

# WOVEN: Statutory

written by Guest Contributor | October 27, 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.*

Reread the [archives](#), always.

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I'm going to tell the truth this time. I've started the story a dozen ways over the years. It's one of allure more than trauma, a shrugged confession, a non-story, really. At first, I wrote behind the safety of fiction injected with nonfiction, like all our best narratives, like *The Bell Jar*, but my novel had time travel to save the day, and teen romance to soften the blow of assault. I wanted to write a cautionary tale for would-be Lolitas, but not my own Lolitas. I euphemized the subject for my preteen daughters when they asked, maybe to protect them from the world, maybe to protect them from disillusionment about me. They'd never seen "old me," and writing about her would unearth her.

She did indeed emerge as I wrote, blazing and indignant at being locked away for so long. Then she burned my life down, structure by structure, consuming it all. Once we start the telling, there's no stopping.

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The real Lolita was a girl named Sally Horner, kidnapped at twelve years old in 1948 by a man who witnessed her shoplifting on a dare with her friends. He told her he was FBI and that he wouldn't turn her in if she went home and told her mother he was the father of a friend and she was invited to the Jersey shore for the week. Thus began a twenty-one-month cross-country

nightmare with a man who had just been released from prison and had several offenses on his record for molesting girls between eleven and fourteen. When police brought Sally home, her mother said, "Whatever she's done, I can forgive her."

My abuser wasn't a wealthy or powerful man, just a construction worker, who promised me nothing but gave me beer and attention. He made me feel beautiful. I always assumed I was the only one but now I know that's probably not the case. He had a girlfriend his own age, one I believe he eventually married. The last time I saw him he came to my house and begged me to leave with him before she got there. "Go get your suit on," he stood on my porch looking over his shoulder to his apartment. "We'll go to the hot springs. Come on, she's going to be here any minute."

He took me to a neighboring town, a can of Coors in between his legs as he drove, his other hand in my shorts when he wasn't shifting gears. Was this how boyfriends and girlfriends acted when they were driving to a date? At the hot springs I wondered what the other people thought of us as he groped me in the pools. Did they think it was weird that we were together, and why did they wonder and choose to look away?

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Americans consume documentaries like we examine car accidents on our commute home from work—titillated and horrified as we pass. Thankful it's not us on the asphalt. *I knew something was up with that guy*, then we turn off the TV and go to bed. I could've been lured to Jeffrey Epstein's island, and I might've survived R Kelly. My story asked me to explain seduction from the inside, through my fourteen-year-old voice. I was a quirky, unpopular girl who found herself in a much older man's bed. I didn't wonder why, but the world does.

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I dug out a tattered red spiral notebook I used for a journal that summer and dared to read how I felt at fourteen before I stuffed it all away and pretended it was just a bad relationship. I'd written *Van Halen—1984* in experimental cursive on the front and only one cheesy poem about him. It was a wistful confession about us "not knowing what we meant to each other," which read like something I'd probably seen in a movie, how an adult might process the end of a non-relationship. In my hunger for love and meaning making, I conjured romance.

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"What's with all the makeup?" he asks. He stares at me with a knowing grin. "I think you look prettier without it."

"I don't know," I say. "I like the way it makes me look..." but now I'm more self-conscious. I rub the makeup off a little while we talk, whenever he looks away.

"I like it when girls are just natural, clean."

\*

He catcalled me when I got off the bus, gave me beer when he invited me over. I'd kissed two boys before him, with bubble gum flavored lip potion on my freckle lined lips. I was a Pretty Baby aching to be all grown up and believed I could handle the aftermath.

*Kissing Slicks...they're not as innocent as they seem.*

\*

The word *hebephilia* was created to explain why some men fixate on their attraction to girls on the cusp of puberty, between the ages of eleven and fourteen. Some psychologists say that it's common for men to find these girls attractive—it's not considered deviant—but to act upon that attraction is criminal. Many call for the dismissal of this term, rejected by the DSM, because it could be used to justify obvious crime in the same way creating a psychological diagnosis for rape might.

