

THINGS WE
DIDN'T
TALK ABOUT
WHEN I WAS
A GIRL

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For Hannah

But what is the word for what I experienced after?

From "Nightingale: A Gloss"
by PAISLEY REKDAL

Early evening. We were in your car, at the end of your block, at a stop sign. The streets were empty. My window was open because I hated closed windows—probably because I thought my *why drive if you can't feel the wind* attitude made me profound. We were sixteen.

I just needed to leave my house, you said.

With a few classmates, we'd been cramming for an exam about waves and optics and contemplating why our accomplished physics teacher taught at our poorly ranked public high school. Cost of living? Witness protection? He actually likes Sandusky? When we left, our classmates were writing formulas on their wrists with fine-point markers.

Let's drive until we hit civilization, I said.

You stared straight ahead at something, it seemed, that couldn't be seen.

Somewhere with a bookstore, I said, like a real bookstore. One with a poetry section that's more than one shelf.

You squeezed the steering wheel and suddenly your pale knuckles looked cartoonish, like a badly rendered, unshaded drawing of knuckles. I barely glanced at your face. I sensed you were resisting tears.

You told me I was important to you. I told you I knew that, and you said, No, really, you're the only one who understands me.

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You turned, looked at me, then quickly looked away. I had never seen you cry before. I hadn't seen many teenage boys cry, but I didn't say that.

I know you understand this, you said. I just get so lonely.

This is probably my favorite memory of us.

I know you're sad now, I said, but I promise this will be a happy memory someday. Us at this perfectly straight stop sign.

You nodded, and I wonder if I explained my observation, or if my observation was insightful enough to imply its metaphoric meaning, as in: let's notice when things are right.

The memory stops there. If you were critiquing this, you might say, Come on, Jeannie, it's a little too perfect, don't you think? The memory stopping at a stop sign.

PART ONE: THE IDEA

THERE ARE GAPS

I already predict failure.

I'm afraid he'll say no, or even worse: ignore me. But why wouldn't he agree to speak with me? He owes me that much.

I could disguise his identity, change his name.

Combing a naming dictionary for some rough translation of *friend*, I first land on Aldwin: old friend. I picture a knight, an eleventh-century Norman invader, a sorcerer in a fantasy novel, a president of a Martha's Vineyard men's club, a child of artfully tattooed parents. Between 1880 and 2016, the Social Security Administration recorded only 129 babies named Aldwin. My former friend's pseudonym should be common, modern, unassuming. I want readers to know someone with the same name.

Phil means friend. But he's not the Phil type. Phil orders everybody drinks. Phil shakes your hand, says, Call me Phil. Phil's too casual, too laid back. My former friend may have slacked from one day into the next, but he wavered between anxious and depressed.

Philip, then? Philip contains friend. Friend of horses. But I doubt he ever touched a horse. He preferred the indoors, rarely straying from couch, desk, and bed. His white skin burned easily.

Forget name origins. What about the origins of words that are also names? Like *nick*. Some of *nick*'s obsolete meanings: reckoning, or account; slang for the vagina.

But I dated a Nick. In college, briefly, between boyfriends. I'd prefer that memories of Nick (him telling me: I could tell you weren't very cultured when I met you, and How have you not heard of Broken Social Scene? and I don't understand why you won't sleep with me if you like me) not influence this project. Though I like the sound of *nick*. So, I want a monosyllabic word that works as a name and contains a *k*.

Mark, maybe? Its main definition: a boundary. And that's what this is about: boundaries.

Perfect.

Mark, then.

Why should I protect Mark?

I enter his work address in Google Street View. Instead of his pale yellow office building on an industrial one-way street, I aim my view at the clouds and telephone wires. The wires don't line up precisely. There are gaps of just sky.

Gaps between communication . . .

I should stop searching for metaphors.

Mark and I stopped speaking to one another in college. He was in Ohio, studying engineering. I was in Illinois, majoring in journalism.

He dropped out shortly after we last spoke, which is not to say I'm the reason, or that what happened between us is the reason.

But I hope it's the reason, or rather: what he did to me—during winter break of our sophomore year—is, I hope, the reason.

