

On Britney, Party Girls, and the Fight for Narrative Control

written by Guest Contributor | March 2, 2021



We were going to Vegas to see Britney Spears. And to drink by the pool. And to quote *Showgirls*. Or at least I was: I did not gamble, not with my history of Bad Luck, but Quinn and Leon planned to be at the slot machines running out of money before they could run out of hope. We had been planning the trip in hypothetical terms for over a year, but it was not until we reserved the hotel rooms that I had the sense that something bad was going to happen, like an animal sensing the air pressure changes of oncoming rain. Everyone said it: *You three, that'll be trouble*. We worked hard and partied comparably, and could always be found at the bar across the street from our office.

I had never been to Vegas, but I had wanted to see Britney Spears live for over fifteen years; it was cheaper to fly to Vegas and stay in a hotel room for her Planet Hollywood residency than it had been to buy one ticket to her stadium tours when I was growing up. So we booked a three-night trip, a long weekend of Britney and desert sun and cocktails. I had wanted to go for just two nights, but Quinn and Leon wanted one additional night to dedicate entirely to gambling— or at least to the slot machines, not so much any gambling that required skill or strategy— and in the spirit of ending the summer with a final adventure I agreed.

VAY-gaaas!, we would titter in the weeks leading up to the trip, between discussions of sequined fanny packs and fake eyelashes: above all, we planned to embrace every tacky, touristy, glittery piece of literal and metaphorical trash that the city could offer. *She's so lucky, she's a star*, we sang boarding the plane. One thing I wasn't, I knew.

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I was nine years old when Britney Spears' debut album *...Baby One More Time* was

released. I remember unwrapping at least two copies of the CD at my birthday party that year, hosted in my parents' backyard in Metairie, Louisiana, a suburb adjacent to New Orleans. I was surrounded by a horde of other nine and ten-year-old girls, all of us decked in pink and lime green spaghetti straps from Limited Too and drenched in Bath & Body Works' Cucumber Melon and Juniper Breeze body spray.

These were the first pining pop songs we'd hear from the first real solo female pop star of our generation, and Britney, now one of the most famous people in the country, was from our home state. The baby-voiced, wide-eyed, all-American sweetheart belonged to us before she belonged to anyone else. They could all keep their posters pulled from *Tiger Beat*. We had entire billboards over I-10 that read *Britney Spears: Pride of Louisiana*.

There was a constant competition of degrees of association or separation from Britney if you were a young girl in the late '90s: *Our family friends live in Kentwood and their daughters went to school with her. Or my mom says we're distant cousins. Or we had the same dance teacher* (which was, for several of us, actually true, as the Gulf Coast semi-professional entertainment circuit is a small, closed loop).

My big Britney moment, though, was the Mardi Gras a year later, when Spears would be riding on her own float as the Grand Marshal for the Krewe of Endymion's parade. Every year, my parents' friends camped out in the early morning to lay claim to a coveted front and center viewing spot for Endymion, and we'd join them in the early afternoon and wait all day for the parade to begin.

By nightfall, I was pressing my scrawny frame into the police barricade on the curb, my toes perched on its bottom rung, marching band bass thrumming my chest as I waited for Britney's float to turn the corner. *There she is, she's coming*, my mother shouted over the brass and bass drums. The crowd behind us roared and crushed forward, bending my torso over the top of the barricade. After another excruciating minute, there she was, high above me in a sparkling pink gown, floating on a cloud of purple and gold light, her lined eyes wide and happy.

I waved and screamed her name, trying to catch her eye, assuming I'd be too draped in shadow by the adults nearly climbing on top of me for her to see me. But then it happened: a moment of eye contact, a widening of her electric white teeth, and a flick of her hand releasing a plastic cup that flew through the night air and landed into my outstretched palms.

She looked right at you! My mother said as I screamed in delight. A middle aged man standing near me literally groaned at his missed catch as the float continued passed us; my mother had to hide the cup deep in her own handbag so no one would steal it from our piles of beads and plastic trinkets. *That'll be worth money one day*, she said later. Twenty years later, the cup, festooned with Mardi Gras imagery and an illustration of Spears' face, lives on my nightstand. It was the first time I'd thought of a person as being worth money.

