood friend was the answer to that prayer for me, in a lot of ways. We were so close, spending every second together we could. But she was a year older than me, and so even though we had known each other almost as far back as I remembered, when she got to high school a year ahead of me she stopped hanging out with me as much. Then one day she seemed unhappy to see me, and she had these other girls with her I'd never seen before, and she tried to politely tell me to go but I didn't get it, I didn't understand because this was my best friend, my sister. And then she just outright told me she didn't want to see me anymore. She had found someone better in high school. It would be too lame if I hung around her when I came to the same high school the next year. Thanks for everything but goodbye. I saw her in the high school hallways sometimes later, and she would avoid looking at me, as if she'd never seen me in her life.

As hard as that hit me, as difficult as it was to understand at the time, in the end it worked out. Because I didn't have a best friend going into high school, I ended up meeting another girl my age who became my best friend instead, who was a huge force in me learning some important things about myself. She and I both realized together we were Wiccan, and that was our bond, and then it became rpgs, and eventually as everything went forward because of other people I met and befriended in high school, I ended up into anime and manga, and it was through all that I eventually landed in the Gundam Wing fandom when I was 14 or 15. Eventually, from there, I got to where I am now. And that Wiccan best friend is still a friend to this day.

So when all that happened with Sonny, at first I reacted the way I did with my childhood friend. It was happening all over again, and I swear I'd even told him about her so he knew I was sensitive to this. I wondered what I'd done wrong, whether this time I could fix it. This time, there was so much else riding on it. ICoS was a huge factor in me not wanting to give up. It may sound stupid and kind of odd, but I felt like ICoS somehow had become this baby we had between us, and it required joint custody or no custody at all. I literally couldn't finish it on my own because I didn't write more than half the characters, and it's not like I could just drop it off on the side of the road and walk away without thought.



I think maybe I thought, this time I can fix it. *This* time I can figure out what I did wrong. *This* time, I don't have to spend forever passing by nearly-family in the metaphorical hallways, having to pretend I don't know them because that was what they wanted out of me more than anything else: to disappear.

But as time passed, as the situation became more and more dire, and I grew more and more depressed and stressed out and it was affecting my mental health more and more, as I felt more and more caught in a trap I didn't know how to escape, I started trying to think of it like high school. It sucks to lose people so abruptly, but maybe I'd get my Wiccan best friend out of this somehow by letting go instead of fighting to hold on.

I decided I had to give up on ICoS because I had to give up on Sonny. It was over. I had to step away for a while or I would only be making things worse for myself.

At some point, I'd have to figure out how to tell everyone ICoS was never going to be finished, and I'd have to do it in a way which wouldn't hurt them, which would minimize disappointment, which would hide what had been happening between Sonny and me. I stopped trying to reach him, stopped connecting with him. I thought about deleting my online presence entirely, and many times over the course of all of these cycles I also desperately wanted to block Sonny or delete him too but I never could.

This time, though, I was probably the closest I've ever been to deleting myself across the internet. Honestly, I wanted to do that so incredibly much I can't overestimate that feeling.

But I couldn't. Because of ICoS.

Even if the series were to end at that point, there would still be people emailing about it. I couldn't just screw them over. I knew he wouldn't answer our shared email address, and I didn't want them to write into a void of silence. And I didn't want the book to disappear from online if I stopped paying for the website so I was going to have to figure out how to keep that going, too. I decided to give myself a little time to figure out how to do all that.

I had finally completely given up on Sonny and ICoS and had *just* come to accept it when a few days later, he messaged me unexpectedly. Talking in the friendly tone he used to use, like we were best friends again. Just casually chatting as if all that shit in between hadn't happened, like he hadn't iced me out and made me feel like a pariah for over a year, all while I was trying to deal with anything happening in my real life too, and making me cover for ICoS.

I'd not only lost my safe space online during that time, I'd also lost the person I always had been able to rely on, who I had always gone to about stories from my day or who had been there when I needed to vent or I needed someone to tell me everything was okay. I'd lost my outlet in the form of writing, the one thing I'd wanted to do, the one thing I'd wanted to be, my entire life.

It was as if none of that happened from his perspective, none of that mattered. He just hit a reset button and there we were, back to 2 years earlier when everything was fine and dandy.

I thought about not answering, but I did. I was wary because of what had happened, but he was totally normal. He was the way I'd always remembered. He talked about things that had happened in the interim, and I was thrown off but I also was feeling cautiously optimistic.

