

WOVEN: Because of a film called Hustlers in which one character says to another 'Hurt people hurt people'

written by Guest Contributor | August 4, 2021



WOVEN is an Entropy series and dedicated safe space for essays by persons who engage with #MeToo, sexual assault and harassment, and #DomesticViolence, as well as their intersections with mental illness, substance addiction, and legal failures and remedies. We believe you. If selected for the series, we want to provide the editorial and human support such that our conversation continues long after the stories and names have changed. You can view submission guidelines for WOVEN [here](#).

Reread the [archives](#), always.

The morning I left the man I'd been married to for 30 years, he was up at three for an early flight, and I did something I rarely did anymore: I got out of bed, snuggled up against his back as he stood shaving at the bathroom mirror and kissed him goodbye on the neck. Then I went back to bed. In less than six hours, I was gone, and as it would turn out, that one small intimacy would be the last time I'd touch my husband like this.

At eight, I was at my desk, reading email, CNN headlines, Facebook. There was an email awaiting me in *Messenger* from a person I didn't recognize. I didn't know you could message someone without first becoming friends. The note was several paragraphs long. I had to read it twice, my eyes darting like a pinball on its descent. *Soulmate, love, we do everything, four years, I can't go on without telling you.* It was a woman somewhere in the west, confessing.

I don't remember the order of the next events, but I know I called my sister to sob; I know I called a friend to ask if she'd take me in. I know I called my husband who was sitting in Charlotte on layover.

"I am so sorry for you."

"Will you go to counseling with me?"

"No."

I know I hung up.

I walked out the back door, sat on the porch steps, looked up at the impossibly blue sky and said aloud, "OK, OK." Then I went inside to pack.

I discovered his iPad on our bed and read a long thread of messages between them, right there, open on the screen as soon as I unlocked it. It sounded like they were married. It sounded like a lover's quarrel. At some point—the next day, the next week—I remembered the time fifteen years before this when I'd found an itinerary for a work trip, tickets for both him and his co-worker, the woman with whom he'd had a year-long affair. Two seats side-by-side, even though he hadn't left me for her, even though we were trying to work it out, even though he told me it was over.

"A philanderer wants to be found out," my mom said that October morning when I called her. "He wants you to catch him."

And now, I'd caught him again. For the fourth time by my account. Whatever this was. I think I'll never really know. I packed clothes, books, my laptop, printer and all my journals. Research for a current project. I loaded it all into the back of our old silver Passat wagon, strapped my Felt bike on top, grabbed a credit card with just enough left on it for gas. I dropped the dogs at our kennel and drove north out of my marriage. I never looked back.

But looking back is all I do now.

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My friend Susan tells me about *pono*, a Hawaiian word meaning *righteousness*. She explains to me how she understands the word to mean *gut wisdom*. What we know in our gut to be true and right. Hawaiians think of *pono* as a "state of harmony or balance." There was nothing *pono* about my fleeing; balance would come later, but to listen, even when there were no words, was the beginning of my finding a state of harmony.

I don't know which knew first—my mind, heart, or body—but all at once, I made the decision to leave, and it was like a death. I wonder when a decision is a decision. To leave. To stop loving. Is it at the moment of acting or speaking? Or is it the quiet and slow march toward that utterance? Had I begun leaving nearly two decades before this moment when I'd delivered our son and soon felt a visceral clawing at my gut, knowing that something had changed between my husband and me now that we were a threesome and no longer just us? Had I fallen away from loving my husband when I'd discovered his first affair? Or was I gone years before all this when I'd followed him from New England to the Southwest? Distraught and adrift one night, I pummeled his naked chest, screaming my regret at having moved. Or maybe it had happened

much earlier at the beginning of us when he was still a submariner and out to sea for weeks and months at a time and I had to learn to live a solo existence—still moored by him but relying more and more on myself. Growing into myself. Discovering myself.

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After I left my husband of 30 years, I lived alone for six months in the home we'd restored in New Hampshire and where we'd raised our son. Then I spent a month at an artist's retreat, and then, I got in my car and kept driving. I knew none of my friends or family would leave me standing out on the street, cold and homeless. I didn't take a new job. I didn't buy a new house. I couldn't have known as I trekked from New England to New Orleans and back again that the real grieving would not begin until after I was settled a year and a half later in Mississippi's hill country, in this old blue house on a hill 15 miles from my dad.

Out of sight is not out of mind, and Grief continues to work on me down to the bone.