I can't forget: I was passed out.

Mark now manages a camera shop. I recently found an on-line forum where he answers questions about cameras. Someone asked if a blur in a photo can be good, and Mark replied: if the intent is to give an abstract rendering for some artistic reason, then it's acceptable; when no such intent exists, it's merely bad technique that has caused something that should be sharp to blur.

If he could photograph that night, would he blur it? Where would he blur it?

My memory is blurry. There are gaps.

But I know what he did, and he does too. The next day, or maybe a few days later, he apologized: I should not have done that to you. I am so sorry. It was not okay. Can you ever forgive me?

I said I could. I said I would. I told him to read J. D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, my favorite novel back then. I cringe at the memory.

He read it and told me it reminded him of us.

But no one in the book carries his drunk friend into a basement, takes off her clothes while she's passed out, fingers her, masturbates over her while she cries, and tells her: It's just a dream.

I'm so glad you liked the book is what I said.

A year later, Mark dropped out of college.

He moved back home, tried therapy, became a mechanic—at least, this is what his dad told my mom. By then, our friendship had ended, though I doubt his parents and siblings knew why. Friends grow apart is probably what they thought. As with many things after my dad died, I never told my mom.

Mark, according to LinkedIn, returned to college, earned a bachelor's in interdisciplinary studies, and, several years later, a master's in civil engineering.

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When we were friends, I told him: Someday you'll become a famous engineer. You'll discover a formula so complicated that high school students will write it on their wrists before exams.

Every time I think about him, I feel pissed off and sad. I understand now why nostalgia, for hundreds of years, was considered a chronic mental illness.

I want to hate him, but I can't.

IF HE SAYS NO

First, do I call or email?

If I call, do I call from a disguised number?

It's too easy to ignore an email.

Do I tell him immediately why I'm calling? Or do I warm him up with small talk pleasantries? So, uh, how have you been? What's new?

I'm not flying to where he now lives.

But it is harder to say no in person.

I know where he works. A nine-minute drive from the airport. Only thirty-four minutes if I walk. And suddenly, I'm wondering, *Would it be safe to walk?* I consider arrival times.

Let's say I confront Mark in person.

Let's say I tell him, This is the only way I'll forgive you.

I unforgave him. I forgot to update him.

My word processor says *unforgave* isn't a word, suggests I make it *unforgiven*.

If he says no, I'll do it anyway.

Why not *unforgave*, or *unforgive*?

Why do I need his permission, anyway? I never gave mine.

What would the book be without him?

Who would I be had I never known him?

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I want to include him—because without him, the book will be: yet another story about yet another sexual assault.

Why do I assume yet another story about yet another sexual assault can't be told? Or can't be interesting?

I ask my editor what she thinks.

Either way, I want to work with you again, she says. But you might be right, unfortunately. The book will certainly stand out if you include him, but even without him I still want to do it. It will just be a different book.

I hate that I feel dependent on him.

I need a script. No drifting off into accommodating his feelings.

If he says no, here's what I'll tell him: You are supposed to say that you're sorry, that you will do this for me. That's how this works.

Though that wouldn't be a genuine apology. And he already apologized. And anyway, I don't want another apology.

I want his consent.

IF HE SAYS YES

If he says yes, I won't thank him.

I won't tell him that everything is okay between us.

I won't comfort him.

I am assuming he'll need comforting.

Politeness isn't needed.

You ruined everything, I'll tell him. You realize that, right?

I can say everything.

I'll ask him:

Do you still think about what happened?

Is it the reason you dropped out of college?

Did you ever tell anyone? A therapist, maybe?

How did you feel the next morning? The next month? The next year? Today?

Do you remember how I felt, or seemed to feel?

Did you ever miss me?

Has my contacting you upset you?

Have you dated anyone?

Have you done to anyone else what you did to me?

Do you know what your brother told me earlier that night? He told me that I wasn't as pretty as you and the other guys made

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me out to be. You want to know the fucked-up thing I thought after you did what you did? *At least I'm pretty enough to assault.*

What did you think of yourself back then?

What did you think of me?

Are you still in touch with friends from high school?

