

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO TELL YOU
BY TAYLOR REESE

“Like all the writers I read, I’m writing to prove that I exist.”
—Nora Salem, “The Life Ruiner,” *Not that Bad*

“Yet I began to feel that my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme, one which I would have been very unwilling to put on paper at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be ‘universal,’ which meant, of course, nonfemale.”
—Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken” (1971)

SHAPESHIFTERS

Encountering shapeshifters is part of daily life, especially for women. We look to the moon to explain them. We look to drugs, drink, to justify them. But the act of shapeshifting is human. We meet people who we think are friends, but who shift and become anything but. In my freshman year of college, I met four men who I thought I could trust. But the second I did not want a sexual relationship, they changed. They grew cold and distant, disinterested in associating with me since they were not getting what they wanted. This shift, this betrayal, colored my experience over just a few months.

Other men were more predatory in their shapeshifting. They did not stop at just a change in attitude—they acted on it. These memories accompany me wherever I go. When I pack my backpack in the morning, they go in right after my planner. I sling them over my shoulder and set out for my day, every day.

I did not see them coming. I got T-boned. My bones rattled by the force of their violence, broken under the gravity of their actions. Bruised in the brain, in the heart.

I bled real blood. There is no metaphor for that.

When I stumble upon a news page, headlines of violence against women stick out. Because I noticed once, I cannot unsee them. I cannot ignore the epidemic that is our pain.

Women do not like to tell their stories. They are afraid of not being believed, of being made fun of. Until this year, I have never told my stories. But if I wanted to heal the pieces that these men broke inside me, I would have to do it for myself, in the way I know how:

To write.

I DON'T TELL MY STORIES

My stories aren't "that bad". They add no value to the conversation. Others have had it much worse.

I don't tell my stories. I've never told them out loud. If I've hinted at them, they're heavily annotated. Aloud, they've become fiction. I tell the true stories to myself in my head where they're safe. Keeping them confined makes them less real.

I don't tell my stories. But they've built up. I can't lie and say nothing's ever happened to me.

I'm sorry, Mom. You asked and I couldn't tell you.

Not then. Perhaps now.

I don't tell my stories. But I have stories to tell and it is my hope that someone will listen, will want to know. And, perhaps, someone else will tell their own.

It's taken me years. Toes dangling. It feels like the breeze is about to sweep me off and away.

Is this what falling feels like? A pit in your stomach, teeth clenched. Typing.

I've fretted instead of sleeping for too many nights.

But now I've begun and I can't stop.

ASHEVILLE, NC

My chest is tight, my eyes are glass being blown— expanding and then collapsing.

I left town for the weekend, an escape into the middle of nowhere, North Carolina.

From our lodge I can smell the blown glass, the woodworking. I go for walks among the flitting bees in the wet, dewy grass. I breathe the fresh air. I'm suffocating.

Dr. Blasey Ford is sitting up there in front of the whole country, reliving her trauma on national display. I can't even live in my own head.

I don't know how to love right. He broke that part of me and I ignored it, hoping it'd heal on its own and go away, but now, it's just gone. It just floated away like a balloon out of a four-year-old's grasp.

The thought of being intimate, of laying in a bed with someone else and exposed, or just fucking, makes me want to run into this forest. Lay down in the leaves, look up at the sky through the trees, and just wait.

I wish you could believe that I'm not just shrugging you off, again.

DISSOCIATION

I don't feel like I'm the same version of myself that's been raped. I feel distanced from it, like I possess the vivid memories of someone I know. I didn't remember my first rape until after Donald Trump's "grab them by the pussy" scandal (the second occurred after said scandal. I knew that time).

I went to class. Macro Econ? Maybe. I don't know who I talked to, what I ate. A whole day, lost to flashbacks from a triggering now-President. And many days after. That day, I realized I'd never given time to them, like the box of toys you purposely leave at your parent's house when you're moving out because you don't know what to do with it, and it's easier to just leave.

But a year and more later, they rushed back.

I am disconnected and I want to get back to it. I want to reconnect the pieces of myself that are frayed, to cut myself back open. I never saw the open wounds, but I need to.

I am still friends with both of my rapists. I look them in the eyes and know what they did to me, but I feel nothing. I am not quite afraid of them. We're not close. But the connection remains. One still hugs me, but I don't hug back. The other is gone.

Maybe you think if I don't feel anything, and we're still "friends," then I don't get to complain. Maybe you're right. Part of me thinks you are. After all, others have had it worse. That notion is hard to unlearn.

But it's hard to feel like I can place myself in the ranks of other women who have been raped. My own best friend has had it worse. Objectively, it just seems true.

So then, what is to be done? I can't report the rapes in order to reconcile the trauma, there's no evidence, just my words and the little I remember:

His fingers, gouging. Hurting. Me saying no. Him ignoring me.

Him, pushing into me though I said "I don't think it's a good idea."

Though I didn't say "yes." Though I didn't say "no."

I was afraid of hurting their feelings. I was afraid that if I spoke up, it would cause embarrassment, and I couldn't have that. Better to just be quiet and take it than impose. I allowed them to take what they thought they were entitled to because I wanted to be "considerate."

Be a good girl, Taylor, he'll be done soon.

Man, 56, arrested on suspicion of attempted murder and sexual assault after woman found with 'horrific' injuries

After Sinéad Talley was sexually assaulted, Stanford invited the man back to campus

Viral video of woman being punched in the face by alleged sexual harasser sparks probe

Catholic nuns break their silence on abuse by priests: 'I pretended it didn't happen'

Convicted rapist Brock Turner is trying to get his ruling overturned because he only wanted "outercourse"

Girl With Disability Gang-Raped By 22 Men For 7 Months In India, Police Say

'Now I'm afraid to even talk to women': Taylor Swift groper said life is ruined one year after singer won lawsuit

Henry Cavill says he's scared to date post-#MeToo because he doesn't want to be called a rapist. Is he alone?

MANNEQUIN

I identify with the shape of my body—the curves, the plateaus, the awkward angles and sharp edges. But I feel wholly un-myself when I am forced to consider and encounter my crevices. My dips and bulges. Folds.

If I were given the chance to have my vagina covered over like a Barbie doll's, I would take it. If I could have the idea of breasts, small but with no nipples, I would take it.

Sexless is ignorant.

Sexless is impenetrable.

Sexless is safe.

To not have genitalia would mean I wouldn't be expected to have sex. I would be incapable in the physical sense—a much more effective excuse than the emotional and psychological sense. I would be *unable*. I long for that.

I am afraid of having to justify myself.

Some say it's just low libido. There are pills for that. They tell you to change or add things to your diet. Research aphrodisiacs. Fix yourself, because this makes you undesirable. Your partners will have needs, too, you know. Don't be so selfish. Don't always think about yourself.

I haven't tried to have sex since the rapes. I do not want it. I can't go through that kind of violence. Maybe one day I'll come around to sex with someone I love. But that day still feels far off, like a premonition of an uncertain future.

I have no interest, no carnal need. I have no burning in me, no drive that controls my actions. And I don't want it. But no one understands that. I'm in *college* for god's sake! Everyone is sleeping with everyone and instead, every night, I am sleeping alone.

But I am sleeping safe.

“HOW ARE YOU?”

People have been asking how I’m doing lately. I think they can tell.

I’m on my bike, just hitting the incline. It’s in the lowest gear and I’m still huffing it.

They can tell.

One of my favorite professors passed me in the hall and asked how I was. I stared at him blankly; I didn’t know how to answer. He stared back, probably puzzled, until I could form a satisfactory answer. He stopped and talked to me for a bit after that. We didn’t talk about my hesitation, my inability to form a socially acceptable answer, but maybe he knew.

I texted my parents saying I missed them and hoped they were well. They called, concerned, and I had fully intended to tell them, but then we got talking about my grandma and the dog.

If you asked me now, I don’t think I’d be able to answer without breaking down. I can’t even *think* about answering without breaking down. There’s so much bubbling inside me, there’s no telling how it’d come out. But it probably wouldn’t come out in the form of “I’m well, and you?”

I think I'd probably throw up on your shoes.

Is it really considered rape if I didn't exactly say no?

Am I allowed to write about it anyway?

I am ash: Nothing is holding me together. All it will take is one strong breeze—

THAT SHOCK

In *Leaving Neverland*, one of the survivors describes eye contact with Michael Jackson as being like a shock. Those words sent a heat through my body. I've *felt* that.

Do you know that shock?

The one that feels like attention. Like interest in you as a person, your hopes, dreams, and future. It feels like a platonic connection like no other. It never feels predatory.

It has been predatory.

Maybe we know in our souls when we will be groomed or abused.

Maybe it is protective instinct we haven't learned to parse out.

That shock.

I forgot about most of it for awhile, weird interactions blurred into the tapestry of my past. But I rediscovered something I wrote 5 years ago. The first time I felt it was in middle school, probably 7th grade. My writing teacher, who was also the headmaster of my school, had taken a special interest in me. Making eye contact with him, I burned.

Did I know?

That shock.

Eye contact at the front desk of my tennis center. The almost imperceptible smirk that caused the corners of his lips to drift upward.

Did I know?

That shock.

Felt in a minivan in Hawaii, on the beach, in the classroom. I thought it meant friendship.

Did I know?

Even after feeling that shock over and over, I am still unsure. I cannot truthfully say that maybe next time will be different, because I've thought that every time.

I still don't trust that shock.

WHAT I REMEMBER EVERYONE TOLD ME

she wakes up on the floor, naked in the room of someone she doesn't know. she tells her friend. he asks what she expected and tells her that's what happens when you drink.

then he showers her with compliments. then he asks why he wasn't the one she had sex with. he compliments her, then insults her, then asks for nudes. she says no.

he asks for sex. she says no. he gets mad.

she wakes up in bed with someone she does not recognize. she does not report because she does not know who he is, and he does not go to her school. she says things will be bad for awhile.

her friends don't know what she means.

she comes to trust him. they become friends. he forces himself on her in the parking lot. he kisses her. he touches her. she does nothing. she doesn't know how to be friends after that. he does it again. she thinks she's cheated on her boyfriend because of this. she doesn't know.

he still follows her on instagram.

she gets drunk with a friend and they go up to his room. they mess around. he wants to have sex. she isn't sure. she asks "are you sure? i don't think i want to." she doesn't want to hurt his feelings. he is already inside her. he has already hurt her. he didn't think about that.

he still doesn't.

she is ten. she's got this new technology that connects her to the world. she talks to a man. he is 30. he says he's a writer. she wants to be a writer. he asks her for pictures of herself. he likes it when she wears pigtails. he asks for permission to "dream" about her. she says yes.

she does not know.

she goes to visit her old elementary school. she is a freshman in high school. her history teacher sees her and says "hey good looking!" she does not know how to respond.

her mom laughs.

she is a freshman and goes to the winter dance. she is awkward and alone on the dance floor. a boy runs by and slaps her butt. she chases after him, yelling at him. she never catches him. she can still feel where his hand was. she is older now.

she wonders where that girl who fought back went.

she goes to a party and drinks too much. she is raped by a friend. she does not report.

she does not tell. she drinks. she loses ten years of her life. she and her parents stop talking. eventually, they start again. little by little. she recovers. she starts her life over.

meanwhile, he has a family.

he is doing fine.

she and her friend leave the friend's apartment. three pick ups drive by. each yells demeaning phrases at them. her friend turns to her and says "why does this always

happen to you?"

she wants to hide.

she is twenty one and works a boring job over the summer. one of the teachers she works with, in his 30s, begins texting her. it's normal at first. she doesn't know how to stop it. he's older and bigger. she has to be nice. polite. she slows her replies. she talks to him less readily. finally, she mentions that she has a boyfriend. (she doesn't).
he never texts her again.

MOM

“Do you have any stories to include in your thesis?”

My mom knew I was writing about sexual assault. We were in the car, driving toward a day of clothes shopping and chatting. Innocence.

I stared straight ahead, stony. Her mirror.

“No,” I said.

Imagine having to marinate in that all day, overshadowed by grief. It felt easier, better, to just say no.

I sit in my therapist’s office, folding and ripping a tissue.

“It’s just, why would she ask then? How could she expect me to be honest in that moment? It was just such bad timing.”

My therapist looks at me, her gray eyes wide and earnest. “Maybe she’d actually planned to ask in that moment. Maybe she’d worked herself up to it, thinking it was the perfect time. As a parent, I ask my kids important stuff in the car because then I know I have their undivided attention.”

I stare at my lap, working that through. I can feel the resentment radiate away from me. The tissue grows into a thick wad, as I fold and rip.

I have the urge to call my mom right then, to apologize, to say I was ready to tell her.

I wish I really felt that.

Teacher tried to hypnotize young female students, force them to call him 'master,' police say

Angry teen drives Ram pickup into Walmart after argument with girlfriend

Man Shoves 73-Year-Old Woman to the Ground, Sexually Assaults Her, Police Say

Doctor slips abortion pill in pregnant GF's drink, causing miscarriage

Airline Passenger Arrested After Allegedly Harassing Woman And Peeing On Seat

He punched, tried to choke teen driver — while her younger siblings watched, Ohio cops say

Man Accused of Punching Deaf Pregnant Woman and Service Dog — but Man's Wife Says He Wasn't Aggressor

Man accused of stabbing pregnant girlfriend, killing unborn baby

38-Year-Old Man Kidnapped 17-year-old and Kept Her as 'His Pet,' Authorities Say

IT FELT LIKE FRIENDSHIP

We sat on the porch of the new building on campus at the end of my freshman year, your junior year. It was Spring Term. Construction had just been completed, so it was yet unused. We rocked in the chairs as the sun set, drinking White Russians (my favorite drink at the time). It was May, and not the weather, but you brought the ingredients and made them for us right there anyway.

As we drank and enjoyed the spring breeze, we watched clouds morph and tried to guess their shapes.

“I think that one is an ant!”

“No, it’s definitely an elephant.”

We laughed and tried to one-up each other. It felt like friendship.

I looked down and saw a public safety officer walking below. I placed my drink behind my chair and waved to him.

“How are you two this evening?” he asked.

“We are great, thank you!”

“Good to hear. Enjoy the sunset.”

As he walked away, we breathed a sigh at going undetected, and then laughed about it. It felt so good, pure, free.

When the buzz wore off and the air turned cool, we said good night.

A few weeks later, you lay on my floor, drunk. I was packing.

"I just don't get it," you said, words slurring. "Why don't you like me?"

"Grant, I just think we are better as friends. I don't really want to be in a relationship right now."

"Yeah, but why don't you like me *back*?"

You spiraled into a rant about dating and religion and I let you talk while I folded my shirts. I don't remember much of what you said, but at one point I handed you a pillow because you looked like you were falling asleep.

"Come lay and cuddle with me," you implored.

"You're on the floor! No thanks."

"C'mon, please?"

"Grant, I really don't want to."

Eventually, you decided it was time to go. You hugged me and wished me a good summer, and I could tell you were upset with me. Your eyes glistened. I knew you were holding back. I was thankful for that.

I watched you walk away out my window. You turned back once, but didn't see me. I just wanted to know if you'd turn back.

Later that night, my Spring Term professor texted me for the first time.

NOTHING ACTUALLY HAPPENED

When I saw I could earn my science lab credit by going to Hawaii to do geology, I was all in. The twelve of us— ten students and two professors— got close on the ten day trip, talking about anything from childhood biking accidents (I almost biked into a lake in second grade) to favorite alcoholic drinks (I like a dry white). We played music during car rides around the island and sung along like friends on a road trip.