\*

I checked out *Lolita* from the library and read it secretly. I didn't want the librarians to think I was a perv, but I wanted to get inside his head, this unreliable narrator. Aren't we all? The pedophile Humbert Humbert drew a parallel between Lolita and his first love, Annabel, who haunted him until Lolita appeared. His desire for a nymphet, ability to pick one out of a group of Girl Scouts, preference for budding breasts, consumed him. Nabokov's depiction of a pedophile repulsed me then drew me back. It read like the satire of *The Screwtape Letters*, but even more horrifying because it was

titillating. In *Lolita* Nabokov expertly makes us afraid of ourselves.

\*

I wrote scenes with long buried images, his beerish breath and a scratchy moustache, on my face, my inner thighs. My body responded to his touch, his tongue, but I gripped the sheets with sweaty hands, both ready to run and trying to relax. I loved and hated it. I felt self-conscious about my braces, lost my underwear in his filthy room. I recalled the weight of his leg and arm pinning me to the bed when he fell asleep. Every time I tried to get up to go home, he pulled me closer to him. I slept naked for the first time in my life, and thought, *This is how lovers look in the movies.*

\*

*I should've left hours ago, but he begged me to stay the night, then fell asleep draped across my body. I pretended to feel comfortable so he wouldn't think I'm a kid, even though I am. Then the beer wore off. I'm alone in his bed with racing thoughts and my underwear on the other side of the room. I want to get up and run, but I watch him sleep instead.*

\*

"She just seems so detached," one of my readers said, "which I guess is understandable given the situation. But I have no concept of her inner landscape."

"Thank you." I accepted the marked-up manuscript and looked around the table at ten heads nodding in agreement. I felt like I was bleeding out on the page. I'd sobbed through every scene I tried to write. The details were there, enough to incite anger toward the antagonist. *God this guy's such a dirt bag*, one of the guys wrote.

I named her Kate. Through her I told it all, but her voice lacked snark and authenticity. She was muffled, but I couldn't hear it. I didn't want to tell everyone this was based on real life because I wanted unfiltered critique. Maybe I was too close to the narrative to see it clearly.

\*

I hadn't been in a critique group since college and felt like a feedback virgin. I found it easier to receive my blows from these new peers than to give them critique, sure I'd reveal my ineptitude. Even so, I loved being with fellow writers.

"Oh my god," I said when I changed into my pjs that night, "there's this frumpy weird lady who writes all kink erotica, and the whole time I'm listening I'm trying to picture her in a collar, and a gay guy whose stories make you go, whoa..."

"What?" my husband asked, "You have to read that stuff?"

"Yeah, that's the deal. We read each other's work and give feedback."

"I don't know if I should let you go there if you're going to read stuff like that."

I stared at him from inside the closet, measuring my next sentence. His *let* deflated my glee and created a boundary I knew I would not cross again. He didn't need to hear about it, and I was not going to stop going.

\*

*"Hi..." He leans in front of my lilac bush and shades his eyes with a paint-flecked hand. We're face to face, but in a Romeo and Juliet sort of way. He wears his work clothes, ratty cargo pants and a t-shirt that says "Cool Story Bro." It's the first time I've really looked at him too. Before today he was just muscles walking around in the distance, now he's smiling green eyes in my window.*

Loves Baby Soft. Because innocence is sexier than you think.

\*

I spent a few evenings lurking in chat rooms where guys confessed their fixation on young girls, trying to understand. If I was going to write this, I needed to research and understand both sides. I couldn't write him as a creepy old dude with huge gold wire-frame glasses a navy windbreaker.