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For the first two nights in Vegas, we acted like teenagers on their first college spring break. Vodka lemonades on the direct flight from JFK, champagne as soon as we got to the hotel, margaritas at the pool, whiskey-sodas at the casino, wine at the topless show, and finally, on the big night, cocktails in the thirty-dollar glittery lavender Britney Spears souvenir cups.

Whatever lived inside of me that was still ten years old and at a Mardi Gras parade and catching a cup from the most famous girl in the world— who was from Louisiana, where until then, no one was from but me— screamed and screamed with delight. I took videos of almost every number, and each one is overwhelmed by my own voice, shouting lyrics that had resided in my brain for almost two decades.

After the concert, we casino-hopped. I lost all of my designated slot machine money (gifted to me by my grandmother, no stranger to a casino) at the Dolly Parton penny slots. We were having, rather to my surprise, a great time. I hadn't hit any jackpots, but my bad luck had not followed me here.

On the third night, a guy I'd been seeing texted me that he knew someone who could have our names added to the guest list at Tao nightclub in the Venetian. None of us had ever been into the nightclub scene, but we had a taste for irony, and of course a taste for liquor, which we surmised could come to us in the form of free drinks if we were on a guest list. We decided to go for an hour or two, make fun of the absurdity of the club scene, and leave when we grew weary of being the oldest people there.

We arrived just before midnight after having a round of drinks at the restaurant next door to the club. I was wrapped in a tight pink bandage dress that I referred to as my Malibu Barbie dress, which I never had any other cause to wear. For one night I'd be someone else.

The door scene was disorganized; there was, as it turned out, no record of anyone's name being on a list of any kind. We were expected to wrestle our way forward and identify the name of a particular "promoter," a word that I snickered at before the enormous bouncer had even finished saying it. I obtained the correct name to shout over the heads in front of me, and, after some disgruntled mumbling, the bouncer— who was quite put-off by performing what seemed to be a fairly straightforward professional obligation— allowed us upstairs to the club.

Inside was no different than my few college memories of clubs: the bass pumping, the darkness punctuated by flashes of green and purple and white, the hordes of skinny girls in fake nails and running mascara and Malibu Barbie dresses of their own.

VAY-gas, we said, snorting, rolling our eyes. Like the rest of Vegas, it was

trashy but harmless, an amusement park where any perceived danger turned out to be entertainment. We pushed through to the bar, where, without the much-hoped for drink tickets, we bought fifteen-dollar cocktails and waited to meet our friend Amanda, who lived in the area.

After less than an hour and another drink, I left Leon and Quinn at the bar to meet Amanda at the entrance. As I walked her in, I told her I wanted to dance: when in Rome. I was pulling her arm into the sea of people crammed onto the impractically small dance floor when she shook her head and laughed, her fingers slipping from mine as a group of four girls who seemed no older than sixteen pushed between us.

The back of her head disappears, and I am alone.

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Of course, we turned on Britney when we reached our teen years. I had started to spurn pink and pop music and all things feminine entirely, but all of my friends— from those who entered goth phases to those whose Discmans played a rotation of top-40 hits— would partake in the shaming of Spears' frequent photos stumbling out of nightclubs and limos, her mascara running and dress straps slipping. *Louisiana's pride? Yeah, right, we'd snicker.*

The tabloid culture of the early 2000s was in full swing, with Spears, Lindsay Lohan, and Paris Hilton being some of the dominant subjects of entertainment magazines and new celebrity gossip blogs. Stalking and harassing celebrities to mine their lives for content, especially young female starlets who'd spent their childhood years in the spotlight, was de rigueur. The motivating interest was not just in the salaciousness of crotch shots and cocaine, but how far someone could fall from a supposed innocence— one so fantastically pure it never could have existed in the first place. The context of abusive partners, manipulative stage parents, predatory business managers, and million-dollar paychecks for paparazzi were largely erased, or simply considered part of the life of an entertainer.

Among its other endless messaging about how to be or not be a woman— or about how much skin or sexuality or fat or alcohol should be reflected in one's body— tabloid culture implied this above all else: that by existing in the public eye, the subjects of the images and articles were willing participants who were in control of the narratives constructed around them. Public, visible lives consist of public choices that are publicly consumable. And consume we did, even if it meant choking down gristle with no substance.