Emma, Kit, and I always rode with our one professor, Eric, in the minivan, while the rest of the class rode with Leslie in the bigger van. Eric was tall, about six foot three and lanky. He grew up in Scotland, but came to the US for graduate school and to work. He was shy, quiet, and quietly funny, with dark curly hair and a trimmed beard that extended down his neck. We called ourselves the “minivan squad,” and listened to classic rock, especially “Don’t Stop Believing,” and Emma would try to get Eric to sing, telling him he was the “boy from Detroit” so it was his turn to sing.

After returning from Hawaii and a week of classes in Lexington, I was laying in bed after the final day of class, and after Grant had finally left, scrolling through Instagram—I’m a sucker for photos—when my phone buzzed. An unknown number.

My roommate had moved out earlier that day, so I was alone.

I opened the text.

“Hi Taylor, it’s Eric. I imagine you’ll be heading back to NJ soon... but I wanted to say if you’re around and want to go take pictures together sometime let me know?”

I thought it was strange, but innocent enough. I agreed that it was a fun idea. I trusted him.

Within a few exchanges, things began to shift.

“Haha you’re too cute.”

My blood ran cold. My heart raced. It still does, reading it now.

All texts and emails are direct quotes. I never could delete them.

He was not interested in taking photos, or being my friend, or respecting me or the power structures inherent in our male-professor-female-student relationship. A thirty two year old man, my professor, was hitting on me, his nineteen year old, female student.

I was alone. I was afraid.

Did he know where my dorm was, what room? Washington and Lee is a small campus. It wouldn't be hard to find me. Could he remember if I'd mentioned it in passing in Hawaii? I was sure I had. He'd referenced other things I'd previously mentioned so anything was fair game.

I looked at my door. I'd left it unlocked. Because of the Honor System, campus is more or less a snow globe—protected, safe, and perfect. We trust that people will not act

against their honor, that they won't go into our rooms without permission, steal our belongings, or hurt us. We trust that if they do, there will be consequences. The entire community is based on *trust*.

How fragile.

A PLAYLIST OF SONGS RUINED BY ASSOCIATION:

TRACK #	NAME	ARTIST	ALBUM	TIME
1	Don't Stop Believing	Journey	Escape	4:11
2	Maggie May	Rod Stewart	Every Picture Tells a Story	3:42
3	Jesus Christ	Brand New	The Devil and God Are Raging Inside Me	5:18
4	Peaceful Easy Feeling	Eagles	Eagles	4:18
5	Fool For Love	Lord Huron	Strange Tails	4:35
6	Cheerleader	OMI, Felix Jaehn	Me 4 U	3:02
7	I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For	U2	The Joshua Tree	4:37
8	Red Lights	Tiësto	A Town Called Paradise	4:22
9	Georgia Woods	Keith Urban	Get Closer	5:17
10	Gravity	John Mayer	Continuum	4:06
11	Short Skirt / Long Jacket	Cake	Comfort Eagle	3:24
12	Hey Soul Sister	Train	Save Me, San Francisco	3:37

NOTHING ACTUALLY HAPPENED

I leapt out of bed to lock my door. Just that little action, the *click* of the lock moving into place, made me feel safer. It also felt sacrilegious.

There were no sounds in the hall. I kept looking at my desk lamp, one of the few things that remained unpacked. It would be my weapon of choice. It felt irrational to think of fighting, or having to defend myself, but the lamp was light enough to swing but heavy enough to have an effect. I was satisfied with my choice, confident that my years of tennis would allow me to swing it perfectly if necessary.

I put my phone down to avoid his advances, hoping he would take my silence as a hint, and tried to fall asleep. I woke up at every little sound, even the usual ones, like the air conditioner turning on and off. I was not well rested when the morning came.

I awoke to find a “good morning” text in my inbox. If I hadn’t known already, that was a reminder that things were wrong. Professors do not text their students “good morning.”

Friends don't text friends “good morning.”

I politely responded, knowing full well what happens to women who choose to be confrontational:

Good morning! I hate to cancel but my parents decided to come down today instead of tomorrow

to help me pack to leave tomorrow, so of course they want to see me tonight and go to dinner and stuff. I'm sorry! Thanks again for an awesome class.

And good luck in Ohio!

Once I sent the text, panic washed over me. I flipped my phone over so I wouldn't see if he responded. Somehow, that both eased and increased my anxiety.

Not having to see, but not seeing.

Besides, the message was a lie; only my dad was coming, and he still wouldn't be in until Sunday. I would be alone for another whole day.

I paced back and forth on the cold tile in my room. I didn't know what to do. I ran to my best friend Nora's room. My theory was that the faster I moved, the safer I'd be. The less chance he had of seeing me, of finding me.

I banged on her door, sobbing, until she woke up and answered. I told her and her boyfriend John everything and begged them to help me, to tell me what to do. She told me she completely believed me, and held me as I cried. Hearing her say she believed me gave me the confidence to follow through with her advice, to tell the other professor from my trip.

I went back to my room, scanning the halls and stairs in front of and behind me. I wished my head could swivel like an owl's. Once inside, I locked the door behind me.

Click. I pulled out my phone to text Leslie, and, in the meantime, Eric had replied:

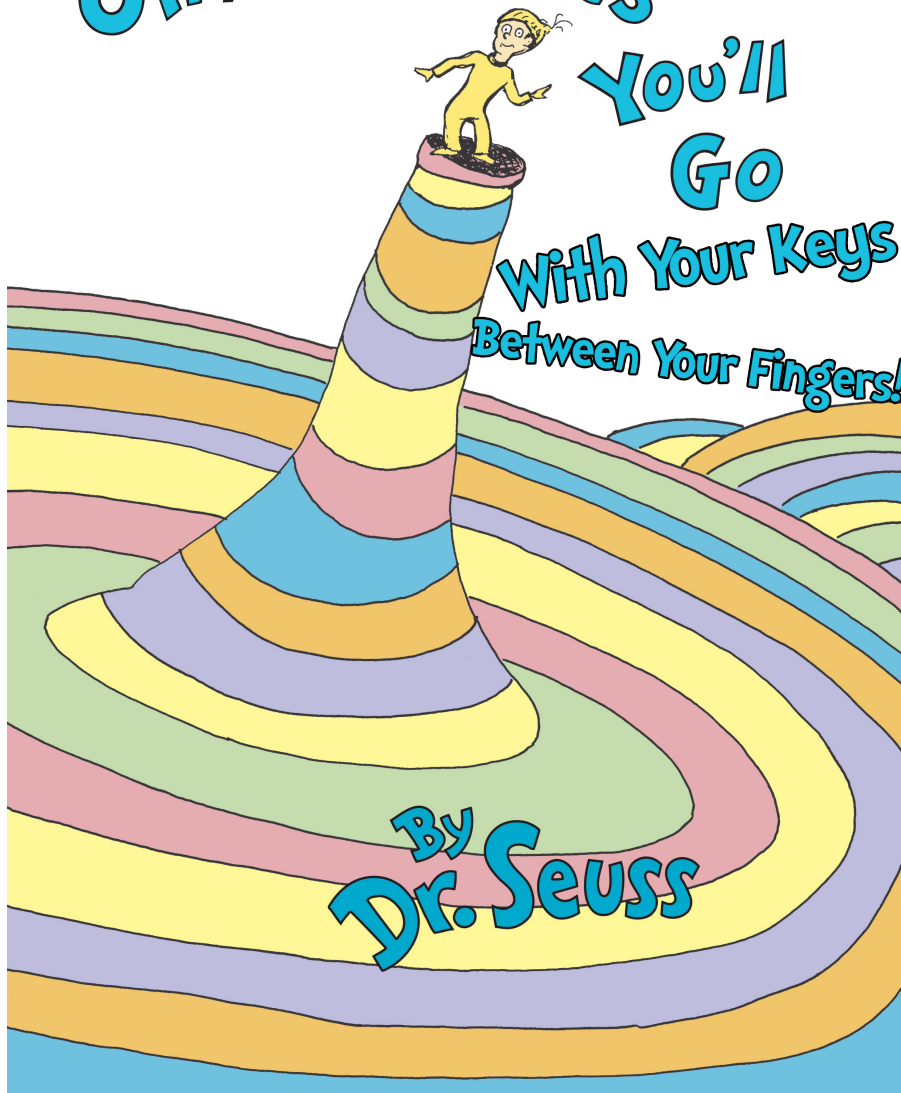
Hey Taylor, that's really too bad, I was looking forward to it, but of course I understand. I hope my asking wasn't too inappropriate. I assume you'll be gone for the whole summer, but I'll be here off and on until late July if you happen to be around? I'm really happy you enjoyed the class! Keep in touch,
Eric.

I didn't respond. Instead, I texted the other professor, telling her I needed to talk to her urgently, and asked if I could call her. She responded quickly, but I didn't really know what to say, or how to say it. I only knew I had to tell her.

Pressing each button of her phone number, I could feel myself draining. The ring waiting for her to pick up felt like an hour glass running low on time.

I looked out my second-story window the whole time, hoping I wouldn't see him down on the sidewalk looking up at me.

Oh, the Places
You'll
Go
With Your Keys
Between Your Fingers!



By
Dr. Seuss

NOTHING ACTUALLY HAPPENED

When Leslie answered, all I could do was cry. I apologized for being a mess.

And then I told her everything.

One weight was lifted. Now more people knew; they could help. But at the same time, *more people knew*. Which meant I had to confront it.

I was proud. I was terrified.

She told me she believed me, asked me to email her screenshots of our conversation, and to keep her updated while she contacted other people higher in the administration.

I obliged:

The screenshots of our conversation are attached. I didn't really know how to handle it last night so I just tried to be nice and not think or worry about it. I don't think I was enabling it. I just try to see the good in people and I didn't really want to believe that there were ulterior motives but in the morning I realized that it just wasn't good and how uncomfortable I was.

Thanks for taking time out of your day to listen.

Taylor

Conveniently, earlier in the week, my friend Grant and I had made plans to get out of Lexington for that Saturday and go to Staunton to see a play.

I went alone into town to get lunch before we left. I grabbed a table in the middle of Sweet Things, far from the door, but facing it. I monitored who passed by, who came in and out. Humans already have the subconscious instinct to never have their backs to doors, but it was a very conscious decision. I was afraid to be out in the open, but I still had to eat. I was prey for some elusive predator.

While waiting for my Jamaican stew, another text popped up. I hadn't responded to the last one.

This is a long shot, but if you have any time tonight after dinner I know you said you like wine and I have plenty if you wanted to come over for a drink? It would be really great to see you again before you leave.

Now in a permanent state of chill, my blood turned to ice.

I had to get out of the restaurant. My stew appeared before me. I dipped my spoon in and licked it. I told myself it was too spicy. I texted Grant to come get me, telling him snippets. He arrived, and we rode to Staunton in a state of shock. We didn't talk much, just stared straight ahead as the trees that line I-81 blurred past.

I called Leslie again, to tell her about the new text. I was pacing the halls of the theater and trying not to cry in public. I failed.

She kept trying to comfort me, saying again and again that she believed me and would do her best to get me out of the situation as quickly as possible. She asked me to let her know when I was back in town, that one of the Deans of the university wanted to meet with me. In the meantime, I was to send the Dean the texts from Eric to review.

Throughout the play, I could feel my phone burning in my pocket. I checked it too many times, just to make sure he hadn't texted again. It felt heavy, like it was sinking into my leg. I wanted to throw it off the theater's balcony.

A Tragedy in Three Acts

INT. Graham-Lees Dorm Room 276

TAYLOR is putting on her newest online purchase— cat onesie pajamas.

CUT TO:

INT. Graham-Lees Common Room

The Common Room is full of male First-Year students playing Super Smash Brothers on the Game Cube. TAYLOR enters.

There is shouting. They're all talking excitedly.

STEVEN, TAYLOR'S friend, looks TAYLOR up and down.

STEVEN

You look really fuckable in that, you know.

TAYLOR freezes, unsure of what to say. TAYLOR exits.

CUT TO:

INT. Graham-Lees Dorm Room 276

TAYLOR throws away the onesie.

NOTHING ACTUALLY HAPPENED

Back in Lexington, I met with the Dean of First-Years. His wife had just had a baby either earlier that day or the day before, and it showed in the bags under his eyes. I sat in his office, feeling terrible. It was entirely my fault he'd been torn away from his growing family.

For this.

I felt very small sitting in the chair across from him, but also thankful that he wasn't 6'3" like Eric. I was hesitant to answer anything; I did not want it to seem like I'd asked for this, and I knew I ran that risk. There was also a piece of me that did not want Eric to get into trouble, but all of me needed it to stop.

There was no disciplinary action the school could take against Eric. Classes had officially ended, and so had his time at Washington and Lee. His contract was up and he hadn't been asked to return.

He had nothing to lose. Might as well leave Washington and Lee with a good story about a much younger student.

Dean Jay said he'd be able to talk with Leslie, who would then talk with Eric and tell him to stop contacting me. He asked if I felt unsafe in my dorm, and offered to try to find me somewhere else to stay for the night. I hesitated, but said no. What if he, too, invited me to his place for wine? Then I wouldn't be able to trust anyone.

Of course I felt unsafe. Of course I wanted to stay somewhere else. But if Eric drove me out of my room, would he win? By staying, did I rob him of that?

Details About The Man Who Intentionally Crashed His Car Into A Restaurant, Killing Two Members Of His Family

New Details About The Missing 5-Year-Old Girl Who Was Found Under A Trailer After A 14-Year-Old Boy Sexually Assaulted And Abandoned Her

Paedophile who raped girl, 4, the day before she started school may serve just two years in jail

12-year-old raped by masked man in Brooklyn home, police say

US military ignored first-grade boy's sexual abuse of girls, parents say

Body of Missing Ariz. Mom Is Found Burned in Field — and Ex Is Charged With Murder

Serial Pedophile With 300 Year Sentence Freed on Technicality, Won't Have to Register as Sex Offender

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Anonymous

2. Yes

3. I was raised with a mother who worked herself to the bone as her husband wasted her money in rage and hopeless ventures, who was too Catholic or too in love with him or too broken to leave.

My mother taught me that women suffer.

A father who named me after himself. A father whose Ambien cocktails made him forget hurting me in the morning, leaving me the only one with the memories of humiliation and horror, memories I frantically hid away. A father who I loved too much to destroy our family over, a father I hated so much I couldn't wait to get away, a father I still don't know who to talk to at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

NOTHING ACTUALLY HAPPENED

That night, I lay in bed trying to fall asleep, when I heard the doorknob begin to turn.

My fight or flight reaction was, and has always been, to fling my bed sheets up over my head. As if that thin cloth barrier would protect me. I peeked my eyes and nose out.

I could see the shadow of a pair of feet under the door.

The person on the other side was pushing on it, hard, trying to get in. The metal door shook in the jamb, creating the most ungodly rattle. I shook in my bed, trying not to make a sound.

I decided I had to investigate. I slid out of bed, grabbed the desk lamp, and approached the door, stepping my socked feet as quietly as possible. My ankles cracked as they always do, and I feared they would give me away.

I took a deep breath. Adrenaline rushed through me. I'd never fought someone before, let alone hurt someone.

Would I be capable? Or would I freeze, like in so many of my nightmares?

I looked out through the peephole.

It was my neighbor, Adam. He was drunk, and thought it was his room.

I opened the door after catching my breath. "Hi, Adam. Your room is across the hall, you know."

"Oh, sorry." He turned and stumbled into his room. I heard him crash on his bed.

I closed the door behind me, locked it, and sunk to the floor, head cradled in my hands.

