

WOVEN: The Why

written by Guest Contributor | August 28, 2019



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.

"It must have happened to you so many times because you're beautiful," he said, his fingers touching the side of my face lightly. As if he'd figured it out. The why. Why men rape women, rape children. A brutality like this makes no sense; it happening to the same person more than once, less sense. What was it about me that caused men to rape me?

Because you're beautiful.

He said this because he believed me. He loved me and he didn't want to believe it was something I was doing, over and over, some mistake I was making. He didn't want to believe that I deserved it, so it must have been something about me that I couldn't help. Something that made men want me; something that made them unable to stop themselves. It must have been the way I looked. He was used to understanding things, to logically deriving answers. He'd always been someone who had answers.

Because you're beautiful.

Except I never felt beautiful. Especially after.

Except that the first time I was only seven, and I wasn't beautiful, I was a little girl. My face streaked with dirt and sweat, my hands and mouth stained purple, I ran from the raspberry patch with my bucket to the house on my cousins' farm, hoping to be fed, proud that I'd picked so much juicy, ripe fruit. My cousin, 15, his hands so big they overlapped when encircling my

throat, "Why do you make me do this?"

I didn't answer. I didn't know why. When I got to the house, bucket gone, pride gone, I couldn't eat.

Except when I was twelve, it wasn't because I was beautiful. I was gangly, tall and flat chested, a white trash girl with thrift store clothes and K-Mart sneakers. It was the summer of 1977, so hot that summer that my sister and I snuck out our bedroom windows to sleep on the tar roof covering the neighbor's porch below. So hot my thighs stuck to the plastic seat of the car, blood wetting my shorts, as he drove past cornfields, run-down houses, back to his childhood home where my mother, his new bride, waited with my younger sister. That summer it was my shorts; the why. The reason. "Go put long pants on," my mother scoffed, just the week before, eyes hard as they looked only at my legs. We sat in our living room in the heat, my step-father's eyes also on my legs, his friend leaning back to put his head against my thigh without asking. I loved those shorts, yellow running shorts with white trim around the edges. I'd babysat a whole week to get them, brand new, and a blue pair just like them, both with matching tank tops. I wore them even after my mother warned me that it was my shorts that caused men to look at me like that.

Except a few months later, it was the weed, or the fact that I was the type of twelve-year-old girl who took a puff when my step-father and the dad of a neighborhood girl offered it, when they took me for a ride in the little sports car and bought me a coke. I still wasn't beautiful; still looked like a child. Or maybe it was because I owed it to them because they bought me a coke, the glass bottle they used to rape me later, tied up in my mother's bed. Why would two men tie-up a twelve-year-old girl—rape her with a coke bottle? Why?

So I drank. I drank to be brave.

And again, it wasn't because I was beautiful when I was sixteen, he the quarterback of our neighboring school, his girlfriend the most beautiful girl in my class. I wasn't one of the pretty girls; I was nobody, the new girl, hanging on the edge of the smart, popular kids; kids with money, clothes, kids with parents who paid attention. I whispered, "No," then louder, "No, no, no, I don't want to, no . . ." I didn't scream, only cried, didn't yell to my friends in the next room, though, later, they said they heard me say, "No." I was drunk, so drunk that afterwards I stumbled crying into the living room and chugged a bottle of Genesee Cream Ale as my two friends and the three boys sat on the couch watching me. I chugged most of another beer, then stopped, threw the bottle at the head of the boy, that handsome boy who could have had anyone, and watched the brown glass fly, slow motion, as it hit the wall. I ran to Route 81, barefoot, stuck out my thumb. Two boys, two girls, people I thought were my friends, found me heading in the wrong direction.

"You'll feel better tomorrow," the boy who drove said, looking at me in the rearview mirror. "He didn't mean to hurt you."

Except I didn't feel better the following Monday as I sat outside in the

early June sun to avoid the eyes of boys in the lunch room. A senior walked by, "She cries when she gets it." His laughter, and the laughter of the boy beside him, echoed against to brick wall on the other side of the courtyard.

The beautiful girl, his girlfriend, a girl with pouty lips and dark curly hair, told my brother she forgave me. "She knew you were drunk," my brother said. She also forgave him. Later my Dad said it was because I was drunk; he knew I didn't mean to do it.

I drank. I drank to forget.

Then there was a boss, too, at Barney's Pool Hall in Houston, and me, so drunk he carried me into his apartment, though I asked him to take me home. Begged him. Threw-up all night in his bathroom. He did say it was because I was beautiful. He loved me, he said. He used to sing, "You are so beautiful to me," along to the song on the jukebox. He played it two, three times a night to warn customers in the bar that he had claimed me, that eventually I would give in and he would have me.

I drank more. I drank until I was twenty-four, drank until I fought with my husband and, full of rum and coke, tried to run him over with our jeep to escape him. Scared of myself, sure I'd figured out the why, I quit drinking. Only then did he leave bruises on my arms; only then did I leave.

It was then that I got a job at Avalon, a domestic and sexual violence center, counseling little girls raped by step-fathers, teenagers raped by boys at school, women beaten by husbands. I learned that none of the things I'd thought about myself were the reason. I can still see the words on the chalkboard at my training, "Poor judgment is not a rape-able offense."

Poor judgment is not a rape-able offence.

Nor is being beautiful, or not beautiful. Or young.

Or wearing short shorts on a hot summer's day.

Or smoking weed with an adult when you are only a child. Or accepting a ride, or letting them buy you a coke. Or a drink. Or dinner.

Or crying. Or not crying. Or fighting. Or not fighting.

Or being drunk. Or really drunk. Or passed out.

Nor is being big-breasted, or fat, or young, or old, or flirting, or kissing, or wearing a short skirt, or being their wife, or saying yes to one thing and no to another. Being a woman. Being queer. Being a man who stepped outside the box of societal norms for manhood.

No, Johnathan, I was not raped so many times because I was beautiful. I was raped so many times because men like you, *good* men who do not rape or beat women, think that could be a reason.

Next time, Johnathan, when a woman tells you she was sexually assaulted (and

there will be a next time, since it happens to so many of us), just listen. Let her tell you her story, what it means to her. When you ask a question, ask her this, 'How can I let you know the bravery, the resilience I see in you? That you never deserved any of this. That none of it was your fault.' She didn't bring it on herself, but she did survive. Let her know you see strength when you look in her eyes.

Become one of many men working to end violence against women. Don't wait. Start now.



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