There's a self-preserving quality to aligning with the people or systems that abuse. As teenagers, insofar as we wanted to be attractive or sexy or talented, we also wanted to do it in a way that would be impeccable, faultless, and always in control. We knew that the more distance we could put between whatever version of womanhood we desired versus that which was being

scorned in the tabloids, the more we'd be able to walk the fine line of female respectability in a way that Britney and her peers couldn't. We didn't know— or maybe we all too acutely did— that it was only a matter of time before someone would come for us next.

But maybe that's too self-serving, even if it is true. It's always easy to rip on a party girl for her looseness and sloppiness that make us feel superior. Still, we love befriending the Lohans in our lives. She takes risks and makes herself vulnerable so you don't have to. She buys the drugs that you take from her in the bathroom. She'll warn you about a guy you like because he's already deceived her. She gives you permission to go crazy and fuck up because she'll go crazier and fuck up worse.

By the time I got to college and balanced having a perfect grade point average and multiple jobs with weekend-long ragers, I knew how to partner with the party girl who was always one grade messier than I was so I could reap the benefits of being fun and down for anything while also being able to fade into her background if I needed to. Eventually I'd know that I was the one-grade-messier party girl to other people, including Quinn and Leon; I would know when someone was using me to make themselves feel better about their own bad choices. A party girl is, in some ways, like watching television, but most of the time she is reflecting you back at yourself, one small-town Southern girl looking toward another.

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Green light, purple, white strobe flashes, vibrations, sweat. I begin to weave through the dance floor, my movement facilitated more by the push and pull of other bodies than by the use of my own legs, my pink dress hiking up my thighs and slipping off my shoulders. I am half-heartedly looking for someone my age, or really anyone over twenty-one and under forty-five— the age categories at the club seemed to lean towards either of those extremes— and I pause for a brief moment to dance with a man who has come up behind me, his hands in the air. He is clearly drunk and groping whatever is in his path.

Underwhelmed by the dance floor attempt, I pluck his arms from where they are trying to settle around my waist. I am turning to make my way back to the bar when a bouncer standing on the perimeter of the dance floor points to me and then towards the back wall, opposite of where I had entered, indicating that I have to leave.

I try to yell *why* but I cannot hear myself over the music, let alone his response, so as I walk I can only wonder fleetingly if I am in trouble for interrupting a private party or if I am being invited into one. I keep walking as the bouncer presses up behind me, his arm outstretched over my head, which it clears by nearly a foot.

Then there is a black curtain drawn, a door opening, and before I can see where I am going, I am outside in warm, dark silence with three other sets of eyes looking me up and down, and more eyes beyond them, like the little cartoon owl eyes in a little cartoon forest. I realize that I am on the top landing of a fire escape on the side of the building.

It is the finality of the door closing with a scrape, a slam, and a lock catching that makes me realize I had been there before, five years earlier in New York, when a different man three times my size pushed me into my own apartment, threatening to shoot me if I did not give him money. Five years earlier the door closed behind him, and I had the horrible realization that I was not just being mugged, and that my means of escape were gone. The scrape, the slam, the lock catching: this is what rape sounds like to me now.

How could it be happening again? I thought this consciously. Was I dreaming? Had I fallen asleep in my hotel room and never gone to the club at all? I could not be here again, with a man three times my size behind me, and a door behind him, and the scrape, the slam, the lock catching. What were the odds? Maybe I was a better gambler than I thought.

The three men facing me look on in varying states of bemused menace. There are others behind them on the fire escape steps, two or three that I can see, disinterested and smoking cigarettes. I try to make this disinterest comfort me, as all women do in all the moments they find themselves alone near strange men.

There is a white guy in the middle, seated at the edge of the railing. Forty-something and trying too hard, cocaine-thin, wearing an atrocious fedora, the kind of the overgrown frat boy who spent so long partying that it became his only viable career option. Two others of the same stock sit on either side of him. A younger, skinny black guy behind him on the fire escape locks eyes with me before quickly averting his gaze, looking down at the cigarette in his hand. The bouncer is still behind me.

The bouncer takes my driver's license and hands it to the fedora guy, and for a moment I am hopeful that this is a simple matter of verifying that I am not underage. I was young enough, and am five foot two without heels; scrutiny of my identification was not uncommon. But instead he starts asking me questions. My answers do not matter because each one is identified as a lie.