THESE OVERWHELM ME:

- Spider webs in bushes in the morning
- The way my fitted sheet comes off my bed
- Vans and trucks that pass me on the sidewalk
- Loud noises
- Poor lighting (especially cold lighting)
- Almost any kind of crinkling
- The way the news cycle works
- Slamming doors
- Sirens
- The concept of teeth
- Public speaking
- The humming of my lamp
- Outer space
- The lack of street lights in Lexington
- Cysts and tumors
- The sound of a torrential downpour
- When humidity levels are over 75%
- The ocean and the things that live in it

NOTHING ACTUALLY HAPPENED

The adrenaline rush was so strong that I didn't sleep the entire night.

My dad finally arrived early the next morning to help me move out.

"You look tired, kid. You all right?"

"I was up packing later than I expected to be, that's all. And I was excited to go home."

Packing my stuff into the car, I rarely allowed my back to face the sidewalk. I felt better with my dad there, even if he was still unaware. I couldn't bring myself to tell him, and hoped I wouldn't have to. I feared he wouldn't understand, that he would believe it was my fault for texting my professor back. I couldn't bear not being believed, let alone blamed.

After filling the car to the brim, I looked around at the campus I'd come to call home one last time. The red brick felt dangerous, not its usual cheery tone. I didn't want to look at it longer than I had to. People bustled by on the sidewalk, moving out or walking into town. I scanned each of their faces as I climbed into the passenger's seat, just to be sure.

I was relieved to leave.



██████████, Leslie <██████████@wlu.edu>

Mon 5/23/2016, 12:52 PM

Reese, Taylor; ██████████ Jay

Reply all

Inbox

Taylor,

Thank you for your email. I had a conversation with Eric this morning. He asked that I pass on the following (pasted below) to you. I do not expect there will be any additional communication from him.

Of course, please be in touch with me or Dean Jay if you have any questions or concerns.

I hope you have a great summer. I look forward to seeing you on campus in the fall.

Take care,
Leslie

Taylor

Please allow me to apologize for my behavior this weekend. It was inappropriate of me to contact you in that way and I am very sorry that I put you in a position that made you feel uncomfortable. I know you enjoyed the class and I would hate for my behavior to leave you with a negative impression of W&L, the Geology Department, the class, or myself. Again, I am very sorry, please accept my apology.

Eric

NOTHING ACTUALLY HAPPENED

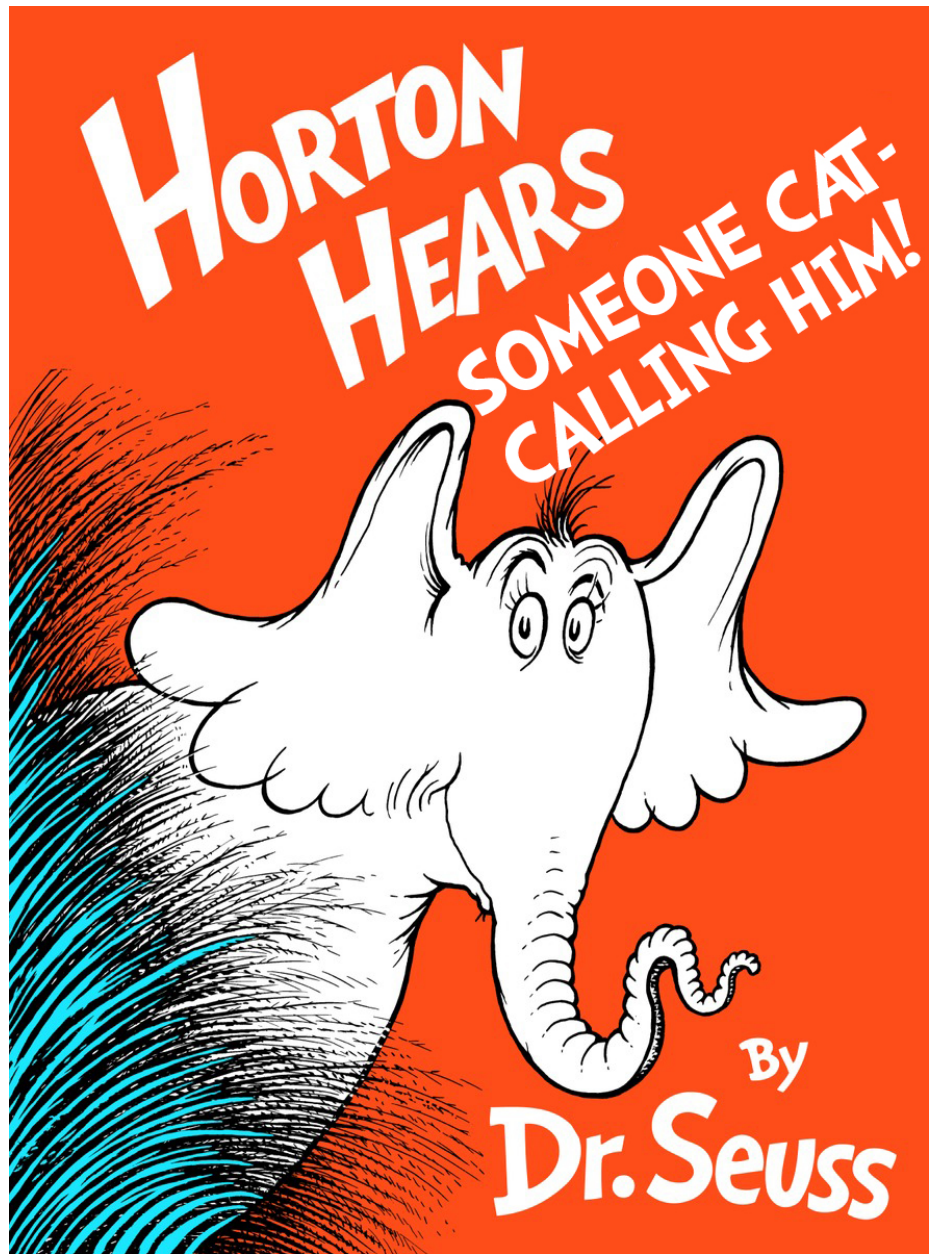
A few months later, I decided that the statute of limitations in our house had probably passed, and that I should tell my parents what happened. I called a family meeting in my room. I sat at my desk, my dad on my bed, and my mom in my other chair. Their eyes bored into mine as they waited. It was night; the room felt claustrophobic in the lamp light. My cat lay in my lap, a small comfort.

I told them about my professor, Eric, and they looked at me with blank faces. I wanted them to react but I suppose they were waiting for the conclusion. When I finished telling my tale, I cried. My mother cried. They were silent for awhile.

They told me that I did the right thing in reporting it, but that they also wished I'd told them sooner. My father said he could've come down faster if I'd told him, but I hadn't wanted him or my mother to have to miss work. I didn't want my situation to worry or burden them. I thought I could handle it myself, that I didn't need their help. I wish I'd asked for it, though.

When we finished talking, they wrapped me in a hug, the three of us awkwardly embracing in the middle of my room. Then we went back downstairs to watch television.

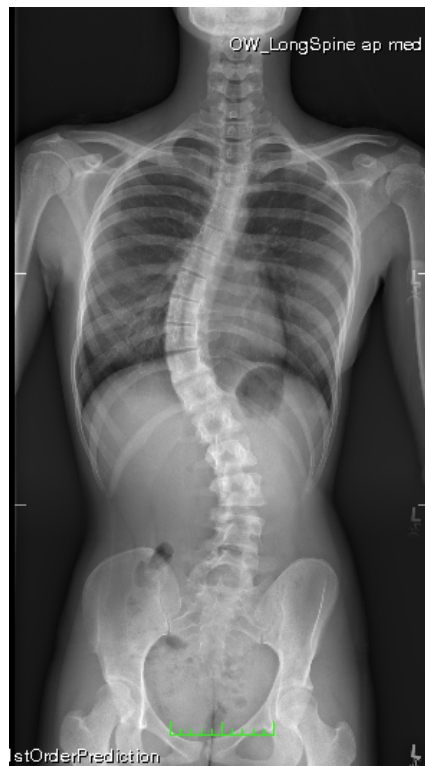
Now, whenever I bring it up in passing, they hardly remember what I'm talking about, if they do at all.



SCOLIOSIS

I get angry when I go to yoga. I can't do it right. The old women are far better in flexibility and form. I feel embarrassed. I should be able to do everything they can do and more. While I warm up my barely-elastic hamstrings, the old women do unsupported arm stands.

I was diagnosed with scoliosis in the 5th grade, when everyone had to be screened. Scoliosis is a curvature of the spine, resulting in over and underdeveloped back muscles that compensate for the curves. These muscles contain a lot of knots, which cause me pain. My spinal curves are 55 and 45 degrees, moderate-severe. When they exceed 50 degrees, they qualify for surgery.



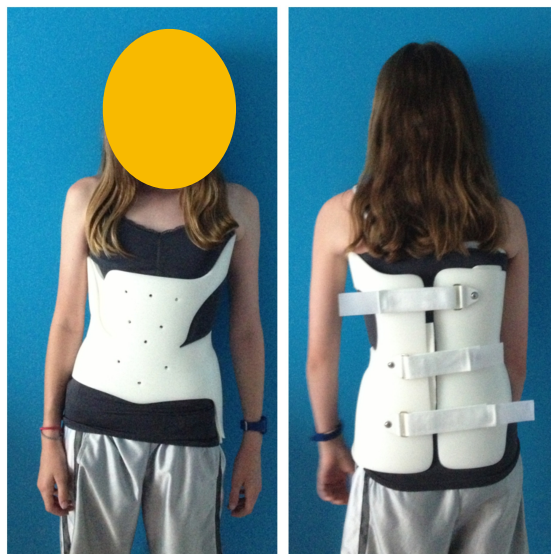
This is my back as of my most recent x-ray, 6/5/15

I didn't want surgery because they said I might not be able to play tennis. That was my deal breaker.

The school screener told my mom I should see a doctor.

One time, we were shopping and my mom told me to stand up straighter. She thought I was slouching. I told her I was standing as straight as I could, and I was. I began to cry.

The doctor advised the "wait and see" approach. Often the curves don't develop, or they correct themselves as children grow. After two years of waiting, and only seeing my curves get worse, I was told I needed a scoliosis brace. Otherwise, I'd need surgery to not be permanently disabled. At the time, my curves were in the 20s and 30s. The brace they typically make you wear is hard brace, which is extremely constrictive. I was an athlete, so this concerned me. They are also conspicuous, and I didn't want anyone to know. I was in middle school, after all.



This is an example of one of the many iterations of the hard brace. This is not an image of me.



My parents found an experimental brace that resembles a straight jacket, but with your arms on the outside. I am lucky enough to have parents who could afford it. Every three months, we drove to New York, a three hour trip, usually on Friday evenings, for my check ups.

The “brace years” were dark. Middle school is already a time of bottomed-out self-esteem, and mine found a way to run right *through* the bottom. I wore a layer under and over the brace, so I was always hot and sweaty, and I assumed smelly, especially in the summer. I was only allowed to take it off for a few sacred hours a day.

Anytime I moved, the velcro would make sounds. I learned to be very still and only move drastically if I had to.

I dreaded New York. They were not pleasant car rides. The doctors would x-ray me and track my progress. Or regress. The brace was never quite helping. I was always getting worse. I saw this as a defect of myself, my character.

I joked that because of how many x-rays I had, I was radioactive. I asked my parents if they could see the glow.

The doctors would pester me to do the German exercises they taught me, the “Schroth method,” about breathing in the right ways and rolling and exercising my spine straighter. I hated the exercises. They were embarrassing and weird. I never did

them. But I tried to fake it. I was supposed to do them without a shirt on so I could see my back. There was something always a little creepy about these older male doctors and their BDSM-esque brace and their exercises that required me to roll my back and thrust my pelvis. I called them “quacks” in my head, but never aloud to my parents.

Nothing ever happened.

Days before high school began, I told my parents I didn't want to wear the brace anymore. My curves had progressed, so to me, it was pointless. We got a second opinion from a new doctor who was supposed to be at the forefront of the scoliosis field. He said the experimental brace I'd worn for two years had done *absolutely nothing*.

That I would have the same curves now if I'd never worn it.

The years of self-loathing and self-consciousness had been a waste.

I told my mom I was going to burn it. I have yet to.

During my freshman year of high school, I was the varsity sub for the tennis team. Practicing for two hours five days a week took its toll on my back, fast. Halfway through the season, I was in excruciating pain. It was difficult to move and bend, and painful to walk. The frequency with which I was serving, which meant having to arch my back (something that doesn't come easily, if I can do it at all) was causing my vertebrae a lot of stress. I got (yet another) x-ray, and found out that one of my vertebrae was about to fracture. I had to stop tennis immediately and start physical therapy.

I *hated* therapy. It reminded me of the German exercises from the brace years. But I enjoyed the rowing machine. The repeated motion, hearing the water slosh around in the machine, was the only thing I looked forward to. I still do the rowing machine at the gym because it's good for my back, and it reminds me of that comfort.

When I put on my back pack, I have to readjust it. My back is always a little different, depending on how the muscles are feeling, so I'm constantly adjusting things that should normally just be stationary. Even in between classes it can change, and I'll have to loosen and tighten the straps. The same goes for the drivers seat in my car. Sometimes it takes five minutes to make little adjustments until I'm comfortable. Which means I'm also constantly adjusting my mirrors.

I sit crookedly in chairs because they often have bars across the back that make them uncomfortable. They are not made for people whose backs are not straight. I have all sorts of signature contortions. I can't lift anything heavy, because any kind of strain on my back is especially painful and detrimental. I am unable to move myself in and out of dorms and apartments. I cannot participate in benching and squats during my PE classes. This, like yoga, makes me angry. I want to be able to do things for myself, like lifting totes while I'm moving, or vacuum without the repetitive motion debilitating me for the rest of the day. I want to be able to stretch without feeling my back pull my hamstrings taut while my knees are still bent.

Clothes aren't made for an imperfect body. Stripes exaggerate the curves—my mom taught me early on that that was a no-go. I'm only just now becoming comfortable with my one striped shirt. Open backed shirts and dresses were (and are) also off limits. My mom never liked any of the ones I tried on because then people could see my back. I'm still learning to unlearn that. I haven't worn anything with an open back in my life, though I stare longingly at gorgeous dresses that have that design. It makes a dress really special, coveted, in my mind. But will people comment if I do wear something like that? Will they ask what is wrong with me?

Bras were definitely not made for me. Strappy bras look cute, but are an absolute nightmare when you aren't symmetrical. They're uncomfortable and frustrating, and exaggerate the curves of my spine even more. I wish there was a brand that could help you compensate for that by adjusting the clothing's dimension, so that the bra or whatever article of clothing would look normal when worn. Same goes for tank tops. If I can't get the)(part in the exact spot, I rip it off and try something else.

I look at my back in the mirror, marveling at how when I look at myself from one side, I look especially skinny, and from the other, I look completely average, all due to the way my muscles, hips, and ribs are shaped.

Because of all of these oddly shaped body parts, my ribs often rub on my pelvis.

It's about as weird as you'd imagine.

I hate my body. I feel like it has failed me, grown into this grotesque and disfigured thing. But my friends and family claim that they barely notice my crooked back, it's only when I'm uncovered like in a bathing suit that it's really noticeable (perhaps another reason I'm not particularly fond of bathing suits).

I'm supposed to like yoga, it's supposed to be relaxing. My shaky tree pose feels pretty good when I find my off-center center of gravity, but when I don't, I feel like lumbered log that should be taken away to become something more useful.

