

Saying the Hard Parts

Hyacinthus

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The Nightmare

As a child I didn't have many friends. I was trans and didn't know it, and didn't perform gender in the way I was expected to. I was autistic and didn't know it, and didn't engage socially in the way I was expected to. I was plural and didn't know it, and didn't act the way I was expected to. I talked to "myself" and stimmed visibly and traded toys with my "differently-gendered" sibling—until, inevitably, these things were shamed out of me, sometimes quite literally beaten out of me. I learned quickly to hide my true self, but never quickly enough, and no matter how hard I tried I could never do it completely. My behaviors were seen as strange by other children, and I was bullied a lot.

This affected my self esteem the way you might expect. I was desperate to fit in, even just in a tiny group. There were outcast groups at my school, but even they didn't want to be associated with me, probably scared of the bullies that tormented anyone who spoke kindly to me. Despite how many times I had been beaten down by social failure after social failure, I had an optimistic spirit. I kept trying. I would walk up to other kids on the playground and clumsily stumble through asking to play with them or asking them to be my friend, even though I knew the answer was always no, probably with a hard shove as punctuation. Of course, no one ever approached me.

One day I was sitting on the swings reading a book, like I always did at recess. A girl crawled up to me—crawled, not walked—and tapped on my leg. I flinched and felt my heart race, expecting her to join in with my many bullies in calling me the r slur or trying to trick me into doing something humiliating. Instead, she barked. She said, "We're playing cats and dogs, do you wanna play?"

My favorite books were all about cats, both fiction and nonfiction. No one ever talked to me, but whenever we got to talk about our interests or books we had read in class I would bring it up. I was obsessed. Likely it was an early special interest. If someone had approached me and asked me to do just about anything with them I would have done it, but here was someone asking me to do something I loved, related to my favorite thing. She didn't even hesitate. She seemed enthusiastic.

I can't blame the little boy I was. I can't. But when I go through the memory this is the point at which I want to grab him by the shoulders and shake *hard*. This wasn't just any girl. At the time I was too excited to even properly process it, but she was one of the most popular girls in school, and the most popular girl in our class. The only reason the bullies that went after me didn't go after her for crawling on the ground and barking was because she was at the top of the food chain, untouchable. People just didn't talk to me. I knew enough at that point to be scared of others, to know that when they asked me to play a game they usually meant they wanted me to do something embarrassing so they could laugh and run away. But I was too excited to be suspicious. I just wanted someone to be my friend. He couldn't have known. Obviously he couldn't have known.

I said yes, obviously. We quickly became friends after that.

As soon as she started hanging out with me my social standing dramatically improved. Everyone loved her. Not only was she popular, but she was the only popular kid who didn't leverage her popularity against others. She never bullied anyone or even gossiped in private. She had a reputation of being especially sweet. Everyone rushed to give her presents every major holiday, and she wrote little thank-you cards for everyone. Just by association with her, I became no

longer disgusting. People still didn't approach me, but the bullying mostly stopped. I sat next to her every day in class, and our teacher scolded us constantly for talking and laughing.

She was the first to ever invite me over to her house. After a little while I started going every day after school. Both my parents worked and her single parent was often busy. We got passed back and forth a lot. Our parents bonded and became very close, until our families almost merged into one. My whole family called them "family friends" and we met up every holiday just like family would. (My parents are their own beast that I'm not ready to tackle in this piece—for context you will need to know that they did not care about my well-being whatsoever, or me as a person in general.) Everyone called us best friends with no hesitation. We told each other every secret, every dream, everything. I was closer with her than I was with my own siblings, or anyone else. I genuinely loved her like a sister. I saw her every day at school, and then the whole afternoon after that.

As I'm writing this I can feel myself getting more and more nauseous. This is the part where I say it. I don't feel ready. Everyone tells you to wait until you're ready, but I don't think I'll ever be. I don't know if I can ever be ready. I don't want to spend my whole life never saying anything, though. Even if I have to share this anonymously somehow. I need to tell someone what happened.