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Everything about her pure uncharted territory turns me on so much, I can't think about anything else. I know it's wrong, some might even call it sick. None of my friends care, but I might have stretched her age a couple of years. I try telling myself it's a bad idea, I'm going to go to jail, but I can't stop myself. She's so easy to reach, open book easy, with this fresh soft face, and no idea how beautiful she is. Every night when I'm driving home from work, I pep talk my inner Mark. You're not calling her, you're not going over there. Sometimes I make it a couple of days, and then I'm half drunk and knocking on her window, or texting her from the bathroom so my girlfriend won't know that after she leaves for the night, I'm going over there. Kate wants nothing, because she's too young to know she's supposed to. I'm addicted to the way she looks at me, like I know what the hell I'm doing, like I have any answers at all. And I'm almost there, about to get it all. I'm such a fuck.

\*

Critique group that night was a wild ride. One of the older women, the ringleader of what we called the "knitting circle," always got so agitated when she ranted about someone else's work. The guys in my outside-critique-group-critique-group knew by then that it was a true story, and maybe that made them want to protect me. We sat motionless, watching her yell while texting each other underneath the table.

"Has she even done any research to understand this issue?!" She looked around the room for reinforcement. "This is a very serious problem. How can one make assumptions like this?" Her cheeks flushed like she'd been running as she came out of her critique trance and finally looked at me.

*She's all worked up because she's a pedophile* one of the guys texted.

"Thank you," I said, and took the marked-up manuscript from her.

\*

Psychologists believe that some people, usually men, become fixated in their sexual attraction on the attributes they first found arousing. Sexual attraction to pubescent girls is evolutionarily appropriate, accepted in many cultures even today. We draw the line when someone acts upon that attraction, to feel more powerful, to educate an innocent, to fulfill a fantasy.

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*"So you haven't been with anyone but that Jake kid have you?" he fiddles with the belt loop on my jeans, one finger looped in, a thumb circling the top copper button. His breathing changes like he's getting ready to jump.*

*"No, why?" my cheeks feel slap flushed, ashamed that he knows one of my secrets.*

*"Just curious," he says. "You know he's a total loser."*

\*

Jake was a boy I had been seeing who had left for the summer and Mark thought he was educating me, sharing his gift of sexual prowess. His roommate made a joke once "if she's old enough to be, she's old enough for me." Was he showing off for his friends? My senior year I met a woman whose husband worked with him, and when I told her how I knew him she was outraged. She confronted him the next day, and he bragged about it—*yeah I tapped that.*

I was a that.

\*

*Promise Roger your strawberry kisses. There are plenty of flavors left for Richie, Fred, David, Bob...Maybelline Lip Potion.*

I had to make him cuter than he probably was for a book for young adults. He resembled a guy in my critique group so I used him as inspiration. The Mark in the book worked a lot harder for access to my body, romanced her even, and I found myself enjoying the rush of recreating a narrative, filled with desire and meaning. Could I make it better than it really was, charge it with eroticism and maintain the shadow of control?

\*

*"Please come back inside," he says. His arms encircle mine, pinning me to him as he buries his face in my neck. I shudder from the cold creeping toward us off the field and breathe him in, warm salty skin, cotton and soapy clean. One inhale and my body buzzes electric. The streetlight above him casts a shadow that hides his expression and gives him a halo. I know there's no deep meaning in this, but the image makes me smile, knowing he's nothing like the*

*saints on Grandma's scapulars. Could I hang him close to my heart? Would he grant me special blessings? He kisses my forehead, that sliver of nerve endings at my hairline that seem to be connected to all the other tiny hairs on my arms and back. I glance back at my house, to the light I left on in my bedroom. There's absolutely nothing drawing me back there. Nobody home, nothing. My gut churns, craving a rush. Something. I'm sick of waiting for my life to start.*

\*

Dr. Nassar's victims describe him as the only kind adult in a world of brutal gymnastics coaches. He snuck them candy and food, comforted them when they were injured. He then administered physical therapy "treatments" that included fingering, sometimes right in front of their parents so they questioned the normalcy.

