

WOVEN: The Turning

written by Guest Contributor | December 16, 2020



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.

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1971

Our living room is a cave in the middle of the house. Dim light peers through one curtained window; dark, paneled walls reflect browns and golds in the stiff, formal furniture. I spend little time here, but it's the only place I can talk with him right now.

He sits across from me, emotionless, like some kind of museum portrait.

"It was just a game," he deadpans, referring to the bet he made with his buddies: if they wanted, they could all "go steady" with me. He says that's the only reason he and I have been together for the last few weeks.

I stare at him, my red, swollen eyes radiating disbelief, contempt. Tears cascade down my face, leaving my skin slippery and tight. My insides are in anxious disarray, trembling with nervous exhaustion. Emptiness spreads through me.

The last few weeks ... so little time. But adolescent time is expansive—it can hold more. In the ninth grade, three weeks is like three years. It feels as though we've had this long, serious romance—he taught me how to French kiss—and now I'm finding out it meant nothing, nada, zero, to him. Sobbing uncontrollably, my breath hitches. I ask him how he can do this, what kind of

a person does this to someone, tearing apart innocence, trust, naiveté, just for the fun of it. He has no good answers. His face, his eyes, betray no regret. In fact, I think I see a whisper of amusement at the corners of his mouth. I'm stunned by how these boys, by the age of 15, have already learned to manipulate others and enjoy it.

Sadly, I did go steady with all of them. This current "boyfriend" was the last of the group. I remember the excitement I felt, many months ago, when these boys suddenly became interested in me, were lining up to be with me. I should have been suspicious then. But the idea of having a boyfriend—especially a popular one—and my longing for attention and affection blotted out any questions I might have had. I'm so ashamed.

After he leaves, my mother asks if I'm okay—she heard me crying from the kitchen.

"We broke up," is all I'm willing to divulge.

I can't bear the thought of telling her, or anyone else, about what has happened. I wonder how many people at school ... in band ... know about this. All these boys are in band. Band is my safe place—where my friends are, where I shine, where I can do what I love: play my flute. Suddenly, it doesn't feel so safe anymore. A black, simmering stew of hurt, humiliation, and anger is taking shape inside me.

During the next month at school, I try to act as if nothing has happened, but "the bet" is constantly on my mind. Band rehearsals feel interminable. Nobody says anything, but in my mind, I can hear everyone silently laughing, pointing fingers at me with their thoughts. I long for invisibility. Finally, school lets out for the summer. I can take a break from the social nightmare that has become my life.

A few weeks later, my parents decide we'll go camping at the beach. I'm excited. We've never done this before—usually we go to some forest or mountain area. I ask a friend (I'll call her "Marcy") to come along so I'll have some company. The campground is in a remote area, a short walk from the ocean, and the beach is almost deserted. The weather is fabulous—bright, happy sunshine; light, dancing clouds; a warm, salty breeze from the ocean.

One afternoon, Marcy and I take a walk along the shoreline. Because we're both sporting lobster-red sunburns from the previous day, we opt for street clothes instead of swimsuits. Walking toward a tower we spotted from the campground, we see people fishing from the seashore and a lone swimmer way out in the water. After a while, we decide we've probably gone too far—this is easy to do on a beach—so we turn around and start back toward the camping area.

As we're walking, we notice that the lone swimmer we saw earlier is coming out of the water, heading straight for us. We also notice, as we get closer, that this person—an older, fiftyish man with salt-and-pepper hair—has no clothes on. Completely. Buck. Naked. He heads straight for me and asks something like, "Do you want to go to bed?" I'm guessing here, because the

shock of seeing his naked parts has caused my hearing to go on the fritz. All I know is I see a dangerous, crazy glint in his eyes and my answer to any question he asks is "NO!"