EVERNOTE

An email pinged in my inbox.

“Evernote has detected some suspicious activity in your account. Please reset your password.”

I followed the link to request a new password, intending to go into my account and delete it, as I never use Evernote. It wasn't worth the hassle.

Upon resetting my password, though, I discovered a note I wrote five years ago, back in 2014, as a junior in high school. It was an unbearable stream of consciousness, so I will try to make it more legible here.

In 7th and 8th grade, I had the Headmaster of my small, private school as my writing teacher. During class, he would always look at me and hold stares longer than I felt he should have, and winked at me frequently. His eye contact sent a shock through my system. I think it felt like adrenaline, but being in middle school, I couldn't quite place it, I just knew it wasn't quite right. What did he want from me?

I thought it was solely because he was friends with my mom, who worked at the school, too. In 8th grade when I graduated, he got me a leather notebook because he knew I wanted to be a writer, and wrote me a card. Whenever he talked to me he looked at me intensely like I'd never seen him look at anyone else. I encountered him many times after graduation, due to my mom's job there.

He never stutters when speaking, he's one of the most eloquent and composed people I've ever met, but he stutters when he talks to me. Over the summer before my senior year of high school, I asked for his help with looking at colleges, as my parents didn't attend college, and he suggested that we talk about it, over iced tea. He knew that was my favorite. A few days later, he called and suggested we get pizza instead. Again, I didn't know how to interpret any of this.

He singled me out often and called me to his office to help him with various tasks. I knew he liked me as a person, and thought I was a really special student, but some of these things freaked me out because I didn't understand what they meant, if they meant anything at all. I could hardly believe my mind as it began to wonder if he had some sort of interest in me. Of course he didn't—I was 12! Of course he didn't.

I got a confused and weird feeling in my chest when I was around him. I knew I was not attracted to him at all, or anything of that nature, so I didn't know where else my apprehension and nervousness could be coming from. Again, I was naive.

I respected him a lot as a person and writer and was comfortable enough with him because I thought I had to be. I convinced myself that he was just being nice.

"My intuition is stirring and I can't really decide how I feel. This is probably nothing and he's probably just being kind and fatherly," I wrote.

He called me a few times, trying to set up this dinner/meeting, and every time we spoke, he asked me if I missed him. He was always sure to tell me he missed me.

Then, a month or two later, I received the following email, after giving him cursory updates on how I've been:

Dearest Taylor,

There is nothing more that I want to do than to meet with you to discuss your college opportunities, as your future is certainly white-hot. I apologize for not getting back to you sooner but I've had some family issues to deal with as my mom is aging and has had some recent health concerns. (Plus it's always busy at school.) Please do not take the aforementioned as excuses, just take them as explanations to curtail my embarrassment in not getting back to you. Please get back to me with some times that you are available to meet from next Sunday through the Saturday that follows anytime, any night would work for me as I would be more than willing to leave School to come to your home in the late afternoon or early evening so that you and I can discuss your concerns. I look forward to hearing from you and promise that I will get back to you within 24 hours of your email.

Thanks, Taylor, have a nice day,

Mr. T

A few months later, I went back to the school to visit and help my mom. I purposely didn't go say hi to him; a small part of me wanted to see what would happen.

He waited until I was alone in my mom's office and came in, saying "You didn't come say hi to me." He leaned in to hug me. It was awkward because I was sitting, so his body was kind of on top of mine. During the lengthy hug, he whispered in my ear "I really missed you." His hot breath sent a shiver down my arm.

He stepped away and looked at me weird, making small talk. It felt like he was staring into my soul. At the time, I wasn't the type to back down, so I stared back, our eyes locked in an intense gaze that I couldn't parse.

"I'll challenge him anyway," I wrote.

Then he left.

Later, I left my mom's office, and upon returning, I found him staring in the doorway. He stared directly at me, but was talking to my mom.

"I swear he looked me up and down," I wrote.

Then I squeezed through the doorway past him, and he left.

Later in the day, I went to his office to talk to him about colleges, as per my mom's suggestion. I felt like I needed to suck it up and just go. Once I sat down and we started talking, he got up and locked the door, so we were locked in his office together. He told me that if I got homesick at college, he'd come visit me. I said "even if I'm states away?" And he said yes, he'd drive to come see me.

For years, he's told me he wants a signed first edition of my first published book.

I don't think he'll want this one.

Top Volleyball Coach Raped Girls Hundreds Of Times, Lawsuit Alleges

Mike Pence Suggests Legal Abortions In U.S. Could End 'In Our Time'

Two police officers sentenced for sexually assaulting women while on duty

Father allegedly raped, beat twins kept in captivity for years

Dad Arrested for Impregnating Daughter Granted Bond; She Remains Jailed

Missing Girl, 11, Found at Hotel With Alleged Abductor, 24, Who Met Her Online Playing Minecraft

Fort Bragg soldier charged with raping 16-year-old girl in 2013 cold case, attacking her with ax

Kellyanne Conway Suggests Donald Trump's Accusers Have 'Had Their Day' Because They Appeared On TV

Sick, Sad And Twisted: Washington Teen Allegedly Rapes A Girl Dying Of An Overdose Before Using Her Thumb To Break Into Her Phone

YOU NEVER FORGET YOUR FIRST

I had dreams about being raped before I ever was.

In 2011, my parents and I took a trip to Banff, Alberta, Canada. Crystal blue lakes, emerald trees, somehow even the gray of the mountains left me in awe.

In our hotel suite, I had my own room beside my parents. We went to bed, and I was suddenly in a pink room with a large bay window that looked out on a forest. I was laying on the light hardwood floor on a yoga mat. I couldn't move. A blond man with wire framed glasses entered the room—I didn't recognize him. He approached me, then was on top of me. He didn't remove his collared shirt or jeans. I could feel all of it. I was frozen and crying. I looked over to the door to avoid bearing witness to the atrocity happening to my body. My dad walked by the door, evidently unaware and unwilling to look into the room. I called out for him. I yelled and yelled but he never came back. The man finished with me, and I awoke, screaming for my dad. I yelled it out loud, but he still didn't hear me.

GOLIATH

I.

Around the kitchen table, seated next to his grandmother. She leans over and tells me she thinks I'm pretty, but that I could never be a model because I have bowed legs. I'd never noticed.

I still think of her when I see my shadow.

II.

14, 15, 16, 17. He said we were going to get married. So did his parents. They'd talk about our future, the family we'd have. How many kids? 2? 3? We'd stay in this town, right?

III.

His brother would help try to give us privacy in the house, engaging their parents in distractions and conversation. Have you heard this new song? Let me play it for you on my guitar. His sister was too young to not be nosey. We could see her on the stairs, spying. She thought she was stealthy.

IV.

His dad would drive slow and take the long way to my house so we could have extra time together. We sat in the back seat, me in the middle and him on the right. Our clammy hands intertwined. His head probably on my shoulder, mourning our imminent separation. I wanted to go home.

V.

We did the same things over and over for 3.5 years. I thought that's what love was. I thought that was supposed to be the perfect life. I thought it was supposed to be fulfilling. So I pretended.

VI.

When I told him I thought I was depressed, he told me I'd go to hell if I killed myself, just like his grandfather.

VII.

Everyone was working to keep us together. They loved the story: two tennis playing kids who fall in love and get married and have a family and love each other forever and never fight and never get divorced and love God and go to Heaven.

Tennis coaches, friends, his family.

Couldn't they see me shrinking?

VIII.

Shriveled.

IX.

I don't like to think about or talk about him. But I have to crack myself open.

X.

Before we broke up, he threatened my friend Ryan, saying he wanted to punch him in the face for playing a match with me in a charity tournament. He could feel me slipping away, and thought it was Ryan's fault.

XI.

Would he threaten me, too?

XII.

I drove to his house to do it in person. He sat in the passenger seat of my car and almost threw up. His blue eyes pierced mine. I almost didn't do it. I handed him back the

promise ring, the Celtic heart necklace. He gave me back my grandfather's trinket, my stuffed cat. We never spoke beyond the rare "hi, how are you?" ever again.

His mom still glares at me.

XIII.

People blamed me, said I ruined him for awhile. But they couldn't see what he'd done to me. A girl who was supposed to be growing, made small.

XIV.

I internalized every expectation. That I would be the doting wife, that I would sacrifice any career for his. That I would marry him and have his kids. That I would stay in New Jersey, in that godforsaken town. 14, 15, 16, 17. Did anyone *really* ask me?

XV.

I played a role. Or, I was imagined into a role. Perception and reality were far apart in that family. A mother who only cooked and cried. A father who was a world traveler, but a chauvinist misogynist. A brother who tried to be helpful one minute, but mean the next, calling his brother a "pussy" for having "Hey Soul Sister" as his ring tone. A sister trying to navigate through it all.

XVI.

His mom liked to push a “feminism lite” rhetoric, to annoy his father, but really she was one of the worst, pigeon-holing me. Making me help with cooking and cleaning.

Talking about my future as though it wasn’t mine.

XVII.

His mother and his father, they were high school sweethearts. They worried about David, their middle son; he was socially awkward and overall just a bit odd. They wanted him to follow in their footsteps. It was the safest option for him.

XVIII.

My parents, bless them, never liked the relationship. They would gently tell me that I could do better. But I think they settled, too. There was no changing my mind, despite taking away my phone sometimes so we couldn’t text, or talking to David about the way he treated me. I had to do it for myself. I had to shake my wilted bag of bones awake.

XIX.

I treated myself to a milkshake at Wawa after I did it. Driving home, I couldn’t tell if it was my tears or the rain that obstructed my vision. With just a few words I burnt down

the future that was built for me. A house of cards built on the land of my life without my consent.

XX.

I said sorry too much. It has taken years to unlearn.

SOMATOPHOBIA

Growing up, I never wanted to wear makeup. I fought through discussions of “taking pride in my appearance” and promises of a shopping in Sephora.

I was oblivious in the world, and my father picked up on that early.

He pointed out all the men he noticed looking at me. I found it annoying, and with bottomed-out self-esteem, impossible. Part of me thought he was making it up.

The other part of me, though, knew if I were to wear makeup, I’d garner more attention, more danger. Rebellion was really protection.

Makeup haunted and hounded me. I wanted to wear it, but I was afraid. As much as I wanted to be naturally beautiful, I knew makeup had its perks, too. But, I didn't want to hear the extra “you look nice” comments. Makeup meant I’d be treated differently, and I wanted nothing to do with it.

THIS TIME, HE GETS IN

I am in bed. The door knob begins to turn.

I'd left it unlocked.

He is standing over me as I sleep and then he is on top of me, grabbing me and rushing me into consciousness. His lips are on mine and his beard is cutting my face. I am struggling but he is much stronger. I jerk from side to side, trying to shake him off.

His hand covers my mouth. He pulls my blanket down.

I wake up.

SOMATOPHOBIA

My first boyfriend, whom I dated from the end of 8th grade through junior year of high school, didn't want me to get fat like his mom. He was talking about our future together. If my body grew unruly and uncontrollable, I'd be unlovable. He said that if I got lazy and just sat around, I'd end up like her.

I don't have a problem with food or exercise. But I do fear for my body. I won't stay skinny forever—growing up, my nicknames included: chicken legs, bean pole, twigs—but I am afraid of growing in size because I've never known it. I feel the pressure to be skinny, but not *too* skinny, otherwise people will think you have a problem. People have made their own assumptions about my lean body, and I suspect these assumptions already fall in that category of having a “problem.” One aunt asked me about it once.

Women's bodies are texts, public records (as Roxane Gay says) for the public to judge.

EXTRATERRESTRIAL

I'm at my tennis club, and it looks as it always does in my dreams, with the courts running perpendicular to their real-life direction. I am playing in a drill and keep missing my shots. I swing and miss, repeatedly. I ask my tennis coach if she and I can hit after the drill so I can remember how to play well again. She tells me she is too busy.

He is also there, chatting in the group of players after the drill. He is shorter than in reality. I've managed to shrink him. His features are distorted, alien-esque. From across the circle, he is staring at me with his black, beady eyes. I don't know how to respond, I say hi and raise a hand to wave. He brushes past me.

Honestly .. 40% attraction & 60% feelings. Only bc it's hard to gain feelings for you now when I was teaching you & you are with someone else. But I'm so fucking attracted to you. I just want to kiss you & see how it goes

NOW, I DON'T LIKE WHEN PEOPLE WALK ME TO MY CAR

You had eyes for me long before. You teased me about my boyfriend, and I shrugged it off. You and him were friends, went to the same high school, just a few years apart. You hit at every insecurity I was feeling, but couldn't express about that relationship. "Do you really want to be with him forever?" Somehow, you knew. Was it the look in my eyes? Defeat.

So that one deteriorated and you persisted. You flirted, you teased. You slyly gave me your number, telling me to let you know if I'd be at practice next week. You started texting me. I was 17. You were 21. Or 23.

I was taking tennis lessons. You had a job giving them. I was applying to college. You'd dropped out right before graduation. I couldn't legally drink. You'd been for years.

I didn't know what to do about you. And besides, what girl doesn't like a little attention after a break up?

I found a new boy and still you flirted. When I fell asleep at the wheel, you were the first one I called in panic.

Why did I call *you*?

All I saw when I opened my eyes were his. Piercing. Wide.

He was turning in front of me. My belongings crashed to the floor of my car. The contents of my purse thrust themselves free. Foot on the brakes, I burnt rubber. Smoke flew from the back tires.

I checked the mirror. Green eyes. Live eyes. My eyes.

Back in front of me, his eyes.

Wide with fear. Wide with knowing. Knowing they couldn't prevent our presumed fate. Knowing he had to trust a dumb high school girl to be able to stop her car in time. I thought of my parents answering the phone, expecting me to be home. I thought about never going home.

I thought of the accident I saw there weeks earlier, the same scene. SUV into a telephone pole. Dented, glass everywhere. Airbags filled the car. Two screaming ambulances.

I thought about how hours earlier, I'd wanted to die.

We were feet from each other when my car came to a stop. There was no identifiable anger on his face. I raised a hand and mouthed "I'm sorry" like it'd be enough.

I continued down the road, slowly.

On the phone, I kept saying:

“I could’ve killed someone. I could’ve killed myself.”

You texted more often. You told me this thing you had for me was “40% lust and 60% feelings.” That you were “so fucking attracted” to me and just wanted to kiss me “and see how it goes.”

You knew I didn’t feel the same.

One night, you walked me to my car after a drill. I thought it was a nice gesture.

You said, “What would you do if I kissed you right now?”

I said, “I’d rather you didn’t.”

And then your lips were on mine, pushing me against my car, your beard scratching my face like thousands of knives. It burned. You tasted like red onion. I hated it and I wanted to get into my car and drive away and go home and cry— but I froze. You were touching me, feeling my body with your big, grubby hands. I didn’t want you to.

With your hand on my crotch, you said, “What does this button do?”

I don’t remember what made you stop, but I got in my car and drove home. My face, splotchy and red, and not from the exercise I’d gotten at the drill. I palmed my eyes, furiously swiping away their cursed leaking. By the time I got home, I was perfectly put back together for my parents. Face drained of excessive color. Eyes like they were just freshly awakened.

"Hi honey, how was tennis?"

"Good. I need a shower."

CHEERLEADER

I am in his car after the tennis drill. I don't know why I agreed to get in but I'm there and it's a dream, so does it really matter? The blue glow of his stereo is blinding.

He looks like an alien in the seat beside me, cerulean-skinned.

The subwoofer is thumping, the waves of sound hit my ears, panicking me. I try to get out, but he's locked the doors. That song he told me reminded him of me, "Cheerleader," is blaring.