In the beginning, there were days I would get out of bed or be walking across one of the spacious rooms of this turn-of-the-century farmhouse and suddenly buckle to the floor, weeping open-mouthed. I would let this physical form of pain move through me until it was gone, and then I'd get up and keep walking, understanding that the work was not to survive these momentary spasms but to accept there would be more. I was learning not to judge myself or fight against the pain, not to evaluate and label these organic and stormy moments, but to welcome the surge and be with it until all subsided.

I can close my eyes and be on another old hardwood floor, this one in the ranch we'd rented four blocks from campus in Tucson. We were students at the University of Arizona; our baby boy was barely a year old. We'd been married ten. As Sammy splashed in the tub, squealing, I sat on the floor next to him, one arm crooked on the toilet seat, my forehead in my palm, replaying the scene in the kitchen that had erupted minutes before. I don't remember what triggered it, but we'd argued. I was always so angry. So fast to attack. I was walking toward the Crate and Barrel table with two plates of dinner, and in my sudden hot fury, dropped them. My husband sat stunned, Sammy wailed, and I just stood there feeling food drip between my toes. I retreated to the bathroom, and sitting on the floor, stared at the wall over the toilet as these words came fully formed: *First you know it's over and then you wait for it to end.*

Time stopped. I knew it was a good line. I knew it was a true line. I didn't want it to be true for me. I filed it away, knowing someday I'd write it into something. I filed it away, wanting to weaken its power. What had I seen in those seconds I hung there, not breathing, my boy splashing and rolling his little body against the porcelain tub in inches of water? Years would pass—a

boy's childhood—of going on and on and knowing all the while the marriage was in trouble. We had lost each other, lost the thread, but we were not ready or able to let go. I knew it was a good line, but I turned from it, deciding to believe that, yes, it was bad what was happening between us, but we would recover. We always had. We would again. Two decades later, after I left, I would learn my husband had started talking to women online sometime during that year I was pregnant.

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It would be easy, rational, and warranted to blame my ex for the ruin of our marriage. I can line up the concrete and intangible offenses and deliver them to you spitfire until your own head swivels uncontrollably. That's what happened when I finally laid it all out for my new therapist here in Mississippi, a man whose eyes grew bigger as I went down the list. I have talked with enough people, those dear and near to me as well as veritable strangers, to know that my story *is* almost unbelievable. But it happened. All of it. And while you could blame my ex as many have, exclaiming, *I'd have kicked his ass out!* and *He doesn't deserve you!* and *How can you forgive him?* —you could also wonder and in silence, as many have, why did I stay? Because that might be a little unbelievable, too.

I stayed because of a fat round orange moon rising over an East Coast inlet where we sat side-by-side at a picnic bench and kissed for the first time. I stayed because of electricity and promise and for that day he'd said, "moonstruck" after Cher's movie came out. I stayed because I liked who I was with him, because it's hard to like yourself when all you do is judge and criticize and loathe yourself and want desperately for people to want and love you. I stayed because it felt for a long time like he loved me.

I stayed because of dreamboat eyes and sweet comedic voices and renditions of Bread's "Aubrey" whispered in my ear when I could not sleep. For hikes and bike rides and travel just to stand at a wild ocean on a cold, bright October day. For saying, "You're right, I don't understand it," when I shouted and threatened to throw my engagement ring over a cliffside. For showing me what looked like self-awareness and self-assuredness that cut through all my worry about what people thought, whether I was doing it right and if I was good enough. For dreams we kept making come true: buying and living out of a used Volkswagen Westphalia camper as we made our way from one coast to the other, finishing college together—his architecture degree, my masters. An old house to renovate and make ours. Raising a wild and rooted son. I stayed for all this.

I also stayed, I know now, because of myth. I let how we looked to the world appease me, bolster me, everyone else's perceptions more significant than mine. People said words like *special* and *neat couple* and asked *Why can't I have that?* My sister said once, "Whatever is broken, you two gotta fix it because you belong together." I perpetuated a myth of us so I could stay. I

held on to the myth more than I held on to the man or myself.

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Two years divorced, and I invited my ex to brunch. I thought I was ready to understand some things. I thought if I asked, he'd tell me exactly what I needed to hear. What I needed to hear was a full, rational explanation. My therapist reminded me before heading to the East Coast for vacation that I will never have what I think I need.

"It's an illusion," he said. "You're trying to arrive at a destination that doesn't exist."

I'm still waiting to hear *I'm sorry*. When I read our texts from the days following my flight, I can see in black and white that my ex did apologize. But I can never remember this, or maybe I can't believe it. It's a bottomless pit I'm still falling into. I'm waiting for satisfaction. It will never come. At least not from my ex. I know my need hails from all the crazy and weird and confusing behaviors in my family of origin: I was a little girl always waiting for someone to explain. I'm still that little girl waiting for someone to explain.

