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The Day After Yesterday

I've read dozens of online personal essays about college sexual assault. Detailed descriptions about dryness or burning cheeks are safely toward the end, but not too far down that an easily distractible reader would want to switch tabs.

Some sites post bold headings that declare four steps every woman should take while trying to recover. Self-care is always on the list along with speaking out. But “out” to whom? It never specifies and so the online essays continue. These are the sites for women who grew up with the phrase: “it’s not your fault”. As if they ever thought it was.

Last week I met a friend of mine at a Ruby Tuesday’s in downtown New Brunswick. She sounded distressed over the phone.

Ann Marie does not prevaricate. She is authentic in a halting sense. She’d only called a few hours before and unlike the days when she discusses the perils of Tik Tok stars, her voice sounded wispy and far away. When Ann Marie has a problem she pauses for 15 whole seconds until I am forced to adjust my glasses or pick at my skin or examine the bulbous veins on each of my hands. Eventually I ask her what’s wrong.

Ann Marie was sitting at a table in the middle of a separate room, her capezio hanging from one heel. Thin women always have high arches.

I was wearing the new plaid boots I just bought from Amazon. The tongues on them are extra fat and make me look like some kind of anime character, but I like them anyway. They are unusual if not exotic and

they look perfect with bulky socks. Ordinarily I would have shown Ann Marie, pointing out their sale price. Now this could not happen.

I met her approximately three years ago at a networking event in Millburn. Females in Tech or as I dubbed it, Rockstarlettes For Rockin' Startups. It was located in what looked like a school cafeteria with walls that, if not actually gray, seem like it in hindsight. We were awkwardly standing by the salad bar when I asked her what she did. She replied, "Oh, nothing much" and we both laughed.

Ann Marie once told me when she was 17 she used to wear all black in an attempt to appear older. Now, at 37 she uses lavender scented hyaluronic acid.

"I'm so glad to see you, Rachel." She stood up as soon as I spotted her table. It struck me as a formal gesture for people of the same age. Then again maybe she considers our three year age difference enough to draw a line. "You're amazing to drive here so early."

"Of course."

"I really needed to talk to someone."

"I completely understand."

We leaned into the middle of the table as if we were teenagers. The rest of the restaurant turned blurry. I half expected her to cup her hand to my ear, but we are too old for that kind of secret. After thirty, drama seems like trying too hard; it's a housewife wearing shorts and a halter.

"I'm just having a hard time, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's just one of those weeks."

I nodded.

"You know?"

I nodded again.

"I was completely fine, everything was going great. I don't even really know what happened."

"Did something happen?"

“No.” She started plucking hairs from the side of her head. “Well, kind of. It was this guy. He was right in the middle of the sidewalk yelling at me from on top of a ladder. Like, literally yelling.”

My mouth dropped.

“No,” she said. “Not like that. I mean... it was gross.”

Ruby Tuesday’s appeared packed and we were sitting in what seemed to be the designated children’s section. High chairs were placed strategically at certain tables. A gaggle of moms wearing loose-fitting chiffon blouses all sat together. Next to one of the moms, a toddler tried to stick two fingers in one nostril. The word “gross” means different things to different people.

“It wasn’t just like a catcall though. It was...”

Silence.

“It was one of those things where I didn’t know whether I should turn around and respond or keep walking.”

“What did you do?”

“I kept walking. And then, I, and everyone else on the street, heard him yell, “Jiggle that ass so I can see it, Sugar Lips. ”

Sugar lips. I clapped my hand across my mouth. I pictured a fat middle-aged construction worker with a Queens accent. It was almost cartoonish.

“That’s horrible.” I did not laugh. I turned to the menu instead.

This particular Ruby Tuesday sells breakfast before noon, but after that there are only blueberry muffins available for \$6 each. It was 11:25 AM. Five minutes before 30 minutes until the kitchen closed. If I ordered a breakfast burrito at 11:40, it would be obnoxious. An extra ordeal for an unhappy cook. Although I’m never sure if my food contains spit, I assume it doesn’t unless I’ve actually done something offensive. The waitress was serving two tables in front of us.

“Yes.” Ann Marie said.

“Did you tell him to go to hell?”

“No.” She made a face. “I walked away. But it was just the whole thing. I can’t put up with this stuff anymore. I shouldn’t have to.”

“Nobody should have to put up with it.” I agreed.

“They don’t understand. They think it’s just some kind of “right” to talk about a woman’s body. Some people are actually, truly, affected by it. They never think about that.”

I nodded. The menu options are much more plentiful at Ruby Tuesday's than they are at the faux barn cafes that charge \$7 for a cup of coffee. Before driving to the restaurant I looked up the calories for their lunch menu, but I hadn’t considered brunch.

