

## Not All Booms Are Loud

Sometimes they're quiet and quick, not unlike the prick of a needle, hurting only for a moment until the body realizes that the danger was only temporary. Booms can, of course, be loud, too: a scream as gunshots pierce through the bustle of a busy shopping mall or the roar of a tornado as it plows through a neighborhood. But the worst are slow and quiet. They too have a focal point of trauma, little moments spiraling out. Reminders that it happened, that danger is near, that the hurt is perpetual.

This was one of those slow and quiet moments.

The air felt stale and worn, not unlike a shirt in need of a wash. Not quite warm but heavy. The room was unkempt but not messy. Clothes weren't strewn about, but not organized either. The room smelled faintly of picked-at meals; half-empty containers filled the trash can below the desk. A towel thrown in haste sprawled across the chair. But the bed stood out: sheets pressed, pillows plumped, and a blanket delicately folded across the foot. The corners of her turquoise comforter lined perfectly with the corners of her bed, carefully placed in position. It was her sanctuary, the queendom that she herself could control, even if last night she hadn't been able.

Cleaning the room had been hard; cleaning the room meant pausing, stopping the continuous flow of "to-do" and places to go and people to see and acknowledging what had happened and acknowledging him, and wouldn't that just be the worst thing? Her room was messy, but her life had become messy. At least, now, the bed wasn't. Not now. Not next time. Next time the whole thing would be neat. Next time she would say something.

Consent is supposed to be easy. If you don't have it, don't do it (at least, that's what they told her and him and all of the other kids freshman year). We have program after program and

orientations and facilitations and discussions around how to, in essence, not rape people. 1 in 10 women in the United States, 1 in 4 female college students, nearly half of transgender people are sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime. While we (men) might not always cause the boom in the first place, we keep it going, keep it slow, keep it quiet. We're not used to being aware of ourselves and the effect we have on others.

In the days following, she came to realize that the hardest part was that he was always there, just like his grip on her arm that night. Sometimes it was soft, gentle even, and sometimes it was rough and tight, handcuffs made of his flesh. But it was always present. He was never gone, not entirely. Her friends couldn't understand that at first. They didn't know that she had changed inside – her brain was now quite literally on fire, wired for danger at all times. She jumped at the screech of a chair, scanned each room and planned three exit strategies before entering, and even insisted on staying in the night that there was a remote possibility he'd be there. Even seeing a boy in a Mets baseball cap would throw her back into the bed, him climbing on top of her smelling clean and sharp like Old Spice and telling her how beautiful she was when all she could think about was his bright blue eyes boring into her and how he didn't understand. She'd never realized how peaceful the soft, white popcorn ceiling was until it was all she could bear to look at.

Like I said before, this boom is quiet. And I literally mean quiet – a few loud breaths, a moan or two, and the break in conversation when, suddenly, that night comes rushing back. In that same silence, her shame festers. She needs a reason; if there was something that could have been done differently, then maybe next time it could be prevented. She could have gone to that float party instead of the mixer, or spent a few extra minutes on her mascara and never have run into him, or even given up when the doorman wouldn't let her in the first time. Maybe the most

twisted part is the contrast, how a fun and exciting night of intimacy for one – the few minutes of ecstasy, the rush of endorphins and adrenaline – can stop the other dead in their tracks. So much for easy, I guess.

As the days dragged on, she realized yet another decision she had to make. He took everything: her sleep, her sense of self, her sanity. She relished in the few moments just after waking up between the latest nightmare and full consciousness, because for a moment, she wasn't a victim. But he also didn't know. He didn't know he had made her sick. He didn't know that he planted bomb after bomb in her head, designed to send her reeling at random turns in her mind. Looking at her options for moving forward, she wasn't particularly hopeful.

Reporting was long and painful (not to mention the inevitability of re-traumatizing herself) plus there was the publicity to consider and the reality that they don't believe survivors. He's also a good guy, after all. But another feeling kept creeping back in, no matter how much she tried to push it away. "What about him?" She knew she wasn't supposed to think about that, but every time it touched her consciousness another wave of shame washed over her. Guilt too. Best case scenario, he would end up on the sex offender list, and maybe a few years in the state prison. He was a friend who made a mistake, or was she just rationalizing? She couldn't give him more power, but didn't he deserve mercy? The questions and thoughts and "what-ifs" bounced back and forth in her head, begging her to answer, but the shame told her to shut up. Stop being weak. Big girls don't cry over sex, and they certainly don't ruin someone's life. Every day, every minute, she ached.

I remember when she told me. The sobs and the shaking and the silences from her reliving that night in her head did not tell me for the first time. I had noticed the pieces of the moments – how certain words made her recoil, certain topics shut her down in conversation, or

the bags under her eyes even when there was no work to be done. But this pieced things together. She hadn't expected or wanted me to, she later explained. Part of coping was learning to be subtle.

I also remember when the shame first hit me right in the gut. First for not realizing what had happened, of course, and later for not saying the right things. I asked questions you're not supposed to ask, and she was patient. I also thought about him and what would happen if she reported. I put myself in his shoes, instead of hers, because it was easier. She was frustrated but understanding. The shame ran deeper though; I hurt not only for her, but for what had happened. Maybe it was the senselessness of it all or how it could've been so easily prevented, but all I could do was rage. I need consent to be complicated. Like some puzzle, seemingly simple on its surface, but vastly complex upon second glance, I need consent to be difficult. Maybe then it would make sense why we rape people. Our unwillingness to change is in part what makes the boom so quiet and so damn long.

I was also thrust into the world of trauma; "flashbacks," "triggers," "agency," and "victim-blaming" entered my vocabulary at lightning speed. She slowly unloaded its nuances onto me: gray-area rape, auditory and visual flashbacks, and how sleep hadn't been an option for years. Her trauma isn't my trauma, but even now, words like "bitch," "slut," and "whore" make me recoil. I stopped hugging people from behind. I remind myself constantly that seen through a different lens, I'm an impending hurricane and that has an effect on people.

She didn't deserve what he did, and he wasn't supposed to change her forever. Yet, somehow, here we are. Her narrative is vague because "she" isn't always a she, nor is her story all too unique. "He" is ambiguous because he isn't always a he and because names have power. She'll throb at the memory of him, even when he's long gone, and I'll ache knowing all I can do

is offer words that bounce off of the iron wall she's constructed around her heart. She figured out pretty quickly that the ache only stops when you stop feeling altogether.

But still, I feel sorry for him. Hopefully one day, he'll have a moment like I did. When it all comes crashing down, and all he can hear for the rest of his life is the boom's dull echo over and over. Where the smell of her rose perfume makes him sick with guilt. Where the bags under his eyes grow heavier with each toss and turn. Where a moment's peace is drowned out by the roar of what he's done as it slowly brings him to his knees, day by day. One day, maybe he'll begin to suffer like she does.

The tricky thing about the slow and quiet booms, as I've come to learn, is that it's never just one boom. They echo, bouncing off of people like walls, leaving tiny traumas in their wake. At first, they shake us to our core, then they soften. We think they've completely gone, dissipated into thin air. But they really just dive below our consciousness, waiting for the first sign of air, where they can resurface into present day, reminding us that they exist and always will exist.

When we talk about pain, we love to say, "Don't worry, it'll only hurt for a moment and then it'll all be over." Boom.

If only.