He grabs me by the arm. A scream cranks itself up from the pit of my belly and bolts from my mouth, shredding the air with shards of sound as I try to wrest myself away from him. He holds firm. I continue screaming, the noise ripping through the rhythmic *woosh* of the waves crashing onto shore. Marcy, completely immobilized, eyes and mouth wide open with shock, has no clue what to do. I yell at her to "Run! Get help!", but she will tell me later she couldn't bring herself to leave me alone with him. This man and I pull against each other in a tug-of-war for what seems like hours, going around in circles in a kind of perverse dance: me constantly shrieking and straining against him, trying to run away; he continually trying to get at me. Eventually, he manages to rip off my shirt and bra, amplifying my cries and injecting new energy into my fight to get free of him. I'm hoping the people fishing down the way will hear me or see the struggle and come to the rescue—I scream directly at them with all my might—but they are oblivious.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, he releases me and runs away, disappearing into the elevated bank of palmetto bushes bordering the beach. I'm dumbfounded, relieved at my good luck, and still terrified, all at the same time. Stumbling around, dazed, picking up scraps of my clothes, I'm thinking this reprieve is too good to be true. I try to reassemble the fragments that were my shirt, but my hands are shaking so badly I can barely hold them. I need to cover myself so I can get back to the campground. Marcy tries to help, but it's useless—the pieces are too small. I don't want to stay here ... he might come back ... but there is no way I'm walking back topless. I tell Marcy to hurry, get my parents, and bring me a shirt.

I walk up into the palmetto bushes—yes, the same ones he ran into—and hide there to wait. The sky is a clear, bright blue, the sun high and laser hot on yesterday's sunburn. There's no shade here—the palmettos are barely tall enough to conceal me crouching on the ground. I'm scared to death this man is going to come back and find me. Trembling, my bones aching with dread, I try to calm myself with deep breaths while steadily scanning the scrubby vegetation for any movement. I pray that he's gone ... really gone.

After an eternity, Marcy returns with my parents. Relief washes over me when I see them—I'm safe now. My mother admonishes me for not running back half naked—she of the "cover yourself up" mantra. I will understand at some point that this is her fear talking, but right now it angers me. I'm the one that was attacked. I'm the one with an ugly, steaming mass of angst and shame stuck in my gut. My father is speechless. His eyes tell me of his disbelief and horror at what has happened, that he's trying to work out how to make this right. I put on the shirt they brought for me and we walk back toward the campground. My parents want details as we walk, but I can't summon the will to relive this just now. I want to get back, to feel safe again.

At the campsite, my father calls the police. A nice, elderly policeman comes to question me. I can tell while we're talking that very little will be done to find my attacker. I'm a 14-year-old girl who wasn't actually raped, so

what's the harm? The whole dialogue is a pat-on-the-head-and-get-on-with-your-life session. He says they'll "keep an eye out" for this guy (*you mean you'll keep a lookout for a naked man wandering around? How many other girls has he assaulted?*). My father has tried to do the right thing, but nothing much comes of it.

Over the next couple of weeks, my mother periodically asks me how I'm doing. I mention bad dreams, but we don't really talk about it. What can I tell her? That I see him—those evil, glimmering eyes—every night as I try to fall asleep? That I dream I'm back there, going around in circles with him, but I don't get away?

The bad dreams continue. For a long time. I will hold the details of that man's face in my mind for the rest of my life and ask myself: *Why didn't you just kick him in the junk? It was right there. You couldn't have missed it.* After all, this whole predicament was somehow my responsibility, right? If Marcy and I hadn't walked too far down the beach, this never would have happened ... right?

I'm unaware of it, but this assault, coupled with that wager placed on my neediness by a bunch of arrogant ninth-grade boys, causes my sense of self to shift, to diminish into feelings of unworthiness. The dark, bubbling brew of anger and shame that took up residence after "the bet" has settled in to stay, staining my self-regard, weakening my trust in the world.

The years that follow produce a series of unfulfilling relationships, including a failed marriage: I'm treated as less-than by some, as private property by others; some are passive-aggressive, others are ego-centric charmers who need a conquest. There are the usual catcalls while walking from points A to B and evenings out that leave me feeling like pawed-over merchandise. Most of these encounters expose a colossal, Grand-Canyon-like chasm between their expectations and mine, producing layers of frustration, bewilderment and guilt, no matter the choices I make.