Between coffee and eggs and toast, the music blaring, and a bustling wait staff, my ex

looked at me and said, "Let me ask you a question. When I was gone all those years traveling for work, did you miss me?"

I instantly replied, "No."

I didn't think about his question or consider how to answer it. I just started blathering on about love and my belief that I don't know how to love well. I said "no" because of this connection I'd long been working on between my self-perceived love deficit and my behavior toward him. I was trying to make him understand that I understood that my seeming disinterest would have been the result of this deficit; that is, if I can't love well, give, and receive and register it, how could I miss him or anyone else for that matter? But I was backing up too far. Going all the way back to an earlier myth I'd made about myself, because since leaving him, choosing to live solo, finally divorcing him, I've experienced love everywhere. I've been changing this story since the morning I got in the car. I know how to love.

If I could return to this moment right now, I'd say, "I stopped missing you because I stopped loving you and wanting you a long time ago. I just didn't know it."

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When I was married two years, my husband, a submariner, deployed for a five-month tour. I traveled to visit my aunt and uncle where my mom was also visiting, and the night I arrived, I was nasty to her, criticizing her openly. I didn't know this then, but I was in the process of leaving my mother, individuating, and late, at the age of 25. Tension had been growing between us for some time. I was acting out my sorrow; I just wanted somebody in the room to give me a little comfort. The next day, Mom and I sat at a patio table in the garage, the automatic door rolled all the way open. Mom was smoking; I was suffering, trying to express my confusion about our relationship, banging my chest for emphasis, saying, "I know I should love you, you're my mother; but I don't *feel* anything!" I know now what I was doing. I was trying to feel something. I was trying to feel I had her and that she was really there loving me. It was awful. I hurt her deeply. We didn't talk for almost a year.

When my mother died many years after this, and before I left my marriage, Dad and I began to talk more and more to each other. I would often listen to him struggle with his grief. During one road trip, Dad told me about his recent check up with his long-time general practitioner, a woman he loved and respected. He'd been depressed and aimless, and she'd asked him, "What do YOU want to do?"

"Well," I asked, "What do you want to do?"

"I have no idea," he immediately said. "I've never been who I am."

"Who's that?"

"I don't know." And then, "Do you notice how everything I say about myself is negative?"

He talked of his childhood, of his older and alcoholic parents who had not planned for him, of growing up as an only child. Of how his father changed after losing everything in the Depression.

"Dad, you never got to believe you were okay. You never got to feel that you were just fine."

I could say these words because I'd long been saying them to myself. I, too, was a child who'd been offered little chance to know I was okay, wanted, welcomed. It wasn't weird to say this to Dad. I used to be angry and quick to blame my ill-equipped, shut down and scared parents, but now I understand they were just people doing the best they could with what they had. I wanted to offer him something that was useful to me.

"I never got to feel anything!" he yelled. "I never *felt*. I just existed."

Suddenly, I understood everything. His not feeling or emoting in my presence most of my life. His not crying or losing it as Mom died. His constant state of being shut down. His seeming disinterest in us, in me, in my life. My disease of always feeling disconnected or like I couldn't feel at all.

"I was loved," Dad continued, "but not nurtured. I was cared for, but not taught. I was never prepared for anything. I did what I had to do to survive. I never stopped to ask myself what I'd like to do."

I have fantasized about what a father is. Someone loving and in charge, calm, protective, in the know, someone who will take care of you. My father needs first to take care of himself. I think his talking to me is one way he's doing that.

"I don't know what love is," he said finally, his voice going high.

And I thought of me and my mother in that garage. How I'd hurt her, how I'd just been trying to feel connected to her, to feel something. But I had been feeling something. I was feeling grief and sorrow and loss and confusion and want and . . . well, all the hard things love makes us feel.

"Wait, Dad," I said finally, "Isn't this love right now between us?"

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Alice Miller's book *The Drama of the Gifted Child* gave me to myself for the first time a month after this conversation took place. I was 53 years old.

I am driven to confirm that I belong, that people want and like me. I am haunted by a need to be the best, to always win. Because winning and praise and acknowledgement confirm I am actually here. When I don't win, I suffer. To fall short of the best feels like death. I learned to connect self-worth and identity to success; without it, my existence is threatened. And it's a setup. Because you can never be perfect or be the best or win every single time. Every single time I believed I failed, a thick coat of self-loathing and depression covered me.

Because of that book, I finally understood that depression is not the *absence of feelings*; being shut down is not stasis. Depression is the *repression* of endless and bottomless feelings. We *de-press* to keep going. We de-press not to disappear—which is what depression feels like, ironically, your attempt to dissolve into your couch crevices—but to keep *living*.