Who are you here with, if your friends are here where are they, why aren't they with you, text them and tell them to find you if they're actually here, if you're from New York why does your license say Louisiana, who was the guy you were with, how do you know him, what's his name?

My friends, they're at the bar, they didn't want to dance, New York, how are they supposed to find me here, I moved to New York for college and never got a new license, what guy, I have no idea who he is, I didn't do anything, what's going on, why are you holding me, I was on a list, I just got here an hour ago—

My repeated questions as to why I am being held are met with snickers and

sneers. Wait, just wait here, they say. For what, I am never told. There is some back and forth, one of them coming and going through the door, which I cannot go back through because there are too many people around me, and if I tried to leave, I was only the lift of an arm away from being barricaded.

I offer to be escorted back into the club to find my friends, to verify that I came accompanied. I offer to be escorted out entirely. We will just leave, I say. Just let me go home. This suggestion also goes ignored.

I feel how short my dress is and try to tug it down before crossing my arms over my upper body. I realize that, flush against the side of the building, I am not positioned to be in the frame of a security camera.

As the tone of the questioning becomes more accusatory, I press myself closer to the wall, the brick snagging my dress. I am sending frantic text messages laden with typographical errors to Quinn and Leon, begging them please come find me, please help me, while acutely aware that they will not be able to find me behind the unmarked fire exit door that is tucked behind a black velvet curtain. In a few minutes they respond, but only confirm my fears: *What fire escape? Where? Who are they?*

Past the men and the fire escape railing, I can see nothing but darkness; the distant glow of the Strip only offers enough light for me to see how isolated I am. Below me I can see approximately one fire escape landing down before the iron fades into black, like a dock ladder descending into lake water. Were we two, three, four stories high? If they came closer, narrowed their semi-circle around me, the railing was directly to my left and I could—

Five years earlier, I had also considered the question of jumping from my second floor bedroom window. From this particular fire escape it was somewhat less likely that I would survive; I would fall farther, hit iron railings on the way down. But it was possible that another landing, or maybe garbage bags or whatever was on the ground below, would break my fall. I would have to— as people tend to do in Vegas— bet on it.

Several more minutes pass while I ask *why why why* like a child in that particular phase of curiosity, and I am given repeated instructions to *wait, wait, wait*. I ask again: *Can you please just tell me what brought this on? I didn't do anything wrong. I don't have any drugs. I just want to leave. You can literally walk me out of the club.*

But I am talking into a void. They ignore me and one of the men goes into the club and comes back out again. Then there is mention made of calling the police.

This is hilarious to me because I know I have done nothing wrong, but it also occurs to me that they will do something— plant something— to implicate me in a crime, and I will miss my flight to New York trying to defend myself, and will maybe spend another fifth of my life damned to the purgatory of litigation.

I'm flying home tomorrow, so if you're going to call them even though I

didn't do anything, do it now, because I need to go home. And if you're not going to call them, you can't keep me here. Call them. Call them or I will.

Or something to this effect comes from my mouth, some impulse recovered from the hours I spent in the offices of detectives and officers and attorneys five years earlier.

I show them my flight information on my phone. I show them that Quinn and Leon are texting me back, for at that moment their responses have started to flood in: *what where are you what's going on are you still there where are you.* I don't know exactly which prompts it, but it seems that as soon as I can prove that people are looking for me, I am allowed back inside.

The music and the white strobe flashes rush out at me and I run through the open door, my arms outstretched, although this time I fall onto the bar instead of the feet of first responders. I bark a drink order of straight whiskey and my friends find me pounding it back in a single swallow. *We have to go, we have to go right now,* I shout over the music. My lungs were burning, drowning-like, the last possible moment before they started to fill with water.

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A few years later, we'd give Britney her renaissance. *You better work, bitch:* you could be a party girl and a boss lady, or so white, middle-class feminism told us. Celebrity surveillance culture was starting to collapse as the extent of its stalking and bullying became more apparent. Famous people now routinely held their middle fingers up to cameras and called out encroachments on their personal lives and property. Gossip blogger Perez Hilton came under fire for his cruelty to celebrities, and in 2010, for posting an upskirt photo of a then-underage Miley Cyrus. But it wasn't until a paparazzo targeted Anne Hathaway for a similar shot at a film premiere in 2012 that popular discourse around such photographs began to change. In an exacting response about the photograph, she aptly characterized it as a violation, a commodification of sexuality of "unwilling participants"— and thus began a reversal of the narrative around predatory paparazzi and consent.