Why would you ruin what we had?

What are your favorite memories of us?

Is it messed up that I sort of want to see you? For so long, I believed that seeing you would break some rule: Boy sexually assaults girl. Girl stops speaking to boy.

Remember how we railed against boy-meets-girl movies? We could be so pretentious. We rolled our eyes at rom-coms.

I'll tell him:

I still have nightmares about you.

I COULD DO THIS FOR ETERNITY

I remember the day we met. We were thirteen. I was at his house because I was friends with his sister. The three of us were in their family room. He played a video game while she and I studied. She left the room for some unmemorable reason (a pencil? the bathroom? a phone call?), and I sat there, unsure of what to say. So I said the first thing that came to mind: I just love watching guys play video games. I could sit here and do this for eternity.

Ha, ha, he said. Do you want to play?

By the time his sister returned, I was on the floor, shooting villains with her brother.

After that day, if I called their house and Mark answered, we'd talk for a few minutes before he handed the phone to his sister. Sometimes I'd forget I had called for her.

Their younger brother was in junior high. When I called and he answered, he'd ask: Which one do you want?

Throughout high school, I probably spent at least three evenings every week at their house. His sister and I studied, and occasionally Mark paused his fight against an alien race to examine our science and math homework. He'd join me on their bulky beige couch, patiently answer my questions about thermodynamics

or whatever else confused me, and I'd wonder how kissing him would feel. I liked how his chin patch and mustache formed a circle. And he smelled nice—kind of citrusy and woody.

What's your cologne? I once asked him, and he said, I don't wear cologne.

He obviously cared but pretended not to care, and I figured he extended that same bravado to school. I told his parents, I think Mark secretly enjoys school, and his dad laughed. His mom said, You're sweet for thinking so.

But after Mark told me, I wish I could play video games all day, my crush on him evaporated.

Mark often fell asleep in class. We all laughed whenever our physics teacher woke him (Mark? . . . Mark? . . . Mark!) and asked him a question that none of us could answer, and Mark would look around, lost. Then he'd scan the blackboard, deliver the right answer, and return his head to his desk. He earned As no problem. I'd earn a C in physics after studying for days on caffeine pills. I remember transcribing formulas all night because if I transcribed them enough times, I thought, their inner workings would reveal themselves.

I didn't feel jealousy so much as dumbfounded admiration.

Already, I feel the need to stop. If I botch some detail (Was it a blackboard or a whiteboard? Did our physics teacher use a projector?), I risk discrediting myself—and then nothing I say will be believed. If I construct memories through narrative, I risk making too many mistakes. I might unintentionally invent details in order to build a well-drawn scene, and then another, and another,

accumulating scenes until they fit a clear plot structure. But I also don't want this to be an impressionistic series of images or abstract meditations on feelings. I want this to be artful, but the artistry can't interfere with the honesty. I'm not sure how to do this, but I know I want to do this.

Let's just assume it was a blackboard.

In high school, I never feigned effortless intelligence. My friends and teachers knew how hard I studied. Some messages in my junior yearbook:

The bonfire study group was great!

Still can't believe the eight-hour (!!!) study group you organized for AP History.

I know you are going to succeed in your life because you work so much and so hard that you don't have the choice: even if you wanted to fail, you wouldn't! Hope you will get a chance to sleep next year!

In that same yearbook, the candid photo spread shows students at a record store, students playing video games, students in stadium bleachers, students hugging.

But in my photo, I'm at a whiteboard in somebody's living room (a whiteboard that I brought from home), staring at equations with two classmates.

A line that can sound cruel or complimentary: She tries really hard.

I remember eating lunch with Mark and a few friends (well, they ate lunch while I agonized over physics formulas) when a physics classmate stopped by our table, tapped my shoulder, and smirked.

I studied for an hour and got an A on the last test, he told me. You studied for days and got a B.