He's saying things about how pretty I am and how much he likes me and then he is grabbing my breasts and groping me. The seatbelt is a restraint.

Teen Set To Testify Against Man She Accused Of Rape Found Dead

Mom upset after school tells students they can't say no when asked to dance

Girl Sexually Assaulted on School Bus Twice in One Week: Police

New Details About The Teen Who Sent Photos Of A Dying Girl To His Friends Before Sexually Assaulting Her As She Passed Away

Teen Girl Who Was 'Groomed' Then Taken by Teacher: 'If I Didn't Go, Something Bad Would Happen'

Man who tied up and sexually assaulted 14-year-old girl will not go to jail after US court hears incident was 'consensual'

Indiana man accused of murdering, eating dead ex-girlfriend deemed competent for trial

Hours after domestic violence arrest, husband crashes stolen plane into his own home where wife was staying

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. N.D.

2. Yes

3. With the idea that rape was the scariest thing that could happen to a female, that it took the shape of a strange older man holding a knife to your throat while he had sex with you (thank you to my 7th grade science teacher for this idea, which we spent the entirety of our sex Ed lesson (4 weeks) talking about).

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. E.S.

2. Yes

3. My parents never talked to me about sexual encounters or hookups, so until I got to college, I always kind of thought that if a girl got taken advantage of or raped that it was her fault for being drunk or for putting herself in that situation.



NORA

Nora called me the morning after. I was at a photography conference in Florida, sitting in their closed bar for privacy. It was sunny outside; the light was offensive, inappropriately shining as she spoke. She was calling me from outside the library, sobbing, having taken a break from trying to do homework.

She told me she'd gone out drinking with friends, but hadn't drunk enough to lose control. She had sex with a male friend at his house, then went home. Our friend Andy texted her to come over, so she went to hang out. They watched TV in his bed, then she remembered feeling tired. They began to kiss—she said it was mutual. As they began to make out, she said to him, "I don't want to have sex." He kept trying to convince her, and she kept saying no. Eventually, they stopped kissing. She told him it was nice to not have to sleep alone (she'd just gone through a messy break up) and to be safe in bed with a friend. She fell asleep. She later remembered seeing his penis, but not what led up to that or after.

In the morning, she awoke, naked. She did not remember how or when her clothes were removed. She saw a condom wrapper on his desk, and thought that perhaps he'd thought they were going to have sex last night. Then, she saw a used condom on the ground, neatly tied up. She woke him up and said, "Did we have sex last night?"

He replied, "You don't remember?"

She left the house in a blur, passing someone, and it was only halfway through her walk home that she realized what happened. She broke down on the bridge, and went to her friend Katherine's apartment. They worked to piece the night back together.

She told me about the bruises on her neck. They were not hickeys. They were large and a brooding shade of purple. They were violent. They were in the shape of a hand clamped on a throat to hold her in place. For leverage.

I still cry when I see them.

I told her to document the bruises and save her clothes. To keep any and all evidence. Screenshot texts. I pushed her to report. I wanted her to do what I hadn't. She was braver and stronger than me.

She went to the Health Center and told them she'd been raped. They didn't do a physical. They didn't even know who to call for counseling. They did nothing. She went home.

When I got back from Florida on Sunday, we set up a meeting with our school's Title IX director. I held her hand as she cried and told her story. I asked a few questions and took notes, and otherwise didn't say much.

There were a lot of sleepless nights. She would try to hide, crying quietly in her room. Our dorm walls were too thin. I went to her and held her. We talked back and forth about continuing the reporting process.

She was afraid to sleep. She'd have paralyzingly real dreams in which he'd show up and rape her again and again. She needed to have the door closed some nights in order to feel safe. Some nights she needed it open. Her brain refused to rest.

Any time a door opened, she would have to see who came in or out. Any time I left her sight, she'd say "Where are you going? Don't leave." This wasn't just nights.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. L.M.

2. Yes

3. While I learned that my body was inherently a stumbling block for my fellow Christian brothers, I never learned about consensual sex, healthy desire, or a positive outlet for sexuality. I had to dress modestly lest I tempt a grown man to rape me.

My parents have both told me (on separate occasions) that they are against abortion. However, they continued, if I am raped, I should get one. To me, this means that my body has to be violated before I have rights to myself.

How can I be equal to the men in my life when the body I am in automatically renders me less than? How can I constantly live in fear of being raped and still feel like it would be my fault if it happened? How can I accept and explore my sexuality when I have to keep it a secret from my family?

Being denied certain aspects of myself growing up only makes me hold onto them harder and know how precious they really are.

NORA

She was forced to tell her story over and over to the administration. Their job requires distance. She needed people close, she needed warmth and to be told she was believed. Their coldness, though necessary, was insulting. She worried after every interview. She wanted to give in, to withdraw her claim because it was so draining to detail again and again. Her grades faltered, but her professors were understanding.

We texted about it almost daily.

Maybe I should just stop the reporting process.

You can do that, if you want. But, Nora, you're strong. I know you can handle it.

I know and I want him to be held accountable. But it's just so hard.

I know. At the end of the day, it's your decision. We'll all be standing by you, either way.

She brought guys home. She was trying to regain control of her body. Trying to prove it was hers. She needed to show that she could do what she wanted with it. She slept with a man who cried in her bed. She slept with a man who uncontrollably sweat.

She slept with a man to whom she entrusted her story. They began sleeping together more regularly. He was a sense of comfort, despite there being no romantic interest. She just wanted sex. She just wanted him to make her whole and take the pain and memories away. But he didn't stitch her pieces back to exactly how they were before.

She'd never get back to 'before'.

The trial was delayed—Andy wanted to have it after spring break, during Spring Term, so he could focus on his Winter Term exams. She wanted to get it over with, before Winter Term ended.

It was held during Spring Term.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. H.S.

2. Yes

3. I don't think I was really raised with any introduction to, I guess, equity as a woman.

In one sense, I think it was because I grew up in a pretty free-flowing, accepting place with an incredibly accepting family. I was never told that I was any lesser than a man, but I was never told I was powerful as a female, either.

Honestly, it wasn't until college that I started to doubt myself as a woman. My first year of college I actually refer to as the worst year of my life, because it, in all honesty, was. I was slapped in the face with an incredibly overwhelming binge-drinking, hook-up, objectify-women kind of culture.

Now I'm re-learning a lot. I'm trying to figure out how to live with and like that which I was raised with, while likewise trying to cope with so many others around me who were raised without all that.

NORA

The trial was held a month and a half after the rape. It lasted for nearly six hours—each party had to present their sides, and the committee had to give their judgment. Her story was coherent. It was consistent with witnesses. His was shaky. He was said to be noncommittal and without conviction about any facts. The committee's verdict was that he was responsible for the highest offense: non-consensual penetration. As punishment, he was given a one-semester suspension. He was allowed to stay for the remainder of Spring Term. He was eligible to re-enroll (after an application process) in the Winter of 2018. If denied, he would be eligible to re-apply the following semester.

And the following semester. And the following semester. And the following semester.

Sam, Cate, and I were not allowed to go to the trial, so we waited for Nora in my room. I sat on my bed, Sam in my desk chair, and Cate in another chair we dragged in. We expected it to only take a few hours; it seemed pretty black and white. As the night dragged on, we tried to make jokes. We all had assignments due the next day. I tried to read *Middlemarch*, Cate tried to read her psychology textbook, and Sam tried to make a presentation, but none of us could focus for more than two minutes at a time. Around hour four, we found ourselves finally able to laugh, mostly at pictures or quotes we

found in our books. We found ourselves laughing at ourselves laughing. Which made us laugh more. It wasn't laughter that felt good, it was just survival.

And then, after midnight, we heard the apartment door open and whoosh shut.

Nora had returned.

Georgia man arrested after he allegedly killed girlfriend, stabbed police dog

Man Calls 911 After Shooting Pregnant Girlfriend: 'By the Time They Get Out Here It Will Be Too Late'

Colo. Husband Accused of Killing Missing Wife, 2 Daughters After Pleading for Their Safe Return

Husband Arrested for Killing Pregnant Wife and Daughters After Telling TV Their Disappearance Was 'Tearing Me Apart'

Boy, 14, held after repeated stabbing of girl, 14, at school assembly, police say

Jury convicts man for sexually assaulting a woman on a plane as his wife sat next to him

Blake Farenthold Blames 'F-Tards,' Me Too Campaign For His Downfall

In horrifying detail, women accuse U.S. customs officers of invasive body searches

Former students allege decades-old sexual abuse at private school

THE ACCUSED

Donald Trump. Harvey Weinstein. Larry Nassar. Kevin Spacey. Roy Moore. Louis CK.
Matt Lauer. Al Franken. Woody Allen. Alex Jones. Corey Feldman. Mario Batali. Stan
Lee. Ryan Seacrest. Les Moonves. Jeremy Piven. Gene Simmons. Donovan McNabb.
Danny Masterson. Brett Kavanaugh. Neil deGrasse Tyson. Bill O'Reilly. Chris
Hardwick. Morgan Freeman. Nev Schulman. Junot Díaz. Sean Hannity. Scott Baio. Nick
Caporella. Sherman Alexie. Charlie Sheen. Travis Kalanick. David Copperfield. Nick
Sauer. Michael Douglas. Seal. Aziz Ansari. Richard Branson. Corey Lewandowski.
James Franco. Tom Brokaw. George HW Bush. Dan Harmon. George Takei. Jay Asher.
Tony Mendoza. Sylvester Stallone. Matthew Weiner. Steven Seagal. Dustin Hoffman.
Jeffrey Tambor. Ed Westwick. Jamie Foxx. Nick Carter. David Blaine. Chuck Close. Andy
Savage. Ben Affleck. Nelly. R Kelly. Brad Kern. Larry King. Roman Polanski. Cristiano
Ronaldo. Ryan Adams...

JOURNAL ENTRY TITLED “HOW I’M FEELING 4/25/17 POST-NORA’S-TRIAL”

First and foremost, I am glad that for probably one of the first times in his life, he is held accountable for his actions. That is a plus. But I am fucking pissed. I am fucking pissed that he is allowed to stay for Spring term, and be around us still. I am fucking pissed that he is only suspended for fall term. I am fucking pissed that it only says he has a suspension on his transcript, not what it is for, even if it is implied. I am fucking pissed that they drew it out over 6 hours, not to mention postponing it to now as per his request. I am fucking pissed because I think they let him off easy to avoid a lawsuit. He is rich, they know it. But what if we fucking sue them. They’d never see it coming if this was their plan. And they deserve it. They deserve to be made an example of. They deserve to have to fight a court battle and pay for it. They, too, should be held accountable. They should’ve booted his fucking ass out of here at midnight tonight, instead of allowing him to stay. They should’ve told him to pack his rapist clothes and his rapist belongings and get the fuck out of Lexington before sunrise. They should’ve done better handling her case initially. The nurse should’ve known who to contact, and informed her of all the things she could be tested for. They should’ve told her who his hearing advisor

would be, because he's a conflict of interest, and she didn't know until the trial.

I am so, so fucking angry.

But I know we are going to channel this energy — this badass feminism —into good for future women. And Nora herself, I hope.

I hope she will not feel defeated by this. I hope she feels empowered and proud of herself for speaking up. I hope she is proud that at least he is held responsible for his actions. I hope she has it in her to appeal, and to sue if her family so chooses. I hope they can afford it. I hope they can get help in affording it. She will not go quietly into that good night. She will not go down without a fight. None of us—none of her support—will, either. Every step of the way, we will be here, fighting for her and supporting her as much as she needs. I will be a witness for months, years, if I need to. I will do anything to help her win this.

Kind of starting to feel like I'm floating through space. Like I'm not really in my body. I am swaying, kind of. I don't want to do work, of course. I don't want to get up for class tomorrow. I want to sleep, and sleep, and sleep, and wake up in a universe where his ass got booted the fuck out of

here. I want to live in a world where justice is served without fear and cowardice. I want to live in a world where Universities protect their students, and stick to their guns. I want to live in a world where it's not all about money and lawsuits, but rather, equality and fairness and honesty. I want to live in a world without sexism. I want to live in a world without rapists.

I want to live in a better world.

NORA

She appealed the punishment, arguing that it was not harsh enough. She was denied, as there was no new evidence presented, and no identified misdoings by the committee. Her parents emailed the President of the University. He returned their words with a vague and cookie-cutter response:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. D—,

Thank you for writing to share your concerns with me. As a parent, I hope never to receive a call like the one you received from Nora. I am sorry about her distress and yours, and I realize that my words can do little to alleviate it.

In my short time at Washington and Lee, I have been impressed with the sensitivity and care exhibited by everyone involved in the sexual misconduct process. There is nothing we take more seriously than protecting the health and safety of our students. That begins with an active education and prevention program that aims to create a culture free from sexual misconduct. When misconduct does occur, we offer support to victims, encourage the reporting of assaults, and resolve complaints promptly through procedures that are consistent with both federal guidelines and nationally recognized best practices for treating all students fairly. I am glad that Nora had the confidence in our conduct system to come forward with her experience...

During the trial process and after, she pierced her nipples; she took them out; she re-pierced her nipples; she got a tattoo; she slept with an endless list of men; she

couldn't sleep at night; she couldn't focus on school; she got fine grades; she drank more; she ate less.

She has gone from constantly pained in reliving her trauma to doing it willingly and in front of an audience. She has told her story at many sexual assault survivor support events like Take Back the Night. Her audiences find themselves in awe of her ability to tell her story. They find themselves in tears. I do, too.

She told her story at a protest in the town green. Using a small bull horn, she told the crowd about how she was raped by her friend in his fraternity house. About how the school did not expel him. About how he is allowed to reapply every semester. Old women, strangers, came up to her afterwards, asking to hug her and telling her they were sorry. One woman, with geometric red glasses and a shock of white hair, asked her if she was doing better since it had happened. Nora assured her that she was. Professors approached her, offering their sympathy. One history professor, prematurely gray, came up and mentioned that she had heard about the trial. Nora said she felt really drained so we left out the back of the park and slowly walked home, where we sat on the couch and watched Arrested Development to clear our heads.

Every semester that he's reapplied, he's been denied.

NORA

I can hear her scream-sobbing downstairs. We've just come back from a party, and her boyfriend is in town. It sounds like, for awhile, he's got a handle on things, so I let him. But after 20 minutes, I go downstairs.

In the cold, dim light of the laundry room, she's drunk and chucking clothes into the dryer, crying about Brett Kavanaugh being voted into the Supreme Court.

"He was voted in!" she wails.

All I can say is, "I know."

She heaves with every wave.

"Is laundry really the best thing for you to do right now?"

"It has to get done!"

I wrap her in a hug, her snot and tears soaking my hair. She feels so small, like she's folded herself, yet we're the same height.

"I've been having dreams about Anthony again," she says. "In them, we're friends. Everything is okay."

"I'm sorry."

"Do you think he's just at home? Or do you think he's in school?"

"I don't know, I don't have any way of knowing. But I understand your impulse to know."

She hangs her laundry to dry. I retreat back upstairs to read. Five minutes later, shaky breaths and sorrow rattle the walls again.

UC Berkeley suspends professor for sexual harassment

Father Charged with Murder in Death of Middle School-Aged Daughter

Woman reports being forcibly raped on Stanford campus

Mom Catches Man Spying on Daughter in Store Dressing Room

Man shot at women drivers, thinking only men should operate vehicles, authorities say

Three Teenagers Arrested in Kidnapping, Rape of 70-Year-Old Woman

Young girls groped by pack of men at water park: cops

Student says former Columbia dean coerced her, sues school

Kevin Spacey, Anthony Anderson and Steven Seagal will not face sex crime charges



**All my
friends
have been
raped.**

Avery Monsen and Jory John

THE MAN HATER

Once, over the phone, my father asked if I was a “man-hating femi-nazi.” Of course, I said no.