If depression is not a lack of feelings, then I was full up with them. I am not broken, devoid of authentic emotions, empathy, sympathy. Nor is my father. We are overflowing with feelings. We are both hurt people. My dad never felt anything, and this is what I've been absorbing my entire life.

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After Mom died, Dad slowly and methodically began excavating the lives he and mom lived in that cabin. Eight years later, and he continues to sort and label and rearrange.

One night a year after I moved to Mississippi, we began to sort through boxes stored in the loft space above the room where Mom died. Dad, age 87, carried his 20-foot ladder inside and climbed to the shallow space under the eaves. I told him I'd do it, but he wouldn't hear of it.

I stood on the bottom ladder steps to receive what he handed down to me: boxes of old dishes and cups, jewelry, and photos, bags of linen and clothes, winter coats, folders filled with documents, my mom's writing; I stood there looking up as if this were the most rational thing in the world, my dad on his old knees, bending down toward me, reaching for my stretched open palms. Then he handed me several bundles of old letters tied with brown string.

"You're gonna want to take a look at these," he said.

I carried them to the circular rug in the center of the small main room. Mom had kept all the letters and cards I'd written her from all the way back to when I was in high school.

I took them home that night and began sorting them by date, making piles across my dining room table. And then I started to read them, one after another.

It was dark outside. One lamp glowed from across the room, another, from the long rustic side table behind me my landlord had built. I read. Letter after letter. And suddenly, overcome with feelings, I wept, smiling, understanding instantly that 1. I'd loved my mother; 2. I had not mourned her; and 3. If this were true for her, that I loved and missed her, then it was also true for my ex. I had loved him. In that order, one jab of grief inextricably linked to the next.

I sat there weeping, allowing myself the moment to feel my mom's absence, to feel my remembering her. It was a gift, and because of it, I remembered myself as the girl and then young woman who'd written to her mother, the same young woman who'd loved a young man and then made him her husband. I'd known love.

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I think because of the ways we incur and get stuck in damage we forget all the time the things we are, the things we know how to do, such as care for others, care for ourselves, such as knowing the difference between right and wrong, useful and hurtful, going and staying.

I stayed in my broken marriage because of history and myth and because of my desire to be seen as good and special and worthy. As successful, including in

marriage. I was determined to our detriment not to give up on us. The myth of us, then, became salve and hope to my trampled, fragile self-esteem. The thing that kept me in my marriage was the same thing that got me out: history of damage. Mine. His. The kind of history that makes you forget. I stayed too long. I didn't know how to say, *no more. Not to me. Not again.* Until I did. Until *pono* or gut-knowing or faith kicked murky indecisiveness and crippling self-doubt in the ass.

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Once, and I am sure about this, my husband's love saved me. He once made me feel wanted and loved and like I might one day be able to love myself. He grew up in a violent and abusive home. He said to me after I left him, "I got split apart and never put back together again. There was just too much abuse." For most of our long marriage, I was not fully equipped to take care of myself. I think we grew each other up, becoming a parent to each other, the parent each of us needed.

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Two months after I read my letters to my mother, I read all the letters my ex had written me from 1986 on. I sat at my dining room table and organized stacks by year. It took three weeks to get through them all. It changed my DNA. Because as I read, I remembered and let myself feel everything. I remembered love.

I finished the last stack one afternoon a week before Christmas. I dropped the last letter into my lap, saying aloud, *fuck it* and picked up my cell. I called my ex.

"I remember," I sobbed, "I remember everything!"

He cried, too, saying, "I'm glad, because it was all real."

I'm still struggling with what's real. As fashionable as the word *normalize* is now, I was a kid when I started using it to describe what growing up in my family felt like. When you grow up in chaos and trauma and knowing nothing else, that existence becomes normal. This is why I still struggle when my ex reaches out to me unexpectedly and with caring and kindness. I do not, as a rule, interact or communicate with him. The cost is still too great. My brain cannot reconcile caring and kindness with his habitual, compulsive deception, lying and gaslighting. I believe it was love that got him doing and saying the early things I will never forget, the ways he cared for me, listened to me, changed me and my life, and that it was damage that got him to burn it all down.

Days before I served him with divorce papers one year after I left him, I stood in the kitchen, the Corian counter between us, my face all tight and screwed up, hot tears falling fast. I was pleading with him because this was it, the moment of cleaving, the point of no return. I was trying to get something out of him, saying in a high-pitched whine, "I stayed. I stayed. Wasn't that love?"

It was not.

This is love: leaving and endings, reckonings, and release. Arriving.



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