\*

I created a character to befriend Kate, to hold up a mirror so she would see what she was doing to herself and the critique group fell in love. He was a mixture of the Matt Smith Doctor Who, my husband, and the boyfriend I fantasized about at that age. He was the lover I really wanted to exist, the boyfriend who would notice what was happening and be there for me.

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*Peter skates by, every morning and afternoon, glides with his towel wrapped around his neck like a scarf, probably going to the pool. I just happen to be in the window, so maybe he passes more often...he's like clockwork, my fedora clad superhero in his terry cloth cape. His whole face lights up when he sees me.*

\*

"I have such a hard time figuring out what this Kate girl is feeling, but Peter. He's so vibrant on the page."

"I felt the same way," another said. "He's really a great character."

"I can already see him on the book cover, like a super hero on a skateboard." My mentor seemed gleeful about something I'd written for the first time ever. For once she didn't say, "I'm skimming, I'm skimming, I just don't care about any of this..."

"That's so interesting," I said, "because he was the hardest part to create." But I don't know if anyone heard me over their Peter party.

If Peter was working, I'd give them more Peter. He evolved into a time traveler who rode his skateboard everywhere, riding in to save Kate.

\*

*How to kiss deliciously with lip potions.*

*Now the stars kiss me when I step outside, they spread their hands soft on my shoulders, whisper condolences and guide me back to my room. The wheels of a skateboard grind the asphalt in the distance. It's Peter but he doesn't see me standing there. For a moment, I believe I'm a ghost, and I truly wish Peter was real.*

\*

Epstein's victims often needed saving, from broken homes or lower income families. He promised to help them advance in their modeling careers, get them medical treatment, better jobs, nicer clothes. R. Kelly was going to make music careers—before they were isolated in locked rooms as sex slaves.

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"I really want to just tell the story in a raw way," I told my husband, "like the ugly truth."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I don't want to give this some shiny happy ending. I need to just tell the story and let people do what they want with it."

"You mean you don't want to write something that could minister to someone?"

"No, I don't want to have to worry about any of that. I'm tired of worrying about it."

This Christian belief had restrained me for years. I must think and write and speak about only the noble, true, and pure. It kept me from writing anything about gruesome, shameful reality, which is where I began to find my power.

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Several chapters in I realized I still didn't have a story. I had no idea how to solve Kate's problem. She was doomed to stay stupid and slutty. I decided to start fresh, from Kate and Peter's future, and I would tell the story from Peter's perspective. As I wrote he spoke to me, like a voice I heard in some space between my mind and behind my shoulder as I sat on my couch with my laptop. I typed everything he said, sobbed with him as he told the story of her eventually taking her life and how he tried in vain to revive her. This would be the beginning of the story and his quest would be traveling back to the point in time right before she walked over to that guy's house. He would stop it from ever happening.

\*

*Kate always wanted to sleep. That's where she found peace. Whenever she became depressed or overwhelmed with life, she would nap. Sometimes twice a day I would find her curled up like the cat and I would just lay down next to her, smell her hair, and smile at my good fortune. She looked like Sleeping Beauty in her state of frozen perfection. I just couldn't accept that this time she had crawled into her bed with her tattered old copy of *The Mark of Athena* and left me.*

*Loves Baby Soft. Because innocence is sexier than you think.*

\*

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide. Roughly forty percent develop disordered eating, whether to anesthetize with binging and purging, or by anorexia, to punish a body that betrayed them, or one they want to desexualize, any way to diminish.