At some point I brought up the whole thing with our falling out, and then he listened to my explanation like he hadn't before, and then he realized the misunderstanding and he seemed to feel genuinely bad about it. He even asked me why I hadn't said anything publicly during that time. He made it sound like he wouldn't have blamed me if I had (so I assume and certainly hope he wouldn't blame me now for explaining any of this when I didn't all those years ago).

I told him the truth: Because you're my friend, so I didn't want to hurt you.

He seemed to feel even worse, hearing that. He seemed apologetic and like he understood why things had gone the way they went, and that made me feel better. That made me willing to move on. Even though, once again, he was adamant he had never said the thing to me that had spawned the email. I knew for a fact he had, because it wasn't something I would have randomly thought to generate in my own mind. Once again, I considered pulling up that old chat to show him, but it seemed like there was no point. I'd barely gotten him talking to me again. What was the point in rehashing an old issue when the end goal I wanted was to write ICoS and be friends, and not prove who was right about some stupid off-handed comment in the middle of the night over a year ago?

We ended up being able to start writing ICoS again because now it was back like it had been, back to being friends, back to having fun. It wasn't quite as fun as it had been, we weren't as close, but we were still some form of friends just the same.

The biggest thing is we were talking, and we were writing, and I was happy because I love ICoS and I wanted to keep working on it. Because of that, we were able to finish ICoS.

We even joked about the whole incident later, publicly, when enough time had passed. We had a falling out over a misunderstanding, we said, and boy was it a dramatic one but boy did everything work out well in the end.

The whole thing in retrospect had seemed innocently, amusingly, so very Boyd and Hsin.

## AFTER ICoS

The situation around the time of Afterimage or 2007-2009-ish wasn't the only time we had any sort of issues, it was just the most dramatic one. Throughout writing ICoS we were sort of friends again and sort of not, on and off for a lot of the time afterward. He still did things sometimes that were very supportive of me, and other times that made me feel confused or crappy. He had a tendency to not back me up in public but then assure me privately that he understood how I felt. I'd grown so used to it that I was just resigned to the fact that this was Sonny. And if this was Sonny, over time I decided I just couldn't be around him as much.

Our relationship became long silences scattered in between with normal moments of working on a short project or, if we were lucky, talking about the day or giving short updates. But that stopped over time too, for the most part. For the last several years, I knew next to nothing about his personal life anymore, whether big or small, despite there having been a time 15 years ago when I knew everything.

We had plans to work more on ICoS-related things but the schedule was usually more dictated by him than by me, because he was the one who was so busy. Sometimes we'd set a date when we were going to work on something and it would come and go, and sometimes I'd be glad because I was working on something else, but other times it was a little sad because I did think it would be fun to write and edit more of the series. Whenever readers asked me about a sequel, I told them the truth as far as I knew it from the last time we'd spoken, which was usually that there was still a chance we'd write something. But as the years passed, I didn't know when exactly that would be because our scheduled times kept coming and going, and then we stopped scheduling at all.

There were times he told me he couldn't work on something because he was way too busy with solo work so he couldn't possibly co-write anything with me, and then next thing I knew, I was surprised to hear he'd written an entire book and/or series with a new co-author. Like everything else by that point with Sonny, I would have to find out purely by accident. I'd run across a tweet in one of the few times I ventured on twitter, for instance, or someone would mention it to me in passing. It wasn't like I cared that he was doing other collabs, it's just, I thought as a friend or at least as a former collaborator, he'd be excited enough about it to even just mention it to me once before it happened, or in the process, or even after it was published. Or even give that as the reason he couldn't co-write, not that he was so busy with solo stories.

But I almost never heard anything directly from Sonny anymore. I had to find out these things when I stumbled across it online.

Because that disconnect was too difficult for me, many years ago I stopped reading anything Sonny posted online, or anything related to him or the genre, and I didn't really go into the genre or on social media much at all. I was tired, and I didn't want to feel tired anymore.

One time I remember I happened to see him online one day, during the same general years where he kept saying he was crazy busy and that was why we couldn't write (and I assumed was also why he wasn't talking to me much). We talked a bit and then I said something like, "Oh sorry, I know you're super busy." And he said something like, "Oh, no I'm not. I just sit around at night doing nothing." Which made me feel like, then why the hell don't you have time for me anymore?