“I guess I’m just shaken up over it because it reminds me of things that are...”

Their brunch menu is a book.

“When we were in college, it was different. Can you even imagine the whole #metoo thing in 2004? I don’t know about your school, but at mine it seemed like getting raped after too much to drink was a right of passage. It was somehow empowering. Or at least it was supposed to feel that way. I never felt that way.”

My mouth twitched.

“I don’t even know anymore,” she said. “I try not to think about it.”

I can’t help but think the incident she alluded to will describe her for the rest of her life. When she screams at boyfriends in the privacy of her home, will she rest on this memory as a shield? It must create a thick layer of intimacy when she whispers it to a man she finds particularly attractive. It makes her mysterious and at the same time completely explainable for anyone who’s heard the story.

Our waitress was too slow for me to order before 11:30. I prayed she’d come before 11:40, but she was still talking to another table. Unlike Ann Marie, the waitress’s behind was unapologetically loose.

“Do you think about it often?” I asked.

“It depends,” she said. “Most days I hardly think about it at all, but sometimes something will just happen. It could be the smell of cheap wine or even a certain smile. It all comes back so fast I feel dizzy. Trauma stays in the body. It’s a permanent memory.”

Ann Marie’s menu remained closed and untouched.

“I’m so sorry, Ann.” I said. “This must be excruciating.”

“It is. I called out on Friday. It was just too fresh in my mind.”

Ann Marie is a sensitive person. On the street across from my building she gives her change to the homeless guy who specifically asks for Newports. On Mondays she calls her mother in Utah and on Sundays she visits her father in the next county. I know this because she tells me.

“I didn’t know what to tell my boss. I didn’t want him to think I was just sick or didn’t want to go to work. I ended up telling him...”

“Telling him what?”

“Well, just that I had some unresolved trauma, you know? I told him about the guy who yelled at me and,” she leaned back across the table, “heavily hinted I had been raped. Like I literally said the words “sexual assault experiences”. It was awful.”

I flinched.

“I mean it wasn’t just awful reliving that stuff over the phone, it was awful because of his reaction. He didn’t even want to talk about it at all. His voice was exactly the same. I never thought of him as having a personality disorder before this.”

The waitress had finally left the table in front of us, but wasn’t looking our way.

“Do you think he has an empathy problem?”

“What did he say?” I asked.

“It’s not like he really said anything, I guess.”

Silence.

“He was just really quick about it.” Ann Marie continued. “Like he said he was sorry and that he hoped I felt better soon. And then he went back to talking about work stuff. He asked me if I could attend a client meeting online.” The fabric of her sleeve stretched all the way across her fist.

Before the movie *Girl Interrupted* I never would have noticed, but thanks to Angelina Jolie with her wolf lips and dead eyes, I am now always on the alert for wrist-cutters. She made it seem so erotic in the movie, like there was a tiny secret that only existed for special people.

It was almost hypnotizing when I met those special few in an 8th grade social studies class. There were four of them. At 13 they decided to cut their wrists just like in the movie. Three of them wore short sleeves and left red stained tissues in the trash can next to the gym.

The fourth girl was the really fascinating one. She seemed aware that hinting at a secret could label her attention-seeking and didn't bother to wear t-shirts or tank tops. Instead, the fourth girl let blood stain white fabric in an attempt to seem discreet. If teachers asked her to push up her sleeve, she'd shake her head violently. The red horizontal stains were juice, she'd say. But she always wore white.

Our waitress showed up just a few minutes later and Ann Marie ordered coffee with sugar. I ordered the breakfast burrito with green onions, salsa and extra cheddar. There was no "the kitchen is actually closing soon". There was no "we're fresh out of ingredients". Instead she wrote it down and continued to smile. It was 11:35.

Ann Marie stared at me.

A pack of floral print tissues poked out of her purse. None of them were crinkled or loose. If she cried in front of someone and the pain subsided, additional tears would seem dramatic. If she cried in front of someone and didn't feel better, her allotment for sympathy would be wasted.

"Technically I'm just an employee," she said. "It's not even like he did anything wrong."

"Again, I'm so sorry." I nodded. "Life is so unfair."

Our waitress returned a few minutes later with an oversized plate and two mugs. A heaping pile of sour cream was spread both on and in the tortilla. Extra salsa filled a serving dish that looked unironically delicate. It was 11:54 and I was shocked the food was ready.

Ann Marie didn't need a napkin and the waitress forgot mine. I thought about the sour cream oozing out of my burrito, but didn't want to maneuver through highchairs just to find a napkin. The tissue pack was open, but the sheets were perfectly unmoved. I averted my eyes before she saw me staring and decided I couldn't ask.