Of course, it helped that Anne Hathaway wasn't a party girl. Violations of party girls don't change the conversation.

Spears' famous head-shaving, umbrella-wielding "breakdown" became sympathetic in light of this increasingly problematic and public rape culture: rampant campus sexual assault cases with no accountability for the perpetrators, who were typically white and wealthy; comments from a Toronto police officer to "avoid dressing like sluts" to prevent rape, and all manner of blaming and shaming women for dressing to skimpily, drinking too much, being too polite, being too rude. We had all fucking had it, hadn't we? The

outrage in the years leading up to the height of the #MeToo movement overflowed to our scorned childhood idols, who we came to understand weren't at fault for the ways their lives were torn apart, especially at such young ages.

And so we celebrated Britney once again, understanding her narrative, how the context of a career that began in childhood and was dominated by predatory relationships— both professional and personal— and an insatiable public had made the story more than what the tabloids represented. But by the time we embraced her again, it was already too late: when we were singing “Womanizer” and “Work, Bitch” along with the bar jukebox, Britney was deep within the confines of the conservatorship that would define her life and career for the foreseeable future. We may have thought that reclaiming her reality and putting all that had happened to her, in all of its messy context of tabloid misdirection, contracts, and custody battles, was as simple as our nostalgia and love for her music. We didn't appreciate how deeply narrative control runs, and how many ways the marionette strings of power can be pulled.

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A casino is a less than ideal place for a panic attack.

The bells and the ringing and flashing lights at least distracted gamblers from my near-hysterical cries of *what the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck were they going to do to me*. I lost track of whether I was saying it or thinking it as I curled over a slot machine, chain-smoking three cigarettes while Quinn rubbed my back and told me to *relax, relax, relax. You're okay; nothing happened*. We left and walked down the Strip back to our hotel, Amanda and Quinn each holding one of my arms. Somehow I must have explained the gist of the situation because they said to me:

It's because you were just wearing the same kind of dress that all the hookers running around were wearing.

No such accusation had been made, no direct question implied that they thought I was a sex worker. The men seemed more like nine-year-old boys with a butterfly caught in a jar, poking its wings and seeing how long it could survive, just for the fun of it. But none of it made sense, not even that.

We joked about it in the morning while we checked out of the hotel. *It's all fun and games until you're mistaken for a prostitute, ha-ha*. Then I realized that the bouncer had not returned my driver's license. I would have to go back for it or I would not be able to board the plane to New York.

We make the stop on our way to the airport. As we pass through the casino, I become lightheaded, my breaths shallow, the water rising. It occurs to me that I can no longer laugh, that last night I was not drunkenly overreacting.

“My ID was taken from me and left here,” I say to the overgrown frat boy at a

host stand at the door leading to the club and its companion restaurant. He looks like the one who interrogated me but it is decidedly impossible to tell any of them apart.

"Oh my God, like, really?" he says in a mocking, bimbo affect. I consider slapping him.

After several minutes, a soft-spoken female administrative assistant brings my ID down. Procedure demands that she ask me for another form of identification with my name on it, as if my own face is not a sufficient verification of my identity. For a brief moment I am afraid I will be questioned the same way I had been twelve hours earlier. But I offer an old student ID, and she hands it back. I can go home.

The next day, back in New York, I call the Las Vegas Police Department to file a report. But the young, tart dispatcher, who is audibly chewing gum, is unimpressed when I try to articulate what happened.

"So what happened? What did they accuse you of?"

"Nothing," I say. "That's the point. They held me against my will without a stated reason in an area where I couldn't escape. Isn't that illegal? False imprisonment? They can't just" – just what?– "do that."

"Yeah, I mean, I know that it's, like, scary, but private establishments can do whatever they want. Prostitution is a big problem here."

"But–"

"You can call a detective, but nothing is going to come of it. Why didn't you call the police right then?"

Why, indeed.

I take the number while I try to swallow the tension in my throat, the shrill hysteria of my own voice.

I call the detective. He sighs.

"Can you give physical descriptions of these men?"

"I don't– I mean– I think so. Yes. Some of them." As I say it, I wonder if it is true, knowing from experience how specific I would have to be, how narrow the margin for error was.