Once, I told him I felt like we were soulless business partners because of this continued disconnect, and he seemed hurt and upset at that wording. I said all I wanted was to feel like a friend, like just get a message here and there about any big or small thing, it didn't even matter. I wasn't expecting 24/7 updates on life, just to feel remembered, I guess. I think he promised to try harder, and if I recall for a little while he did, but then as always happened with Sonny, that expectation fell by the wayside. I did feel guilty right after telling him that, because he'd seemed hurt, so I made more of a concerted effort to try to support him. But it also seemed like he didn't necessarily need my support, since he was doing so well with his own brand.

When I looked on his site years ago, I noticed that he didn't mention me at all in the part about ICoS, and didn't even make it clear it was co-written. Someone unfamiliar with our history could easily assume he wrote the entire series alone. I brought it up because that upset me, and he kind of acted like it shouldn't be that big of a deal and kind of acted like he hadn't really known. He fixed it, I think, but I'm not sure if that stayed.

Sometimes I would hear wind about situations that would come up regarding the genre or anyone else online, but it wasn't often. When that happened, it was usually Sonny telling me what the context was and what was going on, with evidence in part based on private conversations or other things I hadn't seen. I probably never got the full story, because nothing I heard ever reflected fully what's come out now. At the time, the parts I heard always framed the situations as everyone else behaving immensely poorly and/or him being the victim of someone obsessed with him, or harassment, or something else. That fell so in line with the cycles I was used to around Sonny that it became exhausting. I knew it didn't matter what I would say, because for all that he used to tell me he didn't like drama, it felt like he gravitated to it over and over again. It stressed me out. I didn't even want to hear those stories over time.

I have a tendency to cycle through compassion fatigue, where my empathy which sometimes feels overwhelming for other people, gets so overdrawn that I'm drained and drained and drained some more, and then I have to struggle to feel anything for awhile. I coped then the way I know how to cope, by withdrawing from him and everything else more and more. Like a blanket pulled over my heart, deadening all other sound, simply to maintain some sort of equilibrium. To keep myself as mentally healthy as I can, to not put myself in danger of falling over an edge.

At times, I felt self-conscious about a lot of things and started down that worn path so well-traveled in my mind of why wasn't I good enough now, or what had I done wrong, or was it possible something was my fault again, or was it maybe simply just a difference of the way two human beings functioned?

But over time I came to the same conclusion I had arrived at so many times previously, but when I was younger I couldn't follow through because of ICoS: I decided that although at one point our opposite personalities and lives worked wonderfully for a friendship and really helped me become a better person, in the long run maybe our personalities were simply incompatible. The things I valued, or needed in order to feel valued, didn't seem to matter to him and I thought perhaps it was vice versa for him. Maybe he was tired of me constantly seeming like a devil's advocate, so maybe he grew tired of talking to me about anything if I wasn't going to instantly sign off or at least inherently side with him. Maybe that didn't feel like support to him.

Over time, I stopped wondering what I had done wrong and started being the one stepping away instead. I didn't want to keep getting pulled back into his atmosphere which often made me feel unhappy and guilty at the same time. I was tired of trying to push for something when I knew it would be only on his schedule. I wanted to pursue it when it was on my schedule, too. And when I felt like it wouldn't make me feel worse, when it would lift me up and make me feel

empowered, instead. Because I figured that's the true mark of friendship: when you both, ultimately, feel heard.

Between my emotional withdrawal and my avoidance of almost all social media as a whole, I didn't see any details that contradicted the information I knew from so long ago, nor did I hear stories about anything he was involved in, saying, or doing. Every now in a great while I'd hear wind of the idea that he didn't exist, but that was just so completely at odds with what I had known for so long that it felt beyond comprehension. And in those cases Sonny brought it up first long ago, lightly referencing a situation but not really covering it in detail, telling me ahead of time his answers for everything, giving reasons for why none of it made sense. And it didn't make sense to me at the time, not when I had known him for almost 16 years, not when everything I had directly seen myself continued to support what I'd known all that time, backing up facts I'd been told 15 years ago and which had remained largely consistent since.

I really thought that even though we'd had our problems on and off over the years, at the very least if there was something as huge as him not even existing, he would tell me. Surely that, at least, I could trust. But right up through Friday March 9, he still never directly told me the truth. Once again, any information I received, I had to learn online.

That brings me full circle right back to the start of this story, when I was struggling for a week to completely rewrite a history I thought I could believe.

## GOING FORWARD

Whether you were affected by any of this directly, indirectly, or not at all, if you would like to help bring positivity into the world to help balance any negativity, there are many things you can do.