I hate that men feel entitled to me. That by interacting with them, they deserve something. That for being nice to them, that means I should have sex with them. Otherwise, you’re “frigid” or a “tease.” I hate that there are innumerable expectations put on me by virtue of being a woman in a man-centric world.

But I do hate men.

I hate the way they leer at me and yell colorful platitudes from truck windows as they drive by. I hate the way a man walking behind me makes me wish I wore more practical shoes, in case I need to run. I hate that I start thinking of escapes anytime I suspect a car is following me. I hate that whenever a car drives by me walking on the sidewalk, I’m afraid of being grabbed and pulled into the backseat, where I will be tied up until they decide to dump me on the side of the highway. I hate that I constantly check the people around me while putting air in my tires alone at a gas station. I hate that I feel uncomfortable going to a bathroom alone. I hate that I constantly adjust my life to fit these dangers.

I hate men.

Being on high alert out in public is a constant as a woman—you have to be, you know the risks. My father accompanies me to bathrooms in strange and creepy places, the alley bathroom in a relatively nice strip center on Hilton Head Island, a placid retirement town in South Carolina. I hate that I feel unsafe, even there. I hate that my dad has to tell me if I get a flat tire on the side of the road, to lock myself in my car lest a man stops to “help.”

I hate men.

I hate feeling that inherent in my being is a victim waiting to be preyed on. I hate being told and knowing I have to watch my wine glass at every bar and restaurant, even the nice ones, like the Red Hen, because you never can be too careful. I hate not being able to trust anyone, even those I want to trust, like friends I’ve known for years. I learned that one from experience.

I hate men so fucking much.

If I never had to deal with them again, I'd take the opportunity and be grateful for it. I hate that I am afraid of any future relationships, lest they end in me rejecting him and him subsequently killing me. I've collected countless headlines of violence against women, enacted for anything from rejection to love to driving to mothering. "Body of Missing AZ Mom Is Found Burned in Field—and Ex Is Charged with Murder." "Hours After Domestic Violence Arrest, Husband Crashes Stolen Plane Into His Own Home Where His Wife Was Staying." "Man Shot At Women Drivers, Thinking Only Men Should Operate Vehicles, Authorities Say."

I hate men.

WHAT REMAINS

I was the youngest in the office and one of the few women working for that construction company that summer. My dad had rescued me from you in May by coming to move me out, and now we were working in the same office so I could save up some money over the summer.

I did whatever they needed me to do, and on that day, I was to organize the marketing assembly room. It was a large back closet, mostly separate from the office. I played music and tried not to get too bummed out by the lack of windows and the all-white cabinetry.

I was changing songs on my playlist when that dreaded phone number popped up. You were texting me. I flipped my phone over. If I couldn't see it, maybe it wasn't true.

Everything began to cave in. The walls, my chest, my vision. I couldn't see straight, I sunk to the floor, wrapping my arms around my knees. I had to remember I was safe. I couldn't breathe and I felt like coughing. Choking. Screaming for help but I had to be silent.

Choked sobs I tried to subdue with my sweater sleeves. Soon, they were soaked and my mascara ran like blood from my eyes. I crawled to the door and shut it, pushing my back up against it.

I was safe. I had to remember I was safe.

I sat for a long time, collecting myself, before I could open the message.

It was sent to me and Emma, a non sequitur about moving and the mixtape we'd made. It was underwhelming and I was relieved. It wasn't directed at me.

But still, he knew what he was doing.

Man kills wife, 3 young girls, grandmother in brutal stabbing: cops

Baytown man pleads guilty to murdering 16-year-old girlfriend

Woman's Body Found in Recycling Bin in Texas Man's Bedroom — and Now He's Charged with Murder

Brett Kavanaugh Accuser Goes Public: 'I Thought He Might Inadvertently Kill Me'

Man arrested in Louisiana cold case murder of wife 7 years ago

Facing sexual assault charges, 3D-printed gun advocate Cody Wilson evades US authorities

Atlanta man gets life sentence for rape after victim recognizes him at train station six years later

Man charged with killing wife at sea sought to inherit her estate, prosecutor says

Border Patrol Agent Accused Of Killing 4 Women, Kidnapping Another

WHAT REMAINS

Today, I met a man, the husband of a Professor whose puppy I walk. The moment we shook hands, something about him bothered me. He was perfectly nice, though and they were sweet together. He was kind and dedicated to his dog, and I wanted nothing more than to be rid of the weird feeling. I wanted to feel safe and listen to what they had to say about their dog's care and needs. But my heart was pounding and I just wanted to leave.

We went for a walk with the puppy so I could get a feel for how much she pulls and how she reacts to certain things. She's a rescue. When he spoke, I felt chilled. I hung back with the professor as we walked. It wasn't personal.

I went home. I didn't want to be around people, I didn't even want to hear or see signs of their existence. My roommates laughed downstairs; I got angry alone in my bed. I left my house as another roommate came home (how dare she!), forced to go interact with prospective students. I talked to a friend, asking if he'd met the new professor, as they originated from the same country. He explained that he had, and that he'd met her husband, too, who was from Scotland.

Scotland. That was it.

Dark, tightly curled hair, a beard that ran past his chin and peppered with gray, and that accent. The one I'll hear and cringe without recognizing why. He was much shorter than you, but the same brand of lanky.

SPEECHLESS

We're going to Paris again, but it's a mish-mash of people from the Hawai'i class and my Paris class. Someone told me Eric was going to be on the trip, a reunion of sorts. I was on hyper alert in the car and airport, always looking over my shoulder for him. I had to see him before he saw me. That gave me control.

I knew it was a dream the moment I saw him. In real life, I doubt I would have spotted him first.

Sam told me Eric was mad at me, which made me even more frightened. I tried to sleep on the flight.

In Paris, Eric and I were assigned to be roommates, but I wasn't informed. He walked in and began to unpack. I stared. He wouldn't speak.

WHAT REMAINS

I stopped by a professor's office to deliver the succulent he bought from me. This was my new entrepreneurial venture at the time; my succulents kept growing new plants, and I'd run out of room to keep, so I decided to spread the joy of plants.

I entered his office and stood on the opposite side of the desk, introducing myself. Looking around, he had floor to ceiling bookshelves. I was envious. But I was also uncomfortable. It caught me off guard. I didn't understand what it was about him that unsettled me.

He was young, probably in his 30s or early 40s. Perhaps six foot three.

That was it.

LITTLE TRAUMAS

I. You, rushing into my cubicle, saying, "Your grandma died, let's go."

II. Bleeding: my once-monthly reminder that I am not a mannequin after all.

III. When "Jesus Christ" comes on the radio.

IV. That body wash that smells like angst, a creepy professor, and also my hand sanitizer.

V. Neck beards.

VI. The man on the internet who said he liked to "dream of me" when I was 10.

WHAT REMAINS

Any time I see a person that looks like you, my body reacts. Black curly hair. Glasses. Neck beard. I shake. It's involuntary. My brain, though she knows they aren't you, thinks they are you. There is no rationing with her when she gets like that. She does what she wants.

I don't know why. Nothing actually *happened*.

And yet.

I shake. And I hope people don't notice. I swallow, try to play it cool. I'm fine. Everything's fine. See? I can still choke down pieces of my breakfast.

Some friends joke about it, they think the story is funny.

We sit in a room full of people, imbibing and whining, sharing stories and sorrows. Inevitably, it'll come up.

"Taylor, oh my gosh, tell them about the time that professor hit on you! It's a riot, guys."

I usually tell the tale, because I do want people to know. But it's not a riot. They think I can laugh.

Sometimes I bring it up so I can prove I can laugh. When we swap stories, I'll say, "Oh, I haven't told you about the time a professor hit on me and made me really uncomfortable?" I laugh. Time has made it funny. It has to, right?

Does it really sound like laughter? I just hear croaking.

Nothing actually *happened*.

I wish I could lighten up. It was two and a half years ago. I have a terrible memory, and yet this is the one thing my brain clings to.

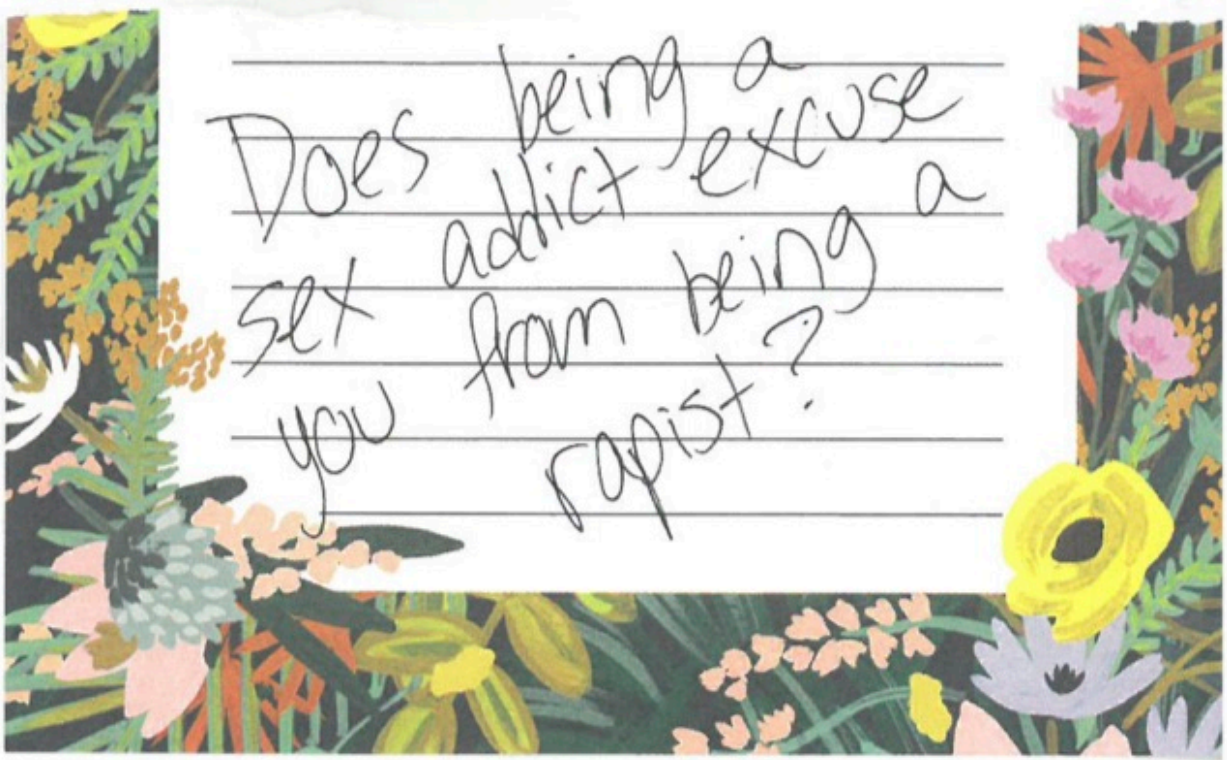
Even now, as I write this, I'm sweating. I can feel my chest closing. I am trying to breathe.

I need to get this out but the window is closing and my chest is compressing and I am starting to stare and go back to that place I'm trying to breathe now but I'm underwater and my eyes are filling and my fingers are moving slower across my keys and *I can't breathe* can you resuscitate me can you make it will someone please make it go away?

WHAT REMAINS

Nothing actually *happened*. You were just a threat. A bogeyman in the night. And yet.

I can't revisit the places I went during those days. I can't eat breakfast in Sweet Treats and not think about the texts you sent me. I can't sit there and not remember as I watched out the window, hoping you wouldn't be the next customer to enter. Wishing my dad would come sooner.



THE MELON

The boy who encountered me after I took pill after pill after pill is the same boy who later raped me freshman year while we were taking a nap in his bed.

I don't know how to disconnect these facts.

I think it was October. I was depressed and unable to get myself help. I was suicidal. I didn't want to be alive. It wasn't my lowest point, but it was the first time I did something about those feelings.

I was crying alone in my room and fumbled my way to my desk. I opened my drawer and looked at my assortment of pills. Allergy meds, ibuprofen. That'd have to do. I took one ibuprofen. Then another. Then another.

I think I took 15. I don't think I wanted to die right then. I just wanted to see what would happen. It was a compulsion.

I knew it probably wouldn't kill me, so I stopped and got into bed and went on my computer. Then, there was a knock at my door. Shit.

My friend James came in, high as a kite. He wanted to talk. I didn't.

He rambled on about everything from metaphysics to actual physics. He ripped paper with his teeth and ate it for a half hour. I sat in bed, my comforter pulled up around me, trying to entertain him as I started to feel the effects of the pills. I texted my

friend Greg to come get James out of my room. Greg was my confidant, my first friend on my hall and one of my first at college.

Greg soon came and dismissed James, who promptly went to bed. I thanked him, and confessed I was feeling weird. I wanted someone to know.

He asked if I'd eaten something that would've upset my stomach, and I confessed that I'd taken a handful of pills. He switched into caregiver mode while I became a zombie. My brain felt dull and sleepy. I could barely keep my eyes open. He instructed me on what to consume the next day in order to detox. He didn't judge me. His brother had tried to overdose before, so he knew the process. I was grateful for a friend who wouldn't chastise me.

The next day, I followed his instructions.

How could he possibly be the same boy that, about four months later, raped me?

He is now a diagnosed sex addict.

Does that mean he is the same boy, or different, after all?

We lay in bed, in February I think. It was snowing outside. I was lonely and just wanted company. So did he. For awhile we lay and watch the snow fall. I lay on my side and he wrapped his arms around me. He was warm and I felt safe.

And then his hands started to wander. I lay still, hoping he just wanted to stroke my skin. That would be okay. But his hands kept going lower and I said, "No." I pushed his hands away but he always put them back. And then his fingers were inside of me.

"Please stop."

He began to move in and out faster. It hurt. My body wasn't ready. I said no over and over but he didn't listen. He continued to push his fingers into me. It was aggressive and violent. I felt like I was being ripped apart. He was tearing me to shreds.

His nails scooped me out like I was a melon.

My mind was racing, trying to figure out how to get away. My body was frozen.

I decided that my best chance would be to fake an orgasm. Surely, then, he'd stop because I'd be finished?

I faked it, but he kept thrusting into me. It was not a loving act. It felt like it was a release of anger for him.

Finally, I decided to lie and say I had to go to a meeting that I forgot about. He stopped. He kissed me on the cheek and I climbed down from his bunk bed and rushed out of his room. Everything hurt.

In my room, I discovered my underwear soaked with blood. I changed them, put on a pad, and crawled into bed. I immediately went to sleep.

I bled for three days.

I am still friends with my rapists.

Both have asked about my thesis. I dance around the subject, or deflect it entirely.

They don't know what I'm writing about.

It's not that they'd recognize themselves. This is something for myself. They don't deserve to know.

It scares me that they could read this if they sought it out.

This is part of the reason I haven't told anyone much about my rapes. If I'm still friends with the rapists, then how bad could it have been? I hardly believe I have room to talk if I allow them to remain in my life, so what will others think?

The optics are no good.

I've been easing them out of my life. One texts me a lot, wanting to hang out and watch TV. I always seem to be too busy. He is fading from my life and texting less and it feels like less of a loss than it used to.