"If you can give physical descriptions, you can go to a local police station in New York to file a courtesy report and have them fax it to us."

"But is this just something that– happens?"

He sighs again.

It is clear from his tone that this would be a pointless step to take. I think of the hours it took last time, the hours it would take again. The

years. I decided to skip ahead, then, to the management at Tao, my hope being that I could get someone fired if a similar incident had occurred in the past. But more than anything I wanted a record: documentation of what happened, a paper breadcrumb trail for the girl who might follow me.

After sending a long, angry email to the address on a business card from the club, I schedule a phone call with someone who claims to be the nightclub's director of security. But when I answer my phone, I realize that he is yet another overgrown frat boy, not a real adult authority who had maybe left his sons with the house to themselves for the weekend. I realize that the conversation is not going to get very far.

For the next nineteen minutes and thirty-four seconds he is patronizing, antagonistic: *ma'am*, do you want to have a conversation or not? *ma'am*, I can tell you as a point of fact that from the video footage you were only outside for a few minutes (this number will range from seven to fifteen when he refers to it); *ma'am*, you in no way indicated that you were afraid; *ma'am*, just what did you think was going to happen?

His story was one that I prepared myself for: alcohol. Club security, he claims, sometimes has to hold "investigations" to determine whether a patron has ingested too much alcohol to remain on the premises. The wine at dinner, the margaritas by the pool, the whiskey at the bar. I considered my blurry memories, distorted by strobe lights, drowned out by the music's volume. No one believes a drunk party girl.

But I snag on the term "investigation": as though intoxication is not something that can be observed in something as simple as walking. Besides, none of the men had asked me about my alcohol consumption or any other substance. I force logic to replace shame: women are not held hostage on fire escapes alone begging to go home because bouncers think they are drunk.

I tell him as much. I press on. I inquire. The answers are in how the questions are avoided.

"Why was I accused of lying about my identity? Why would no one ask me how much I had to drink if they really thought I was drunk? Why was I not allowed to leave?"

He doesn't answer that. Instead:

"I'm not seeing what the source of trauma is for you, *ma'am*."

"I am a woman who was separated from my party and held against my will by several men for no stated reason in a dark and inaccessible area. I obviously thought I was going to be robbed or assaulted."

"*Ma'am*, what would you expect them to do in that situation?"

"I would expect them to tell me why I am being questioned and to allow me to leave the club or be escorted out when I repeatedly offered."

"As a *private establishment*, *ma'am*, we have the *privilege* of preventing you

from re-entering the club.”

“I don’t understand. The only way to exit the club would be to re-enter it.”

“But. Did you say you wanted to leave the *premises* or the fire escape? Ma’am, you had full access to the fire escape stairs if you so wished to leave the *premises*. But as a private establishment we have no obligation to allow you access to the club *itself*.”

I wonder if this reach in logic is physically painful to him: a stretch beyond reasonable capacity. The unlit steps that led to nowhere, no doubt a liability in and of themselves, which were blocked off by other men. It was not possible for me to walk away, even in theory.

“That’s what you would have a club patron do? Walk down fire escape stairs into complete darkness? I don’t even know where those stairs go, and they were blocked by other men. And why accuse me of lying about being with friends? Why threaten to call the police? And why would you ask me about a man I was dancing with?”

I hear him remember the other man, hear another justification being concocted in his stutter.

“It– it was for your *safety*, ma’am. He was claiming that he knew you. We would never let a man you didn’t know follow you through the club. We were trying to *protect* you.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. I offered to leave the club escorted by your staff.”

Then I repeat my list of questions one last time before he hangs up on me, labeling my suggestions as “offensive” and “insane.”

Later, when I told the story to friends, I could see it in their faces: the indulgent sympathy given to the insane, the look of the stock character psychiatrist in movies who nods and says *I believe that you believe what you are saying*. I knew that it didn’t last that long. Ten minutes, fifteen, although it felt like hours. No one robbed me. No one assaulted me. No one even touched me. As far as practical matters were concerned, nothing happened.

But it is impossible to have a concept of nothing-happened when you have been on the other side of could-have-happened. If, in the realm of possibilities of a given situation, horrific violence is one extreme, the opposing extreme is not nothing-happened, nor is it relief or a funny story. Because something, still, did happen: the denial of agency, the instillation of extreme fear, the unnecessary exertion of power, and now, the denial and rewriting of the events that took place.