One time we were playing together and her neighbor, another kid our age, was over. We were sitting in the front room at the computer. I forget what exactly we were doing at first. At some point the neighbor kid made a joke. I didn't understand at the time—now I know it was some kind of sex joke. The neighbor told us to google something and she, my best friend, did. The result was porn. She clicked and started playing the video.

They both were laughing at it. I remember laughing a little at first because I didn't want to seem like I didn't get the joke. I was confused. I didn't understand anything about sex yet or even what it was. Somehow, though, I instinctively felt that something was wrong. My skin felt tight and hot. I kept weakly trying to get them to change the subject and do something else, suggesting other games, but they kept laughing and playing more. My best friend turned to me and asked if I knew what it was. I bluffed and said yes. I just wanted it to be over so we could go back to playing. She then started talking about her sexual interests, the kind of guys she liked, what she was curious about and various sex acts. The neighbor was joining in and talking about the same. I felt like an idiot for not understanding whatever topic they thought was so funny and cool, and even worse for being uncomfortable. I already felt indebted to her for being my friend. It felt wrong to not go along with something she wanted me to do.

They eventually started asking me about my own sexual interests, or specific questions about whether I would do a specific sex act and things like that. I didn't know what any of it meant or how to answer. I kept dancing my way around answering, desperately hoping they would drop it. I eventually said, "Hey, what if we get in trouble?" or something like that and they seemed to realize my friend's parent was just in the other room and could come in and see us at any moment. They quickly closed the website and the conversation moved on.

I asked my father over the phone if he could pick me up from her house early that day. He could and he did. My skin felt hot the whole car ride home and I probably was visibly red. He kept asking over and over if something had happened or if something was wrong. I said no, of course not.

I probably wouldn't be writing this if it had ended there.

We did everything together. We had lots of sleepovers. There was one specific show that we both loved to watch together and we would watch it all the time, especially late at night when I slept over at her house. Her parent, unlike both of mine, was extremely relaxed. She had almost no rules and we could stay up however late we wanted if we were quiet. Her room was small, so we always shared a bed, often pulling her mattress onto the floor so we could watch TV with the computer pushed up against the wall.

We were watching this show, our favorite show that we always watched together, one night. We had already watched all the episodes, so we would often talk over them. That one night, she suddenly brought up the topic of sex again.

She clearly knew more than anyone her age should have known about sex. I can only ever speculate as to why that was but I know something had to have happened to her. She knew all the names for specific acts and how to do them, describing them in detail in very sexualized ways. It didn't feel like how a curious kid would describe and talk about sex as they were learning about it. But she went on and on. I had that same tight and hot feeling in my skin. My whole body had pins and needles. I was panicking, going through excuses in my mind for reasons to leave, considering excusing myself to the bathroom and making myself throw up so my parents would have to take me home. We were sitting on her mattress together, alone, in the middle of the night. We had school the next day.

She didn't ask first if I wanted to. She just reached down and touched me. I never said anything. I didn't make any noise. I didn't move unless she moved me. She did and I didn't resist. I kept thinking that we had school tomorrow, and I was gonna sit next to her in class and do math equations and it would be like this never happened. I didn't understand fully that it was sexual at all, and I still didn't really understand what sex was. I knew it hurt. I knew it was supposed to be cool and good and mature and that I was supposed to like it. She was my best friend. She was the only one to ever extend kindness to me. I had no one else besides her, no one who would tolerate me. Being her friend had completely turned my life around.

She wasn't the first person to do this to me, either. I realized at some point in the middle of that first time that what she was doing had been done to me before. I didn't think anything else of it, besides connecting the two dots. She wouldn't be the last person to do it, either. In a way she was "laying the groundwork" for the others.