Please consider keeping watch of friends, family, or loved ones online or in person, and take note if their behavior starts changing drastically. Please reach out to them or otherwise help them create a support network, so that if they end up in a situation from which they feel they can't escape, they have someone there to have their backs. If there are people out there who don't have a support network, this has to be even harder for them. Please help them if you can.

If you are someone who would like to do something even more, please consider donating to any charities that you would like to support, whether on this topic or others.

Some options to consider are below, but there are so many more.

**The Trevor Project:** <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

**OutRight International:** <https://www.outrightinternational.org/>

**Payton's Project:** <http://paytonproject.org/>

**Megan Meier Foundation:** <https://www.meganmeierfoundation.org/>

**International list of suicide hotlines:** <http://www.suicide.org/international-suicide-hotlines.html>

**USA suicide hotlines by state:** <http://www.suicide.org/suicide-hotlines.html>

(Please double check the validity in your country and/or state to ensure the suicide hotline information is accurate. If you believe it is correct, remember the number for yourself or loved ones but perhaps also consider donating or volunteering to help)

But definitely don't stop at that list; there are so many more. And I'm having a difficult time getting a good list for international recommendations. I just recommend you run any charity through charity watch organization searches first to make sure they've been well rated.

If you can't afford to make a direct donation but would still like to support the charities in some sort of monetary way, if you use Amazon already then consider using Amazon Smile. You take the exact same Amazon URLs you normally would but make it smile.amazon instead of www.amazon. You can choose a charity to support through there, and every purchase you make through smile.amazon.com generates a portion of proceeds for your chosen charity. It's a great way to give a little back every time you make everyday purchases.

I know this is a week late to be saying this, and I'm sorry I couldn't get this out sooner but please know I did spend every waking minute outside of work trying to write this, with a few breaks when I couldn't keep going-- but if there's any way for me to make a request of others, I would like for us to try to retain some kindness in our hearts when interacting with anyone else for any of this.

Whether you were someone who was hurt or did the hurting, please remember that although everyone is very upset right now, and there is good reason for it, everyone was also equally, at some point, unaware. To be blinded by trusting someone or caring about someone is not an inherently evil action; it is only that of a human being who wants to trust someone they think trusts them.

For anyone who might be angry, frustrated, disappointed, or any other emotion toward the people who might have protected or defended Sonny at any point, I don't know their actions or words so I can't comment on that, but please if you can, remember they were probably that way because they wanted to protect someone they cared about. I'm not suggesting people should not take responsibility for any actions or words, but if they do take responsibility at this point, I hope you hear their words clearly with kindness, and don't attack them thinking somehow those words must be false because they are not in line with what they might have said before.

It isn't a bad thing for people to realize when they have made mistakes, to acknowledge them, to try to make changes so it doesn't happen again, or to at least apologize for the wrongs they have done. So my request to those who did the hurting is that you really listen to what others are telling you, as hard as it may be because they may be using harsh wording at this time, and try to understand at least the emotion or intent behind it all. Try to understand how you can fix what went wrong. But also remember throughout this all to take care of yourself. Because even if you might have hurt others along the way in the process of all of this, so too were you probably hurt, yourself. Please don't deny yourself that acknowledgment, because you may need to reach out for help as a result, and to ignore your own pain only brings more pain in the end.

If you are someone who was hurt by someone else during all of this, please also treat yourself with kindness, and don't silence your own voice. If someone hurt you, they should know. It may be hard for them to hear, but it's still important for them to know. And please also know that although things may seem exceedingly obvious to you, even though you think others should have clearly seen the holes in the stories or somehow inherently known what was happening,

please know that as human beings we have an extensive capacity to fill in the blanks with the parts we know. That's why it's entirely possible to read an entire page filled with sentences of words which start and end with the correct letters but all the letters in between are jumbled up. It's why we sometimes see things where something is not, and don't see things where it so clearly, in hindsight, was all along.

All I can say now to everyone is this: brightest of blessings to all of you. I'm wishing you all the very best. If you're dealing with anything difficult right now, especially if it's related to repercussions of all of this, I hope you are able to talk to a counselor, or someone else you trust, and I hope through that you are able to develop some coping skills if you haven't already.

Also, more than anything, I want everyone to know it wasn't your fault. I think I desperately wanted someone to tell me that at different times over the years, and then the people who told me it were people I felt like I couldn't believe because I was so convinced I was in the wrong. I don't know who I needed to hear it from. Probably more than anything, I needed to hear it from myself.

Maybe you need to hear it from yourself too, but for now please start with me:

It wasn't your fault.