The following week, Quinn and I would browse through the nightclub’s reviews online and find other stories. The girl who was trapped in an elevator by a bouncer and almost sexually assaulted by him before the doors opened. Another girl who was separated from her group of friends by security and returned

fucked up—clearly drugged since she had not been drinking. Any allegations of misconduct that we find in the reviews explicitly involve the nightclub and security staff, never other patrons.

A week later, when I tried to find some of these reviews again, I couldn't: they had been scrubbed from the website.

When I listen to this recorded phone call now, I wonder where my narrative goes while this man who parties for a living rewrites the story. There is no security camera footage turned over; there is no one in a position of authority who can confirm if what the men did was illegal, or even wrong. There is no one to bear witness to the danger I felt. There is no one who wants to testify on behalf of a young woman who goes to a nightclub in a short dress and drinks alcohol, whether she is one of the most famous people in the world or a scrappy fan of one of the most famous people in the world, so the version of the story rewritten by the man who parties for a living is the one that wins, as far as accountability is concerned. What happens to my version of the story? If a woman jumps off of a fire escape at the side of a building where no security camera is around to record her, does she still make an impact?

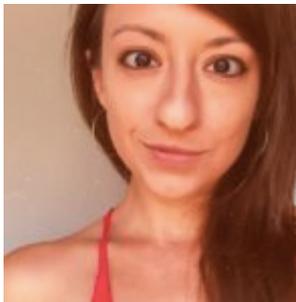
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It's hard to imagine a journalist, in 2021, directly asking someone like a sixteen-year-old on *Dance Moms* if she's still a virgin, as one had Britney Spears at the start of her career. If a celebrity's private photographs are leaked now, more responsibility is leveled to the person who leaked them than the subject of the photos. With the ongoing impact of the #MeToo movement, predatory people and practices in all industries are routinely outed for sexual harassment, assault, bullying, and other forms of manipulation. If the culture around female celebrities in any way reflects a society's attitudes toward women at large, then maybe these are successes worth celebrating.

But this partial reckoning reveals the other ways women lose power, if not by press and tabloid storytelling, then by complex legal and financial maneuvers: Britney Spears' conservatorship, which has garnered attention for its overreaching, if not exploitative, terms; the contract binding Kesha to her abusive producer, Dr. Luke; and Taylor Swift's battle for ownership of her masters from her first record label. Much like existing in the public eye in the early 2000s meant that any private doings were available for harvest, these are also hijacked narratives that are steered toward the blame of *you signed the contract, you should have known better*, even when the contracts were signed by children and/or their financially desperate (or exploitative) parents. Emily Ratajkowski considers this in her own essay "Buying Myself Back" in *The Cut* about trying to reclaim the use of her own image from a predatory photographer, a vindictive ex, and hackers on 4chan: "A lot of people believed the entire situation had been my doing. I, after all, had posed for the photos."

Power and narrative control often lie in the hands of someone who has taken it by force or manipulation; details and context are not allowed to inform the story until we seek them out. Britney Spears' umbrella-paparazzi attack seems more than justifiable now that we have chosen to bear witness to what the rest of her life was like— and to admit our own participation in erasing that context.

There is no credibility or accountability without context. If narrative erasure can happen to, by some measures, the most powerful and profitable women in entertainment, what does that mean for the average woman reporting harassment or escaping domestic abuse? With only isolated images or forensically selected facts of a situation, our reckonings with the worst of violence and abuse come entirely too late; we can't sufficiently acknowledge the escalation of manipulation and abuse tactics that are a rehearsal for something more extreme. Whether it's an ex-boyfriend or a media outlet spreading a lie, whether a custody battles happens in private or is aired on television, and whether a person's finances are controlled by a partner or a team of lawyers, the post-tabloid and post-#MeToo shadow culture still too often takes the voices of women and other marginalized people out of context, reframing and reducing their stories into their most digestible versions. It takes effort to find the rest of the narrative, and if we don't make this effort, we miss the warning signs, the opportunities for rescue. We miss the full Renaissance painting of chaos and cameras that surround the girl in the tight dress, backing her into a corner, giving her no place else to go.



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