

Don't Say His Name

He is a seasoned marketing professional with a long and successful history, he says. He's experienced in industry verticals, research and analytical methodologies, he says. Lists branding, digital and media behavior among his skills.

We were friends, almost 40 years ago. Had been good friends for more than a year. Shared confidences. Plied a similarly dark sense of humor. Pursued fun – constant, ridiculous fun. During long summer vacations, we exchanged letters that evinced our friendship vividly – snarky, clever, newsy – and made us laugh while we were apart. We were part of a large social cohort where every participant had similar personalities, interests, inclinations. Actors, singers, writers, honor students, brainiacs. Each friendship among us equally bonded.

One of our mutual friends was my boyfriend. My friend offered to take me home after a party because we lived closer to one another than I did to my boyfriend. A gallant gesture. A caring gesture. A friend, safe as milk, who wanted to help me get home.

I was drunk. He was drunk. We all were drunk. We were teenagers in 1980s New York City, living the utter antithesis of a helicopter-parented life. Our parents were willfully, blindly unaware of the extent of our transgressions. Or maybe they weren't, but none of it seemed concerning, right? I mean: prep-school, college-track kids. Jesuits were educating us, in fact: the elite among Manhattan's Catholic schools. We learned important things in hallowed Upper East Side halls. We knew how to show up there on Monday and kick academic ass after a weekend of partying, dancing, singing, laughing.

I had been making out shamelessly with my boyfriend all night. I adored this boyfriend beyond all reason. Well, now I know the reasons: deep emotional needs, a dread of inauthenticity in my achievements, damage done at home, and my desire for a safe haven in the form of a beautiful, warm, friendly, and (most importantly) smart and funny boy. I had those things, that night, right in my hand. Embraced. Warm. Mine.

His friend, my friend, offered to take me home. It was a long taxi drive from that raging teenage party in one outer borough, to the other outer borough where I resided. I was so sad to leave my boyfriend behind on that glittery night, because I was drunk and sappy and wanted to be with him as much as possible. But I angled my head down and tumbled into a taxi because this would be easier for him and would be fine because his friend was my friend.

Marketing. Branding. His brand was loyalty, clearly. And reliability. He had earned my trust in long gab sessions where we reviewed our personal romantic situations, even before I became involved with his friend. How complicated, now, our high school social scene appears to be. Assorted boys and girls, smart and driven, drinking buddies and confidantes, ranging all over the night city... then suddenly two of us would shear off into actual romance while others remained standing at the bar, basically, still bending an elbow and awaiting some magic transformation from friends to more than friends.

He was tired of waiting, I guess. The taxi ricocheted from one borough onto an endless fast highway heading towards the other, and he shoved himself across the black vinyl back seat, and pushed against me. And stayed there. Not a mistake, I realized in confined misery. He was against me and on me, kissing me hideously, hands all over, his glasses gone askew. Saying that he deserved someone too. And saying other words that did not justify his assaultive motions even though as he emitted those words, darkly, like bullets, I know he must have thought they did. Accusing me, mocking me, telling me as he moved off that I could never tell my boyfriend, his friend, my friend, because what would he think of me?

He markets, now. Analyzes. I analyze too – and even as he sat back that night in the cab, sweating and blessedly no longer on top of me, I knew how foolish his words were. As though anyone would blame me for what he did... especially not the boy I loved fiercely, whose presence in that taxi I craved at this sodden moment of post-dread.

Actionable strategic insights. My strategic insights were correct – no one would blame me for what happened, because no one would have ever believed I'd enticed him and willingly participated in this one-shot mess.

And I was not judged, or ostracized, or any of the other usual horrid outcomes, after this one wild party, a nightmare taxi ride, and a subsequently safe delivery home. Not even my mother judged me for the drunken outburst that commenced as soon as I entered our apartment. Honestly, it was as epic an episode of self-analysis as I've ever indulged in, and stunningly accurate under the circumstances. Exploded in a song of sobbing sadness with a chorus: every man leaves me. Child of divorce, child of alcoholics, I had a lot of work ahead of me. Personal branding and marketing, you could say. I didn't need help from a professional.

Spurred by the Kavanaugh Moment – which resembles so much the world and the circumstances that I, too, lived – I must confess that I have zero desire to say or sully his

name. I found his photo easily because, surprise, he has a social media presence. I expected to recoil, I did not recoil. An odd little bubble of fondness was my first unbidden response to his familiar, improved-by-the-years face. That's right, he's shed the eyeglasses and lost the weight. He looks like someone's financially secure husband. I suppose he's a dad, too. And in the furthest corner of my mind, I imagine that he doesn't remember forcing himself on me in a taxi in 1981. He was drunk. He was thwarted. He was livid. I was just there.

Nonetheless, I remember every detail, etched into all my senses. I am a writer, experienced in retrieving memories, finding words to shape and convey them, achieving universality and connection in essay form. I am a woman who emerged from his taxicab onslaught mostly unscathed. Changed, yes, and horrified; disgusted; rueful; but headed for plenty more losses and upheavals because high school was almost over, anyway.

I'm still friends with the ex-boyfriend, a dear, heartfelt man, and several others from that hodgepodge high school crowd. We are, all of us, successes. Seasoned marketing professional? Not on my friends list. I do wonder who's on his.

The best thing about being a boomerang is launching out into the world and returning to where you started, hopefully, a little wiser and smarter than you were before.¹

¹ LinkedIn