I returned my gaze to my textbook. Formulas about fluids, forces, moments of inertia, all of which I'd highlighted in yellow, blue, orange, and pink. I now forget my color-coding system, but I remember keeping my highlights organized. The problem was, I'd highlight any backstory—even though I doubted the material would appear on tests. My textbook pages looked as if children had colored on them. How could anyone determine what to study? Wasn't it all relevant? Newton, for example, divided white light into the seven colors of the spectrum—but not because he could see seven hues. He wanted the color classification of light to correspond with the seven notes of the musical scale. Any other way, he determined, would break the Pythagorean principle of harmony. I remember looking around the room, after our physics teacher shared that story, as if he'd just recited an entire Shakespearean play by memory. I thought, *That is the most beautiful thing I've ever heard*. Why did nobody else look surprised?

But in the cafeteria, my gaze remained locked on my physics book. If I glanced at this classmate or opened my mouth, I'd cry. I knew that. I suspect he did too.

Mark told him: Didn't Jeannie beat you in a writing contest? She got first place, isn't that right?

I'll write the memories as they come.

Mark's glasses were rectangles with thin black frames. When someone said something particularly stupid, he took them off, pinched his nose, and sighed.

Underneath his regular rotation of loose, untucked T-shirts, he wore a thick plastic brace that wrapped around his torso. Scoliosis curved his spine like an S. Looking at him, you'd never know. Once, a friend punched Mark's chest before history class started, and our teacher winced, shouting, Don't! Mark lifted his shirt, revealing the hard black shell, and invited our teacher to punch him. And because this teacher was one of the fun young teachers, he did.

Even though Mark was as tall as our star basketball players, he lacked their confidence with girls. The scoliosis, I suspect, contributed. It also probably encouraged his sensitivity. Unlike the other guys, he never cracked crude sexist jokes, never used a numbered rating system or surmised bra sizes. Given the general behavior of high school boys, my standards for decency or maturity may have been low. Take one of the starting soccer players, for example. He chased me with a hose in a friend's backyard, drenching my white T-shirt, and high-fived his friends. Behind his girlfriend's back, he'd complain about her flat chest but add, At least she's skinny.

Or take the guy seated behind me in French. He bragged about organizing his porn by country. Half joking, I asked him: Why not apply your geography skills to Model UN?

You're such a nerd, he said.

Or take the school stoner. He filmed me and a few other girls modeling in my friend Sheanneen's fashion show. Sheanneen designed and made the clothes herself. Because of a skirt's thin material, I'd taken her suggestion and worn a thong. I later learned that the school stoner had aimed the camera up my skirt. He and

one of his friends made copies of the tape and distributed them. I didn't know how many copies.

Mark said, People are the worst.

I don't understand, I told him. They have access to porn. This was just me, and I was wearing underwear.

Mark explained, There's something about it being someone you know.

I remind myself, *Focus on the good*. I want readers to like Mark, to see why I trusted Mark, to think, *Of course Jeannie wouldn't have expected him to assault her*. That way, his betrayal will seem as unthinkable and unexplainable as it seemed to me then—because, while I know it's not my fault, some part of me still blames myself for trusting him.

But if Mark comes across as too nice, I could come across as too defensive of him, delusional even. Yet Mark was nice, and that's why his voice belongs here. I want readers to meet one of these guys, to think, *I'm probably friends with one of these guys without realizing it*. Also, I don't want readers to focus so much on me that they think about what I could have done differently to prevent or stop the assault. I want readers to hear Mark say, I knew what I was doing was abhorrent. And Mark better. He better feel so terrible that he admits, I preyed on your vulnerability. Otherwise, this project, founded on my belief that Mark was my friend, falls apart.

Mark and I talked about our feelings, and he actually would follow up the next time we hung out. What other guy his age did that?

Mark and I often sat with our friends Daniel, Garrett, and Carlos at lunch, quoting lines from *Office Space* and *The Simpsons*.

I said, Someone say something that isn't a quote.

We all looked at one another. No one knew what to say.

Garrett: Marge, we need some more vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry ice cream.

We could all picture Homer Simpson staring into a box of Neapolitan ice cream—with only the chocolate missing.

We are so unoriginal, you guys, I said.

So we just laughed at our unoriginality.

Daniel, Garrett, and Carlos are not their real names. To protect Mark's identity, I'll change some names and mention when I do it. I don't know how else to simultaneously protect Mark and tell the truth. That I care about protecting him at all, it bothers me.