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*He never lies to me, doesn't whisper I love you or promise about the future. He tells me he wants me, needs me, can't stop thinking about me. You're ready, I know it, he says. I close my eyes, hold on for dear life, hold my breath through the tearing, pretend it's nothing.*

*"You okay?" he asks. He's heavy on me, hot and intruding. He holds my face in his hands, searching my eyes for an answer again. I nod. His kisses reach through me and I am gone.*

*Spend the summer in love. Love's Baby Soft.*

\*

I hit a roadblock at the middle of my novel again. How can he solve the story problem, save her from herself, from something that is as much within her as external? I wanted her to be her own hero and he didn't know how to be a hero. Was he going to confront the guy and get his ass beat and then have her continue to let the guy manipulate her? What could he do to change the outcome and what would a reader even care about? Maybe we are destined to always make the same mistakes.

\*

Survivors know the power of finding one's voice. Nassar's victims came forth one by one to give impact statements in *Athlete A*, and they found power in numbers. Rachel Denhollander tried to tell her coach about Nassar when she was fifteen and being abused, but she quickly learned that no one was going to listen to her. Years later when she read the story about him in the *Indy Star* she knew it was time—she was the first to go on record, and brought with her a case she had built against him.

\*

I stayed silent until I was twenty-three and about to get married. A friend invited me to lunch to catch up. She'd started therapy to understand her patterns of self-harm and the therapist felt everything she wrestled with pointed toward sexual abuse. For the first time ever, I said "Me too...there was a guy when I was fourteen, a neighbor. I thought he was my boyfriend."

I called my mom that day and told her. I didn't want to make a big deal out of it, just needed her to know. I've seen my abuser once in the thirty years

since, out of the corner of my eye while we ate steak on a date night and he drank after work beers with a friend. I heard his voice and froze.

"You okay?" my husband saw the fight or flight wash over me.

"Yeah, it's nothing. I'll tell you later." Adrenaline urged me to go. I couldn't swallow my food, and I couldn't explain to my husband without feeling like it would become something bigger than I wanted it to be.

That's the thing with sexual abuse. You feel like you were making it up. Or because you chose to be there you were equally to blame. Everything gets twisted when you find yourself in the greyish area of consent, with an adult body but a child's psyche. I explained it away—I was hypersexual, I thought I was more mature than I was, I looked older than my age, I wanted to be there, I enjoyed it. Oprah once explained on her show that the thing nobody talks about is the physiological sexual response that occurs in the victim that makes her feel culpable alongside the horrible. A switch in that child's body has been flipped and they're never the same.

\*

*Kissing Slicks. They're not as innocent as you think.*

*We fall asleep like that, and I wake disoriented and groggy, thinking of the time. All I know is it is still dark and I need to leave. "Mark, will you walk me home?"*

*"Baby, please stay." He calls me Baby, but I'm not. And I am. He says thank you, but never mentions love. I never expected it, but my heart winces at its absence.*

*I rise, shaking, disembodied. My rubbery bones carry me to my clothes.*

*"Mark, please come with me. I don't want to walk home alone." But he's asleep. I dress. Not too much blood. I'm okay. One last look at him on the bed and I leave.*

\*

I didn't tell my mom or dad because in my mind I had been sneaking out of the house and drinking, not being assaulted by a pedophile. My sister knew, and one other friend who'd been out of town. We sat on my lawn commiserating about our summers and I told her I wasn't going to see him anymore.

"Yeah, why not?"

"I had this horrible dream," I said. "I was with him and he was kissing me, and when I opened my eyes he'd turned into my dad."

"Eew, what?"

"Yeah, it was so gross." He wasn't my boyfriend, and there was something really wrong about all of it, but I was a child and I moved on.

That year I cut my hair and dyed it black. I cut and shaved it more, wore black lipstick and ripped clothes. I didn't want to be beautiful anymore. I cultivated a beauty boys would have to dig for if they wanted access. I thought I was just rebelling, finding myself. I saw no connection to those few months, a handful of encounters really, to this or the daily self-medicating. Or the binging and purging for euphoric relief.