Am I only a body? Does it not get any better than this?

Part of me will think this is just the way life is, or the way it is for me, anyway. Another part will remain angry, victimized, wondering why people take advantage. It never occurs to me that my choices might reflect my sense of self: that mirror of me that was cracked long ago in the living room, at the beach. I'll hunger for an honest, deep connection, but will continue to pursue the unattainable or naughty types—expecting to be dumped—and be devastated when they leave.

1996

Summer in Charleston, South Carolina: I'm playing flute with the Spoleto Festival Orchestra. It's a bright, sunny day. A friendly breeze is coming off

the ocean as I take my daily walk down by Waterfront Park, in one of the most historic, affluent neighborhoods in the city. I've learned, since that attack on the beach so many years ago, to constantly scan my surroundings, take note of people around me, and carry pepper spray or mace.

Deep in the neighborhood, a block or two from the water, I spot a man up ahead on the opposite side of the street. He's kneeling to tie his shoe. This seems like a pretense. As I get closer, he stands, gives me a sideways, furtive glance, and begins walking. I keep going. He turns at the next corner and disappears. This unsettles me ... I have a sense he'll be back. My thumb rests on the discharge lever of the pepper spray, just in case.

A few minutes pass. *Maybe I was mistaken ... maybe he won't come back.* Then I hear eager footsteps over my shoulder. I know it's him. Just as I'm about to turn to look, he grabs me by the crotch and wraps an arm around my chest.

I should be afraid. I'm not.

My simmering stew of anger and shame has morphed into boiling hot magma, erupting into full fury with this violation.

All I want to do is take a walk. That's all. Just a walk.

I can't even take a fucking walk in a nice neighborhood in broad daylight without being assaulted.

I wrench myself around to face him, pepper spray held high, ready to let him have it. He sees my arm raised and looks into my eyes ... eyes that are bleeding with rage: rage at my enforced state of constant vigilance; rage at the faultless shame I carry; rage at my loss of safety, loss of self, loss of value, loss of love, all because of people like him.

In the space of a heartbeat, he sees all of this, turns, and runs away.

In that moment, I feel a surge of power—I feel stronger, more worthy, than I've felt in years. I'm a little shaken, but I'm okay.

I continue walking, at a quicker pace, and head back to my room. On the way, a police car appears up the street. I think about running to the car, telling the policewoman what happened. But I don't. Telling her won't make a difference. It will just complicate my life.

The rest of my time in Charleston is fine, enjoyable even. My concerts go well. I'm happy to be playing with this orchestra. I don't go on regular walks anymore, just occasional outings with other people. There are no bad dreams, but I think about the incident a lot. I still feel vindicated—he saw my anger and it scared him—but it's not enough to make me feel safe. I know better. *How many more times must I go through this, or something worse than this? And will I make it out unscathed?*

The ensuing years are spent with my radar up, never wandering out alone without mace or pepper spray, never really feeling secure. I embark on a path to try to embrace the image in that cracked mirror of mine, finally finding

genuine, kind companionship. All the while, I imagine I'm one of a small percentage of women who have been assaulted. I tend to minimize my experiences because I wasn't raped—in fact, I wasn't physically harmed at all.

When the Patriarchal Dam begins to leak—memoirs detailing all kinds of assaults, news stories involving celebrity rape and assault, the #MeToo movement coming to life—the terrible truth becomes clear:

We—All of Us—who have experienced harassment or assault, are the Majority.

I'm not alone.

As I witness this transformation from a culture of solitary shame to a blossoming of tell-all and evolving solidarity, I come to understand that we need each other in order to be strong. We need our shared stories to heal, to build a foundation for moving forward. Our narratives make us strong, allowing us to confront our experiences, to reach out, to come together.

So, I put myself out there.

To add my story to yours.

To strive for change.

To shift responsibility from where we carry it to where it belongs.

To lay claim to our right to safety in this world.



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