The other snapchats me a photo of cocktail he's made of a dinner he's cooked. Usually, I don't reply. Sometimes, he texts me and we'll chat, cursory life updates.

I don't know how to allow myself to be friends with them. By all accounts, I absolutely shouldn't be. I should've cut them out the moment they betrayed me, but I didn't. I've had to live with that. And I still don't know how.

I don't know how to put them in order.

1. How dare I?

2. It's okay.

1a. No, but really, how dare I?

3. How dare *they*?

1b. But seriously, *how dare I*?

4. Why would I do this to myself?

There's no order.

Hello, yes, I'd like a small blizzard with a side of crippling self-doubt, please?

That'll be \$3.33 at the first window, ma'am.

I'm sorry, I asked for a small blizzard, not a large slice of guilt.

That's all we have in stock today, ma'am.

Don't I have to pay?

No, the men in the car in front of you said your order was on them.

I still don't know how to write about this in a linear way. I've put it off for almost an entire semester, allowing everything else to come out first. But this one just doesn't want to come yet. How am I to articulate something I don't fully understand? I don't even feel wholly comfortable talking to my therapist about it. I'm afraid she won't understand.

We discussed it once, she told me I should try to accept that I am friends with them and that that is okay for me right now. But I am disgusted with myself and want to shove it all away. I don't know how to tell her that. She understands and can help but my brain tells me she can't. I didn't even look her in the eyes, just stared at her assorted dried branches and years-old posters.

I can't tell you how many times I've read the 2014 Martin Luther King Jr. Day Parade poster.

I am afraid of having sex.

I wanted it and I did and the world went around. But it feels like that part of me gone. Shut down. Out of commission. I don't know how I am supposed to feel.

I mostly feel barren and numb.

I don't care about sex. I don't seek it out, I don't like thinking or hearing about it. I don't want to be penetrated—the *idea* of that feels like an act of violence, let alone the actual act. I just want to be myself, existing in the world, doing whatever. I don't want to be thought of as sexual.

I don't want anyone to lay their hands on me, to touch me in places which have been victimized. I day dream of cutting off these folds of genitalia, or looking like a mannequin or Barbie doll, recognizable but sexless.

What if this is how I'll always be, closed off and unwilling and unable? I won't be able to satisfy my partner. Am I to date on and off, fleeing when it comes time to be intimate? Will anyone be able to accept me? Am I to be alone?

Do you ever look around the classroom & wonder how many of your peers have
raped
someone?

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. C.N.

2. Yes

3. Coming from an evangelical Christian background, almost all forms of premarital sexuality were harshly condemned, which essentially prohibited any sort of discussion about consent. Fundamentalist Christianity also enforces strict gender roles, an idea they call complementation. This means that wives are seen as ultimately underneath their husbands' authority, sending a clear message to me growing up about my relative worth compared to men

I was often told to watch the way I acted and dressed in order to avoid being a "stumbling block" to my "brothers in Christ". The responsibility to remain 'pure' falls almost completely on women, making them at fault should any sexual act, whether consensual or not, occurs.

IT DIDN'T FEEL QUITE RIGHT

We became friends through racquet sports. First with our University's club tennis team, then badminton. I thought you were cool, though a tad too religious.

It was never weird— never more than just friends. We joked, we teamed up to take on other teams at competitions, and even when we got crushed, we had fun.

You had a party at your house. I'd been there a few times, I was comfortable. We all played beer pong and talked and danced.

You asked if I wanted a drink from your nicer stash. I followed you to your room. We sipped Long Island Iced Teas and chatted, away from the barbaric sounds of the party.

Soon enough we were drunk. You kissed me, and I reciprocated. We didn't like each other. We were lonely.

I don't know how long we kissed on your couch, but eventually you shut the lights off and we moved to your bed. I heard you take off your pants. I was feeling fuzzy and sort of sleepy. You said, "I want to have sex."

I said, "I don't think that's a good idea."

Then you were inside of me and it didn't matter what I thought.

Then we were in your car, you were driving me home. And you were mad. Mad at *me*, for tempting you and for yourself for giving in to that temptation. You were raving. I was wearing your brown jacket, staring at the fogged glass of the window. I didn't say anything, I just cried, thinking this meant we wouldn't be friends anymore.

I went into my apartment. Nora and her boyfriend John asked what was wrong, but I didn't answer and went straight to my room, to sleep. The jersey pillowcase grew cold from my tears, my arms clutching my stuffed cow.

The next day, Nora asked how my night was, and why I came back crying.

"Grant and I had sex."

But that didn't feel quite right.

She laughed, stunned. "I can't imagine you two together, like, at all."

Neither could I.

I hadn't *really* consented and he hadn't *really* listened, but I figured it was too late to correct them. I didn't know how to walk it back.

Saying it would be admitting that it happened. If I kept it in my head, I was safer. I could ignore it and pretend it didn't exist and we could still be friends despite the gnawing dread in the pit of my stomach every time I saw him.

Sometimes, my friends will bring it up because they think it's funny, how mismatched we were. "Wait, remember that time you and Grant had sex?"

Cackling. They're all looking at each other, laughing. They're all in on the joke, and somehow, though it's about me, I'm on the outside.

The punchline.

"Uh, yeah. We shouldn't have done that. It made things kind of weird. But it's funny now!"

A PLAYLIST OF SONGS THAT DIDN'T AGE WELL:

TRACK #	NAME	ARTIST	ALBUM	TIME
1	Every Breath You Take	The Police	Synchronicity	4:14
2	Run for Your Life	The Beatles	Rubber Soul	2:21
3	Fat Bottomed Girls	Queen	Jazz	4:16
4	Stupid Girl	The Rolling Stones	Aftermath	2:55
5	Fire	Bruce Springsteen	The Promise	4:09
6	My Sharona	The Knack	Get the Knack	4:55
7	Hot Legs	Rod Stewart	Foot Loose & Fancy Free	5:15
8	Don't Stand So Close to Me	The Police	Zenyatta Mondatta	4:03
9	Under My Thumb	The Rolling Stones	Aftermath	3:42

A SNEAKY KIND OF VERTIGO

You texted me yesterday for the first time in probably a year. You were going to be in town and you wanted to see me.

I didn't want to see you.

You texted me all night, trying to convince me to go to the parties and meet up with you, but I wasn't feeling well. I kept brushing you off, saying no, saying I had a headache, saying I had too much work, but you persisted. You texted me updates, unprompted:

"Just got beer dumped on me! Gotta love tear night."

Eyeball.

You moved to a bar with your friends and again asked for me to join, even offering free drinks.

You asked where I was living these days, and I told you over by the Lenfest Center. It's near where you used to live. You got a kick out of that.

"You know I'm not going to leave town without seeing you, right?"

I didn't want you in my house. That was the last thing I needed.

"I'll come over to say hi if you're still up!"

I gave in. I didn't want to reward your persistence, but it just felt *easier*.

Isn't that how it always goes?

We met for coffee and reminisced about the time we sat on the Center for Global Learning and drank White Russians and watched the sunset. About the time we drank Long Island Iced Teas at a pregame of a pregame of a pregame and never made it to the actual party. About our tennis matches, won and lost.

We did have some good memories.

I didn't bring up the time you raped me. The time you didn't listen to what I wanted and penetrated me anyway.

After I went home, the world spun for awhile. I couldn't tell if it was from forgetting to take my medicine yesterday, or having to interact with you again.

I don't know if it matters.

I showered, I had to feel clean. Then I lay down and slept.

ILLNESS-INDUCED

I.

In a strip mall. The room is large, white and shiny despite being weighed down by exercise equipment. The women inside look miserable, scared.

It's not clear why I'm there. I think they're going to harvest my eggs. It is made to sound voluntary.

They put me on a piece of equipment to warm up, like an elliptical but more compact. I run on that for awhile, and realize I'm attached to it, so if I wanted to get off I couldn't.

Women around me are called back for the procedure.

I am taken to the side of the room, too, and strapped onto another piece of equipment, my legs spread. I am uncomfortable, despite still having all of my clothes on. The nurse is trying to calm and reassure me, but it all is so horribly white and shining. She leaves me to go prepare for the procedure.

Suddenly, my major advisor is at my side, wearing his new red and black plaid flannel suit, unstrapping me. He says we have to go and rushes me outside. My legs are weak so his arm loops with mine and we run.

II.

Back in that horrible white strip mall room, but this time for the computer section. It's a kind of typing test. Waiting, I play soccer in the hall, and talk to my friend Mikey this large, black and white moth that rests on the wall. I am finally called in for the test. A lot of people leave and it's me and one of my friends whose face I can't see but I know I trust. Who is in charge here? What does he want?

On our laptops, we read the email he'd sent to participants and it is filled with insinuations that he is looking for a student to date. Not while being taught by him, because he acknowledges that is not allowed. But a year or two out. Who is he?

We start doing searches, he's signed the email with an alias. He turns out to be some 50+ year old man I've never seen before, but sort of looks like Kelsey Grammer. We plot to take him down.

III.

I am in a farm house with Professors Gavalier, Wheeler, and Gertz and students from classes I'm currently in. I guess it is some sort of retreat. Everything is tight in the house, the walls and furniture are all very close, suffocating. We are talking and getting settled in when gun shots rain down on the house. We try to peer out windows to get a sense of our attackers, but every time we peek out, we are shot at. They must have scopes.

We crawl from room to room and sit beneath windows. Every minute is a fight to survive to the next. I think some people with me die, but I don't remember seeing them. After a great deal of time, we escape to board a ship. The ship capsizes because none of us know how to steer it (thanks English majors and professors) and we hit a sand bar at a wrong angle.

Somehow I end up back in the house. There are less people and everything is in tatters. I am sitting under a window huddled and waiting when I hear a pick-up. I hide in a cabinet while the occupants of the truck search the house, I suppose for survivors. They don't find me.

When I'm convinced they're gone, I get up and find that they've left a bull head sculpture outside the house. Their mark, I guess.

IV.

My mom bought this house where we used to get our dogs groomed. She says she wants to turn it into a vet's office. From the outside, the house looks the same as I remember it.

Walking up, there's snow blanketing the ground. I think I can jump across the pond out front—until I'm at the semi-frozen water's edge, and I realize it's expanding. I walk around it instead, following my mom inside.

Inside, the ceilings and doorways are low, and feel like they're closing in. Each room leads to another room, and then another. It is difficult to navigate and I end up lost. My mom shows me her plans for each room. Most rooms are empty, but one is red with large windows. It is like a ballroom.

Another room is a cramped bedroom with a massive TV shoved in a corner.

My mom calls for me, but I am unable to find her.

V.

I'm in a Target, retrieving my belongings off the shelves in order to buy them. They fit in two carts, which are difficult to control.

Buying your belongings is the only way to leave the store. Otherwise, I would be trapped in there, in a luxurious aisle of food paid for by the Glasgow Endowment with some other people from my life, but I needed to go find my parents.

The check out line crawls. There are some problems with my items. I am afraid of being detained, but they eventually let me go. I go outside, steering my two carts, and set off in search of my parents. I am in what I believe to be Philadelphia. I don't know where to go, so I just walk. I end up walking through almost entirely empty parts of town, with just men passing me. They harass me and try to assault me. I am paralyzed with fear but escape unharmed each time. Eventually, when I'm in a wooded area and totally lost, I find my phone and call my parents sobbing.

"I really need a ride, dad."

I will die unless they come get me right now. There are people in the woods who want to hurt me.

"Dammit, T, we're at dinner. We're coming."

I share my location on my phone and wait. It says they are 6 minutes away, but that doesn't account for city traffic. I start walking towards them, but the map is indecipherable. So many looping streets and dead ends. I begin to walk anyway, and

end up in a strip mall. After wandering into and out of stores, hiding from pursuants, I end up in the W&L University store. I am hiding inside when my parents arrive. I am weak and they are worried. They chastise me for wandering away and walking around alone, but help me load my things into the car.

My mom collapses, twitching. She is unresponsive except when moved, when she cries out in pain. I know it is my fault, her collapse.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. M.D.

2. No

3. I was raised to recognize confidence but didn't learn to grow into it until after being abroad and on my own. I was raised to be myself but I didn't know how to give myself the chance.

MOM & DAD

I sat across from my mom and dad in the arm chair, they sat on the couch.

“I have something to tell you.”

It was time. I couldn't hide forever. I shouldn't. Wouldn't.

“My thesis is actually about sexual assault. My friends and my own.”

Their eyes bore into mine, faces expressionless. I was looking at zombies.

“You can read some of it, if you want.”

I pulled up an edited version of my thesis. They took my computer. I wasn't ready to tell them everything yet, so I left some things out. The worst things. Of the 100 pages I had at the time, they read about 65.

“Do you want to come sit with us?” my mom asked.

Hesitantly, I moved over to the couch. I sat on one end, they sat close together on the other. Reading. Consuming.

Our house was silent for the hour it took. I felt guilty breathing, for the small sound it made. It should've been a pure vacuum. That felt right.

I read the entirety of my thesis from the side of my screen. Tilted away, like I wasn't supposed to see my own work. It felt like I was made of concrete, unable to adjust. Bodies immovable. My leg fell asleep. I forgot to breathe.

I still felt proud of it, even under those conditions. I'm doing myself justice.

When they finished, they were speechless. They just stared at me like I was some relic that they would only get to look at for so long, so they had to imprint it on their minds.

Like I was impermanent.

They told me that I should have told them sooner. I reminded them that since we were in the present, that didn't really help right now.

They clung to me, fingers pressing into my back and shoulders. I think it was supposed to be a hug.

A girl has stolen my heart, and so I'm letting her have it and letting it go and seeing where it takes me. For the first time in a long time, I am excited at the prospect of a relationship. Before, I would run at the first hint, afraid of what would inevitably come down the road: intimacy. But with this girl, I feel no pressure. She understands. She gets the pieces of me that I've barely begun to comprehend myself. She sees and accepts me without question. I didn't think I'd ever find that.

THE BISEXUAL

Over break, I came out to my parents. I assured them that being a survivor of rape and being bisexual are not intrinsically linked, it is not cause and effect, but two parallel happenings.

I hope that is true.

I really don't care if that is true. I don't want to deal with the idea that I am just running from men, and to women, to feel safer. If it makes me feel safer, I will pursue it.

But it is true that I have an appreciation for both men and women. As I tried to explain it to them, I see and like people for their souls, not what is in their pants. I like that about myself.

“I don’t want to sound insensitive, but—” he started. “Do you think this is linked to what your thesis is about?”

My dad tried to raise the question in a sensitive way, at least, but still, it hurt.

“I just don’t want you to run from what hurt you, lest you miss out on other experiences.”

That “other” is loaded. Sex. Marriage. Children.

No, thanks.

I tried to nod and seem like I was really hearing him, accepting his words, but my brain faded to static.

AFTER FINDING OUT A FRIEND WAS SEXUALLY ASSAULTED BY HER GODMOTHER'S HUSBAND

My brain is fracturing at the folds. My insides, the ones I worked so hard to fortify, are crumbling with every shaky inhale. I can't be the vase that tumbled off the mantle. I won't shatter into jagged pieces on the hardwood floor.

I don't want to tell my friends. They have their own problems. So I'll focus on my breathing to repair. I'd feel safer in her arms but that requires telling her. And she looks so happy, belting songs from *Rent* (the movie), so I'll just hold her hand, lean my head back, and let my eyes freeze over.

I have to remember it wasn't me.

I was not there. I am safe.

I am safe.

This is the first time I've wanted to self harm in a year.