*Spend your summer in love. Love's Baby Soft.*

\*

When Peter and I got stuck in our story together, I put him in the drawer and started writing about my "uglies"—all of the shameful things I had a hard time admitting to anyone, things I knew I would be judged for, like the rage I had to contain to avoid beating my children. I looked like super mom and felt like Silvia Plath. Or the attraction I had for another man, the eye twitch I developed from holding life together, or the loss of faith I was navigating. I had thoughts of putting a gun to my head, and spent hours in my closet with the door locked, sobbing while my kids scratched on the door and called my name. They needed something from me and I was suffocating. Everything was burning.

I knew I couldn't talk to my husband. He judged me more harshly than anyone.

Essay writing cracked the seal to release my voice and I was never the same. I grew restless and hungry for experience. I felt like I was losing my mind, but I was coming back to myself. The more I confessed, the more I stripped away the layers of self-protection, the stronger my writing became. I cared less and found my voice. Kate wasn't snarky or quirky, just a muted wisp of a girl, until I gave her a food addiction and suicidal ideation. I made her brilliant and flawed, profoundly unsavable. I see now that I had to find my own voice before I could give one to Kate.

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*I hate being a girl. No, I hate being that girl, the one who stares at her phone waiting for a text, the one who stares out her window watching him,*

*desperate for his affection. I hate everything I've done and everything I'll do because he makes me feel wanted and beautiful, and alive.*

There are roots to this kind of abuse. I want to dig them up and examine them—the chubby awkward child beginning to blossom, cheekbones appearing when the baby fat layer fell away, when the chunky girl learned to skip meals, take her mom's diet pills and laxatives. She had very few friends, was more comfortable with adults than other kids, always on the outside looking in.

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Researchers in epigenetics are finding evidence of trauma-altered DNA—in the cortisol levels of descendants of holocaust survivors, in mice who avoid cherry blossoms because their grandparents were zapped while smelling them, in the behaviors of baby mice whose parents were traumatized by separation. Our DNA is written in sharpie; epigenetics is pencil.

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If I can't protect my daughters from a trauma that already scribbled on their DNA, how do keep them safe? Girls are fetishized and raped every day, whether in my little town or on Epstein's private island. It keeps happening, always happened, and how do we make it stop? Maybe it begins with language. We stop using euphemisms, like "underage" for child, and "non-consensual sex" for rape. We teach our children to find their voices and believe them when they speak. We tell our stories without fake Hallmark endings.

\*

I wanted to explain how it happened, but I realize I still haven't. I don't know why I was there. I was bored and curious. I wanted to feel loved, beautiful. Blame it on *Seventeen Magazine* making me stare at myself in the mirror for hours on end trying to figure out who I was looking at, and Judy Blume who talked about the smoldering fire between my legs and how to stoke it, or the Patriarchy, or MTV. It was *Blue Lagoon* and *Endless Love*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. But truly, it was not having the words or power to leave, and I still struggle with my learned girlness and acquiescence. Just this month I realize I muscled through an unpleasant experience because I didn't know how to remove myself. I think, *it's not that bad, I've come this far, it would be rude to turn back now. Or I'm too drunk or too tired to drive home, I can endure until morning.* Just like Kate, I get up and dress as

soon as I hear birds and see sunlight.

As parents we try to solve the sexualization of our daughters with sheltering. Dress codes, curfews, purity rings and courtship only empower the patriarchal culture trying desperately to control the sexuality of girls. It enforces the strict rules then blames them when assault occurs, like Sally Horner's mom and community. She was ostracized when she returned, not nurtured and counseled for her trauma. Sadly, she died in a car accident at fifteen.

Sometimes I feel guilty about putting Peter in the drawer because our exchange was so magical, but when I jumped from the burning building of my marriage, I hated him and Kate and anything that smacked of true love and destiny. I'd been duped. Now I wonder if he would speak to me again if I pulled out my laptop and invited him. I truly want to finish their story. No, this time it would be Kate. I can already hear her yelling at me, telling me she didn't need saving.

She needed power.

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