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It's Not Okay

By Olivia Walker

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Sexual assault has always been a prevalent topic. For young women, it is a precautionary tale from mothers and mentors, a scary story meant to incite fear of what could happen – what would happen – if certain choices were made. In the past few years sexual assault has flooded the media, first with Brock Turner, then again with the #MeToo movement, and most recently Dr. Ford and the Brett Kavanaugh trial. With the frequency of allegations increasing, a question arises: are more sexual assaults happening or are more women (and men) feeling empowered to share their stories?

As an avid feminist I was enraged during the Brock Turner trial and a strong supporter of the #MeToo movement. I attended marches and supported campaigns, all the while fearing for my own safety and the seeming inevitability of assault. Then in August of 2018 Dr. Ford came forward with her allegation against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. She was a normal woman, unknown by the media and quite frankly unremarkable. Even her story was average: she was at a party when two bigger, stronger boys overpowered her and sexually assaulted her. And yet it was the normalcy of her story that triggered my own memories. It was the routineness of her allegation that reminded me of something I had tried to forget. It was Dr. Ford's unremarkable but extraordinarily important account that caused me to finally accept the truth. When I was sixteen years old I was sexually assaulted.

I wasn't raped. I wasn't penetrated. I wasn't grinded upon or undressed. What happened to me was small – small enough that I completely separated it from the #MeToo movement and other allegations; they were celebrities, and I was just a suburban high school girl. But when I read Dr. Ford's story, something clicked, and all my memories that I had blocked came rushing back, leaving me confused and vulnerable. Was what happened real? Was it my fault? Was I a victim of something I had been fearing for so long?

The night it happened was near the end of my sophomore year; summer was in sight and the current seniors were counting the days until graduation. My best friends, Anna, Conner, and I were attending the Book Club Ball, affectionately nicknamed Nerd Prom, which was held in the school library. The only other people were book club members, many of whom were graduating soon, and Mrs. Colpi. It was meant to be a fun night.

What I remember most is how dark the library was. Save for some soft lamps and fairy lights, the room was completely blacked out. Anna, Conner, and I were sitting in the back nook of the library, smushed together on the hard loveseat. We laughed and observed our friends as they danced and sang, wistfully remarking about the seniors we would miss.

Then he came over. At first I was excited. I had been talking to this boy for the past week as he frequented the upper library where I completed my study hall. He had been my senior leader for the Respect Retreat and we had bonded over art. I thought he was trustworthy; I thought he was my friend.

He squeezed his way onto the already full couch, body pressed up against mine in every way. As I moved closer to Anna to make room, he rested his hand on my bare leg. I stared at it, goosebumps erupting over my thigh from his cold hand. I was uncomfortable, but decided that it was accidental, merely a placeholder while he found a more appropriate place. Yet as the hand stayed firmly on my thigh I chose to ignore it, not having the courage to ask him to remove it, not having the strength to bring attention to what may have been a mindless action.

Shortly after he had joined us, the rest of the upperclassmen did, flocking around our once peaceful couch. He pressed more of his weight onto me, shifting forward to address the group. At his suggestion we began a game of truth or dare, with the specification that it wasn't the "pussy" version.

I watched as the people around me said and did ridiculous things, most of them dirty, silently and rigidly sitting as close to Anna as I could on the increasingly smaller couch. The start of the game had triggered movement from his freezing hand, leaving a trail of raised skin as he slid higher, fingers ever so slightly brushing the cuffed edge of my shorts.

I didn't know what was happening. The music blared Disney songs. I could feel the pulse of the bass in my throat, combining with my frantic heart. My eyes strained in the dark to make out images. People were dancing. Someone was kissing a tree. Someone else was perched awkwardly on another's lap as a laughing friend timed them. Freshmen were yelling at each other from across the room. And his hand – his cold, freezing hand – was climbing its own personal Everest.

And then it happened. Everything else stopped as his hand smoothly moved underneath the thin material of my jean shorts. All my senses focused on his ice cold fingers grazing my underwear, his thumb slowly hooking around the elastic and making its way underneath.