Daniel invited Mark, Garrett, Carlos, and me to a LAN party at his house.

A what? my dad asked.

Local area network party, I explained. We hook up our computers on the same network and play computer games.

He nodded, an indication of approval.

The LAN party is all night, I said and named off all the boys who'd be there.

Okay, he said.

Daniel's parents will be there, I added.

It's fine, he said. Have fun.

Before I left, I asked my mom: Dad is letting me stay out all night with boys?

You are bringing your computer, she said.

In grade school, my dad didn't let me sleep over at a girl's house unless he knew and trusted her parents. He had never met Daniel's parents. He had never even met Daniel.

And so, before my dad could change his mind, I hurriedly packed my computer tower and clunky Trinitron monitor into my LeBaron's trunk and drove to Mark's house, to pick him up. Mark placed his desktop computer, wrapped in a towel, next to mine in the trunk.

Your tower is impressive, he said.

I had cut an abstract shape in its side (adding black rubber liner, the sort used for car windows, to hide my uneven cuts), mounted interior neon lights, inserted a Plexiglas window, and installed a small fan. I also had painted the tower bright blue with a white racing stripe. And I could take it all apart and reassemble its insides, identify where the CPU connected to the main memory. At the LAN party, this impressed the guys.

You think I'd buy an already modded tower? I asked.

I tried not to smile when they said, You're not like the other girls.

I described these LAN parties in a college admissions essay. I clarified that one would put quotes around *party* the same way one might allege a strip club was for *gentlemen*. I went to the LAN parties, I explained in the essay, not because I enjoyed playing *Quake* and *Counter-Strike* but because we discussed politics and religion. I could criticize our country's involvement in proxy wars, and the guys would listen. I remember we complained a lot about our conservative government teacher. The day after 9/11, he told our

class, We should bomb the snot out of Afghanistan and France and anyone else that gets in our way.

But here's what I didn't mention in my admissions essay: at one LAN party, Daniel repeated some rumor that our government teacher's daughter went to orgies, and I asked, Even if that's true, why does it matter?

He said it proved our teacher, who claimed liberals lacked family values, was a hypocrite.

Not really, I replied. It just proves that she's her own person.

From kindergarten through junior high, I attended a school where Jesus was on a cross, dying in every classroom. Before raising my hand, I regularly questioned whether I should—all because of one classroom banner that read: *The meek shall inherit the Earth*.

Until I transferred to public school in the ninth grade, almost everybody I knew believed in God. I liked that Mark was a good person who didn't believe in God. Atheism seemed glamorous.

You're not one of these hypocrites hankering for eternity, I told him.

I like that, he said.

You don't think the alliteration is too purple? Or maybe it's a bluish purple?

You overthink everything.

Which is probably, I said, why we're friends.

I remember eating leftover Halloween candy with Mark and complaining about a hell house that two classmates had just duped me into visiting.

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You went to a hell house? Mark asked.

I thought I was going to a regular haunted house. Chain saws and zombies, you know? I didn't know it'd be a Christian thing. It was in a forest.

He laughed, and I described the teenage boys dressed as doctors staging abortions gone wrong. I described the teenage girls in a busted-up car with ketchup smeared all over them and beer bottles on their laps. I described the hot guy dressed as Jesus.

But what bugged me the most, I said, was the last scene.

At the forest's edge, near the gravel parking lot, had stood a white door connected to nothing. On the other side of the door, we'd been told, waited heaven. We were supposed to tell a church counselor why we deserved to walk through the door and into heaven. Somebody whispered that the door was on loan from a hardware shop that belonged to a cheerleader's dad.

Why that mattered, I said to Mark, I have no idea.

When asked why I deserved to walk through the door, I struggled not to roll my eyes. I answered that I tried to be a good person. The counselor instructed me to wait off to the side. I pushed past him and walked into heaven anyway.

But I should have asked for directions to Jesus, I told Mark. I definitely wanted to make out with Jesus.

Mark looked away. I almost teased him: Are you jealous of Jesus?