I want to smash my head into a wall a thousand times. I want to shove my finger down my throat and throw up my entire gastrointestinal system. I want to peel my skin, inch by inch, and wrap myself again like a mummy, blind to the world.

HEAVE

"I don't know why we are so insecure about each other. I wish I felt like I could even just change my clothes in front of you," she says, leaning in the doorway of her bedroom, back lit by her dim \$10 lamp.

"It's because I don't like my body and I want it to look good for you. I'm embarrassed."

"But that's how I feel too! So we should just do it. It'll be okay."

I rush past her, excusing myself to the bathroom. I sit on the toilet, head immediately dropping into my hands.

I heave.

Sobs rise out of me; it feels like I'm vomiting tears. I try to be quiet.

She knocks on the door, saying "Hey, are you done peeing? I want to wash my face."

"One minute."

I wipe at my face, trying to erase the signs, and let her in. I've done a bad job, but at first, she doesn't see my face.

She reaches for her cleanser, and I heave again.

She turns to me, eyes filled with concern. "Oh, are you okay?"

I shake my head "no" as tears and snot stream down my face. She wraps me in her arms and walks me to the bedroom, where she sits me on the bed and drapes her

warmest blanket around me. She is gentle and tender and I feel like she doesn't deserve this. My hands cover my face; I don't want this to happen, and I especially don't want her to see me like this.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Again, I shake my head "no."

"Not until I stop crying," I respond, too late.

I feel my sadness ebb away a bit.

"It's just that, I feel like so many men have ruined me and my body, I don't know how to be vulnerable with you. And I really just don't want to fuck this up."

I heave.

LITTLE LOVES

Volunteers. Artists. Professors. Students. Friend's parents.

I don't know how to tell these people that I love them because it could be weird or bad or taboo, but maybe they already know. It's not *love* love. It's an I-get-you-and-you-get-me-and-that's-pretty-neat love.

I. Being able to sit in his office and talk for hour about the President and my life and then remember the question I really came in for, like clarifying a piece of political theory or looking over my draft outline. Conversations that feel like catharsis and creation.

II. Talking and connecting through tennis and learning about each other through that lens. Hugs that feel like coming home.

III. She's never been more beautiful than in those twilight hours between laughter and tears.

IV. Between JV volleyball and being misfits in our high school, we collided. We found art and poetry to create and in each other.

V. Being lonely and depressed in high school and feeling able to go sit in his classroom after not knowing where to turn. Crying in front of him because I didn't know what else to do.

VI. He had the messiest office but the cleanest soul.

VII. The "how are you doing?" asked in earnest and fully listened to, even though I've only taken one class with her. I could feel her compassion and empathy radiating, even just standing in her doorway.

YOUR EFFECT

You kiss me and I feel my body reawakening from its years-long slumber.

My hands move for the first time, the stone molds around them cracking and falling away.

I am coming alive, synapses repairing and growing from the dust they had become.

I can't remember the last time I breathed. Until you.

Your eyes refresh mine, the glaze melts like that off of a donut.

Even though neither of us understand thermodynamics, we feel it at work.

YOUR EFFECT SONNET REMIX

My body reawakens from its years-long slumber with your kiss
My hands move for the first time, stone molds cracking away
I'll sweep away the shards, leaving nothing amiss
But for now, I want to focus on you, on your sway.

I am coming alive, synapses repairing and growing back from dust
I can't remember the last time my lungs took in air
Until you came along, repairing my trust
Your eyes refresh mine, the glaze melts away, I say good bye to the crust.

Even though neither one of us understands thermodynamics,
We can feel it at work,
Fired in a kiln like ceramics,
And in the end, we can share a loving smirk.

I wish I could see myself through your eyes—
Maybe then I'd believe this isn't just a lovely guise.

HOW TO BE A SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVOR

A 12-STEP PROGRAM BASED ON EXPERIENCE

1. Deny, deny, deny. This will save you before you know you need to be.
2. Be shocked when you remember the violence your body endured those days, weeks, months, years.
3. Cry.
4. Sleep. Or don't. Pick one, and really lean into it for awhile.
5. Grieve for your body. Hold a funeral. Make a donation in lieu of flowers.
6. Cry like you're a baby just entering this world. This is how you know you are alive.
7. Introduce yourself. You are someone entirely new.
8. Learn how to talk about it (maybe).
9. Learn how to write about it (maybe).
10. When you hear of others who have been assaulted, go back to that dark place.
Lose all that progress you made.
11. Cry again. (Quietly, so you don't wake your roommates).
12. Write about it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people I need to thank for helping this project to exist.

First, to my parents, for accepting me and my truths, even though they didn't come to you in a timely manner. Thank you for supporting me through my education and experiences, and for loving me despite all my flaws.

To my best friend and girlfriend, Lorden, for reading the first drafts and pieces before anyone else in my life. Thank you for reading and rereading my truths. Thank you for holding me while I cried, writing and rewriting them.

To my best friend Nora, for showing me what a strong, fierce woman looks like. You helped me to see that there is worth in loving oneself, and to see that there are many different ways to reconcile our traumas.

To Professor Alexander, for talking me down, or talking me up, depending on the situation. For always believing in me and encouraging me. For our hours of talks in the Jefferson chair, and for telling me what I need to hear, even if I don't want to hear it.

To Professor Fuentes, who helped me to see there is worth in telling whatever hair-brained story is in my mind, and for encouraging and supporting me in writing my thesis. For reading my drafts even when you had a million other things to do.

And finally, to Professor Gavalier, my thesis advisor. Thank you for taking the leap with me when I came to you after only just a few weeks of class, saying I wanted to

write a thesis, hoping you'd help me see it through. Your faith in me kept me afloat when I had no faith in myself. You have helped me to become a better, stronger writer, but more importantly, a better, stronger person.

PROCESS

My thesis, above all else, has shown me my strength. I sort of always had hoped it was there, but I didn't quite recognize it until I saw it all laid out in front of me. Writing this pushed me to my breaking point, and then some. I learned to write around it, that is, until I learned to write *it*.

Rape.

That four letter word—it can ruin you. It ruined me, for a time.

In September, I was excited to get started. I started writing little traumas that I'd more or less felt I'd worked through. Turns out, I hadn't. As I pushed myself to continue writing my 10 pages a week, I noticed a correlation between my ability to get out of bed and be productive and how heavy the topics I'd been tackling were.

By October, I wanted to throw in the towel. This project was important to me, but I was emotionally floundering. I was empty. Every week, I poured my contents out onto the page, and every week, I'd yearn to feel full again.

Finally, I went to counseling and asked to be medicated. I knew I couldn't continue this pattern. I've been depressed for years (and tried medications previously but never really had any luck), so I sort of just accepted that this was my life.

Defying my mind's preconceptions about medication, I actually wrote better and was more creative once medicated. I'd always feared that my depression was what drove me as a writer, what made me a "good" writer, but that simply was not true.

I wrote closer and closer to the core of my thesis. I wrote and rewrote scenes, working them in different ways and from different views. If you feel an undercurrent of repetition, that was part of the process, and remains part of the product.

I wrote in pieces. I wrote the longer stories as parts I, II, III, etc. Sometimes part III came before part I. Sometimes part I isn't really part I. The fragmented nature of my writing is something I wanted to preserve in the final product, and it is why you'll find many stories interwoven and broken up with lyrical beats.

Day to day, until about mid-February, my process was a combination of the following elements:

- Tears
- Walking away
- Writing around it for hours
- Therapy
- Secrecy around what I was writing...until I felt really, really good about it
- And sometimes secrecy after that
- Late nights writing
- Waking up in the middle of the night to write
- Experimentation
- Playing with visual elements
- Dream journaling
- Talking and listening to others
- Lots and lots of remembering
- Playing with form

On the academic side, my process was in part informed by my summer research with my major advisor and professor, Dr. Edward Adams. From doing research with him, I learned how to search for very particular and minute details. It also helped me be

able to find more varied sources, and with what to look for in order to determine if a source is credible. I learned how to better analyze works, which, in turn, allowed me to learn to analyze my own.

My writing classes also guided me towards and enabled me to be able to write a comprehensive project. My first fiction class with Professor Fuentes showed me that the stories in my mind were important and should be shared precisely for the quality that made me so insecure about them: their weirdness. I always sort of shied away from sharing my writing because I feared people wouldn't "get it." Instead, in that class, my work was embraced and enjoyed.

My nonfiction class with Professor Rajbanshi consisted of four freshman girls and me, a junior at the time. It was the strangest class make up I've ever encountered, but in a way, that liberated me. I felt full freedom to explore the topics I wanted to talk about, as I was older and "wiser." I wrote about Eric for the first time for that class, and I realized I didn't want to stop after one assignment. I knew I had a lot more to say, I just needed the space (and time) to say it. Between that outpouring of the personal and reading books that showed me others' deeply personal experiences, I felt compelled to apply for and write this thesis.

My advanced fiction class with Professor Gavalier gave me the best thesis advisor I could ask for. I'd only known him for a few weeks when I had to pick an advisor, and just based on how dynamic my class was with him, I decided to take a chance and ask

him to embark on this project with me. He seemed really excited about what I wanted to do, and that excitement has only continued, contributing to my energy towards the project as well. His suggestions for my writing in that class (and ever since) were always spot on, always making my writing stronger and clearer, so I knew I made the right choice.

I read widely for this project, pushing myself to read authors and forms I'd never considered previously. Here's the list of books I read, in alphabetical order by title:

- I. *All I Want to Do Is Live* by Trace Ramsey
- II. *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin* by Terrence Hayes
- III. *Bad Feminist* by Roxane Gay
- IV. *Bestiary: Poems* by Donika Kelly
- V. *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nahisi Coates
- VI. *Blankets* by Craig Thompson
- VII. *Body Horror: Capitalism, Fear, Misogyny, Jokes* by Anne Elizabeth Moore
- VIII. *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel
- IX. *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon
- X. *How To Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America* by Kiese Laymon
- XI. *Hunger* by Roxane Gay
- XII. *Lucky* by Alice Seybold
- XIII. *My Body is a Book of Rules* by Elissa Washuta
- XIV. *Not That Bad* by Roxane Gay
- XV. *Too Much and Not the Mood* by Durga Chew-Bose
- XVI. *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* by Dorothy Allison

Across texts, narrative styles varied widely. Some authors chose to confront the act of rape head-on, in graphic detail, while others skirted around it for awhile, or approached it more generally. In some books, I found rape where I didn't expect it. This

showed me what an ingrained part of society it is: even memoirs that aren't about rape, include rape.

In *Bad Feminist*, Roxane Gay uses pop culture to provide relief and comparison for her own rape story. This was the book that pushed me towards this project in the first place—for the first time, I saw someone writing about their experience in a way I could foresee for myself, too. It was one of the first nonfiction books I ever read, and I couldn't put it down. I saw myself in its pages. It lit a flame within me that wanted to tell my story, too. She uses *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins as her parallel—she discusses her gang rape as an adolescent, then follows it with her love for Katniss. This choice humanizes her for me—she isn't just a victim that we feel sympathy for, she is a fully human person who likes things in pop culture. We can relate to her in more ways than one. Instead of using pop culture, I wanted to humanize myself by showing that although bad things have happened to me, they are not me. I am a person who feels fear and pain, but also love and hope.

Alice Seybold writes about her rape in a similar way to Gay, but she does not provide relief. The first chapter details her rape, graphically. This is hard for many readers to get through—I spoke to a number of people who said they had to put the book down during the opening scene and were never able to pick it back up. This is effective because although she “scares off” some readers, she grips and engages others. We readers wonder how she will ever get through the trauma, and we see her do it in

the book's pages. She doesn't shy away from the complexity of rape, nor the complexity of hers, specifically. She is a white woman who was raped by a black man, and this carried a lot of weight for her. She was careful to consider the way black men are treated in our society, especially at the hands of the police.

Before reading *Lucky*, I didn't feel like I could or should detail my rapes. It felt wrong and impossible. After reading it, I did it with ease. Seybold showed me that I bled real blood, and others could know that. That I didn't have to keep my full experience and pain hidden from others for their sake. It helped me see that being explicit isn't always gratuitous—it can be effective.

Formally, *My Body is a Book of Rules* by Elissa Washuta set my mind on fire—I was holding in my hands a successful version of what I've now created. It felt a bit like looking in a mirror. It didn't discourage me, to see what I'm doing already completed, but rather, encouraged me. The book is multimedia, and contains running episodes of different stories throughout. She includes psychiatrist's notes of her different appointments and medications next to stories next to Law and Order: Special Victims Unit quotes and imagined dialogues. The episodes woven throughout tell a larger story of her native identity.

The notion of her rape being “not that bad” is pervasive, and something I often wonder about my own rapes and assaults. *Not That Bad*, edited by Roxane Gay, is where I found the confidence to challenge that notion within myself. All forms of sexual

assault and harassment are portrayed in the collection, from violent rape to catcalling. No experience is privileged over another, the challenge to consider one story “not as bad” as another is inherent in the arrangement. In its sequencing, the book challenges your preconceived notions and with the title echoing, I am forced to think through it every time I think “oh, her story wasn’t that bad.” Everyone handles trauma differently. In reading this book, I found a site of solidarity. I felt like I had a bunch of confidants who understood me and were telling me it’s okay to feel like your story “wasn’t that bad” but who were also encouraging me to unlearn that idea. It was a lesson I needed for my own healing and writing. Because of this, I included stories I may not have otherwise, because I wanted to keep my unlearning near, and put it into practice.

In *Hunger*, Roxane Gay again writes about rape and trauma, but this time she examines the ways in which we try to protect ourselves. The form of the book was repetitive sometimes, but between that and its very short chapters (similar to my project), she cultivated a “lost” feeling.

Gay began to eat and eat and eat after she was raped as a young girl as a way to protect herself. She believed that the bigger she was, the more undesirable she’d be, which meant she’d be safer. *Hunger* is an exploration of her body. She turns the lens to herself in order to explain her past and current behaviors. This radical vulnerability inspired me to try to embrace that spirit in my own writing. As a young person, I engaged with a similar mechanism: I refused to wear makeup because I thought that

meant I'd be safer. Reading Gay examine her body through her writing lead me to try to attempt some of the same, or at least my relationship to my body.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, *Bestiary* by Donika Kelly is imperceptibly about rape and incest. Her poetry is beautiful, often about animals, and was difficult for me to find the themes of rape before finally resorting to Google. Still, I thought this was brilliant, because sometimes you just can't write about it in the same way that a lot of the books I read do, especially in poetry. It taught me the act of withholding was as valuable as sharing.

Similarly, in *Heavy*, by Kiese Laymon, he withholds a lot of information that I feel myself yearning to know. Molestation as a child must be a painful memory, and I was surprised to find it at all in his memoir, which is advertised to be a memoir of being a heavy body in a society that doesn't accept that. This is the book that showed me just how deeply rape runs in our society. It also reminded me, as did many other books, that rape is not just a moment, but also everything leading up to it, and after. It's world-changing.

My own project is multimedia, making use of prose, poetry, prose poetry, handwriting, images, and more. As it developed, I pushed myself to experiment, to discover the many ways a story can be told. It begins with general rumination, then moves into more specific incidents from my childhood /less immediate past. It ends

with the third version of myself, the more immediate-past me, and sometimes, even present me. Seeing the ways in which these versions of myself interact and build on one another is one of the pillars of this project. It makes use of repetitions, weaving many disparate themes together to make a quilt of my life's experience with sexual assault and harassment. This book taught me that I am capable of sticking with a long term project and seeing it through. It taught me that although I may not always believe it, I am strong enough to be capable of writing through the most traumatic points of my life.