My fingernails dug into my palms, the only movement I dared to make. All my limbs were clenched and my eyes watered as I sat there amid a circle of chaos and laughter. Everyone was having fun, including him. His voice didn't falter as he doled out dares and confessed truths, more of his fingers slipping their way into my underwear, never venturing over the line into illegal territory, but flirting with the law.

What felt like hours could have been mere minutes, but at long last Anna noticed my rigid frame and his venturing fingers. I don't remember what she said or how she did it, but suddenly I was free again, back in the well lit center of the library, able to breathe again, yet still burdened by the darkness. My leg burned where his freezing hand had been, and I was shaking. I didn't know what had just happened, and whether or not I should mention it to Mrs. Colpi. I knew what he had done was wrong, but I subconsciously felt like it was me who was to blame. Why hadn't I stopped him when his hand was only on my knee? Why hadn't I jumped off the couch as soon as it started moving? Why didn't I say something, anything, when I felt his fingers creeping under my underwear?

I was determined to put him out of my mind, but I couldn't escape. He kept finding me, walking up to me, grabbing my hand, kissing it, complimenting my black nail polish, insisting I paint his black one day. Everywhere I went he appeared, kissing my cheek and hand and grabbing at my butt.

Eventually I went outside into the rain, my last attempt to catch my breath. I let the water soak through my clothes, cascade down my face, penetrate my soul and clean it of the dirtiness.

My freedom was short lived. Once more he found me, stumbling his way outside, bragging about how high he was. He rambled on, sauntering closer and closer, pinning me against the wall, asking if I wanted to go back with him to his house, if I wanted to watch him get high.

That's when I got scared. Here was this eighteen-year-old man, bigger and stronger than me in every way, and under the influence of drugs. How far would he go? Was he going to force me back to his house? Was he even going to let me back inside the library? What would happen if I ended up in his basement? Was he trying to get me to have sex with him?

Frozen in fear and unable to formulate any cohesive words, I stood there in the rain, vigorously scratching at my arm and rocking back and forth on my heels. I was trapped.

Suddenly the door banged open, breaking the muted noise of his speech and ceasing the buzzing in my brain. My watery eyes focused on Conner and Anna, bags gathered and keys brandished. I felt Conner grab my hand and pull me towards his truck, Anna's hand on my back as we walked away. I heard him shout after me, telling me that we'd have to get together another time. That he looked forward to it. That I had to paint his nails black like mine.

It wasn't until I was sitting in Conner's truck that I cried.

I was so confused. I didn't know what had happened or why it had happened or if it was my fault. Everything about me felt dirty and violated and used. I felt ashamed of myself; I felt disgusted with myself.

The haziness of the situation hung over me until my concerned dance teacher pulled me aside, asking me what was wrong. I hadn't yet told my mom, and as soon as I started talking tears began to flow, my words broken with shaky breaths and clattering teeth. When I was finally finished I collapsed into her arms, asking her what to do.

She pushed me back, looked me straight in the eyes, and told me to get used to it. I was completely taken aback. I had expected some sort of tough love response, as that is Monica's nature, but not that. She told me that it wasn't the last time this would happen to me, and that I needed to get used to it.

So many years later, that is what has stuck with me. Is that why I feared sexual assault despite having already experienced it? While girls are taught what sexual assault is from a young age, we're also taught to accept it. The nature of "boys will be boys" and dress codes, the commonality of rape in television and movies, the sheer number of countries who still have sex slaves and human trafficking – society tells victims to normalize sexual assault rather than giving them the tools to fight back.

When Dr. Ford gave her testimony alleging what happened the night of her assault, everything clicked. Rape and sexual assault doesn't just happen to celebrities or fictional characters, it can happen to anyone. It happens to little girls before they know what it is and old men who can't fight back. It happens to teenagers who are drunk and teenagers who are sober. It happens to boys and girls, gays and straights, and in all cultures around the world.

He violated me. He put his hand where he shouldn't have. And maybe I should have spoken up and stopped him, but he never should have done it in the first place. What happened to me is not okay, and what is happening around the world every second is not okay.

It's not my fault. It's not okay. It's not my fault.

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