One night, Mark, a few friends, and I drove to a forest on the town outskirts where an orphanage was rumored to have burned down.

I don't believe in ghosts, I said.

Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was A Girl

Me neither, he said.

We both jumped at the sound of twigs breaking, then laughed at ourselves.

You're really pretty, he told me that night.

I pretended not to hear.

He confided that he hated being lazy: Things have always come easy to me.

I MIGHT STOP FEELING ASHAMED

Reading about the legal considerations for memoirists, I almost laugh at the suggestion of securing consent.

I should ask him?

My partner, my friends, my therapist, they can suggest why Mark assaulted me. But their conjectures might diminish the urgency I feel about this project. They might transform the particulars of what happened into some stock instance of an already accepted theory in sociology or psychology or whatever. I want Mark's *why*.

Had he been sober, would he have restrained himself?

How can I expect him to be honest about that?

Or even to know the answer?

I'm thirty-three years old, an assistant professor at a university outside Baltimore. I tell my creative nonfiction students not to ask for consent from anyone mentioned in their essays.

Wait, I tell my students, until you've settled into your writing.

But let's say Mark grants consent and honestly answers all my questions. He undoubtedly will want his identity obscured. But

if I blur it, I fictionalize—and so in my efforts to protect him, do I discredit myself?

This question, though—*why include him?*—interests me more than any question I could ask him—because it leads to an uncomfortable thought: *My story isn't interesting without him.*

As a feminist and an artist, I'm ashamed that his voice seems necessary. I teach college students how to explore their stories artfully. I'd never tell a student that her personal essay about sexual assault would be more interesting with the perpetrator's perspective. Until now, I hadn't considered that point of view. And every semester I read at least five student essays about rape. These students are always women, and these women often ask some variation of: What counts as sexual assault?

Sometimes they ask me if they've been raped.

Sometimes, knowing the answer, they make excuses for the man: he was drunk, he was sad, he had low confidence.

Their rapists are never strangers in the bushes or alleys. Their rapists are their friends, their boyfriends, their boyfriends' friends, their bosses, their relatives, their teachers.

Their excuses frustrate me, but I understand.

Here I am, trying to render the Mark I knew before that night.

When Mark knew me, I edited the high school newspaper, then majored in journalism on full scholarship at Northwestern, and then interned for a business reporter at the *New York Times* Chicago bureau, where I researched cube-shaped Japanese watermelons and Europe's stance on genetically altered crops. I desperately

wanted to become a journalist—and whenever I doubted my abilities, Mark would remind me that I'd earned a full ride to a top journalism school.

But one month after I started college, my dad died—and I became increasingly obsessed with a deathbed promise: that someday I'd write a book for him. He was under so much morphine I doubt he even heard me. But by junior year, my promise led me to switch majors, from journalism to creative writing. I'd either write a novel for him, or I'd write him a book of poetry. Memoirs, I assumed, belonged to celebrities and politicians. But then, fifteen years after he died, I published a memoir for him, about him, about my love for him. This genre felt right. I wanted readers to know: the man you're reading about, he was real and I loved him. He was sixty-one and retired when I was born, but throughout my childhood he didn't seem old, not to me. We'd spend entire days together, swimming, riding bikes, feeding birds by the lake. Not until I became a teenager did I notice his worsening health. He was bedridden the last year of his life. Doctors said there were so many things wrong with him. His death certificate lists throat cancer. While I never expected my first book to diminish my grief, I think it did. I rarely dream about him anymore, and I'm okay with that. Maybe this book will end my nightmares about Mark.

But that's not why I'm writing this.

I'm writing this because I want to interview Mark, interrogate Mark, confirm that Mark feels terrible—because if he does feel terrible, then our friendship mattered to him. Also, I want him to call the assault significant—because if he does, I might

stop feeling ashamed about the occasional flashbacks and nightmares. Sometimes I question whether my feelings are too big for the crime. I often remind myself, *He only used his fingers*. Sure, I could censor my antiquated, patriarchal logic (*sexual assault only matters if the man says it matters*), but I want to be honest here: because I doubt I'm the only woman sexually assaulted by a friend and confused about her feelings.