It happened again, the next time I slept over. Then it happened again. Then again. Over and over. At first I had convinced myself she would eventually get over it like it was some phase and she would stop, but she never did. Then I started internalizing all the shame. For not liking it, for not being cool and mature enough to do the thing all the cool kids were talking about, for not being grateful enough to my only friend for all she had done to me. The shame built greater and greater over time, and I tried so hard to like it, to be "good" at it. Over time I convinced myself more and more that I wanted it, falling so deep into the lies I told myself that I thought I had been the one who instigated that first time until she herself recounted the story to me. (It was what I had to do to survive. I felt so helpless. I was just a kid. I was trying to rationalize it so I could get up every day and go out into the world and function. This is the hardest part to talk about but I have to say it.) At some point she got bold and started doing it in the afternoons, hiding in the bathroom or the basement. Every night, at all those sleepovers, she would play that same show that we loved when she did it. Somehow I can talk about what she did but I still can't talk about the show.

For just over two years she did it. I never stopped going over all those days and nights to her house, mostly because I didn't want to say anything suspicious to my parents and they had sent me over to her house in the first place because of their busy work schedules. (I know I shouldn't have to justify it but I just can't not.)

Then she moved away. One day her family mournfully announced it. It would be so many towns over that we wouldn't even be able to make time for the drive—we would never see each other again. I said my goodbyes just as tearfully as everyone else did. By then I had fully convinced myself that the whole thing was my fault, that she was the best friend I had always known and loved, that I was awful and disgusting and should have liked what she did to me. I genuinely missed her and didn't want her to go. I loved her, after all.

Waking Up

I realized what she had done was sexual abuse only when I was an adult.

I vaguely knew, as I went through my early years of organizing and political action in various anti-oppressive and anarchist groups, that it would technically be considered assault. I didn't believe it, though. It didn't feel like it was. I felt like in so many ways it didn't count. I was a boy and she was a girl. We were both exactly the same age, and I was actually a few months older than her. I never said no or stop. I kept going back over and over after it happened, knowing it would happen again. I had eventually convinced myself that I had to like it and tried to make myself believe I did, telling myself that we were equal participants in consensual sex. I would say to so many other survivors who experienced all of these exact same things that what they had experienced was real abuse and that they were a survivor, but I could not bring myself to say the same about myself.

I know so many trans men who have swallowed stories like mine because they already have to fight to be seen as a man. There is that pervasive myth that is so deeply saturated into every inch of our culture: sexual abuse is done by men to women, and it's certainly never done *to* men, and if it is it's certainly never done to men *by* women. Acknowledging that I've been assaulted triggers my gender dysphoria, which feels disgusting and misogynistic even to say, but I know so many men who would be relieved to hear me say it. Acknowledging it publicly would mean that in combination with the abuse denial and victim blaming that every survivor experiences, I would also be misgendered. If I was not transgender I would not struggle to nearly the same extent to tell others what happened. Even if I was a cis man, it would be indescribably easier. Transmasculine invisibility further compounds this problem. Transmasculine people experience some of the highest rates of sexual violence in the entire queer community, and yet we never hear anything about it. There is this resounding silence around it. There are so many men like me who never say anything, because if we do we are the targets of violent transphobia in combination with the already excruciating attacks of abuse apologists.

I also feared from the beginning how others would weaponize my story to harm others. Queer women are often demonized and framed as sexual predators—the story of my friend assaulting someone she perceived to be a girl would be used to justify this anti-queer stereotype. I also have seen over and over in all my years of political work how often survivors' own stories or experiences are used to shame or otherwise harm other survivors. The recent discourse around the “KYLK” slogan exposed just how deeply anarchist communities are infected with the virus

of coddling abusers, demanding “rehabilitation” over the safety and autonomy of survivors and viciously decrying survivor militancy. I don’t want any violence to come of my abuser, or anything to do with my abuser at all, and I knew how that could be used to harm other survivors with different desires, framing me as “the good survivor” in order to shame and victim blame others. I also knew how other survivors’ stories, like stories of people who physically resist their abusers with violence and tell them to stop, would be used to frame me as “the bad survivor” in the same way. I know now that no matter what I say or do or what I could have said or done, this would have happened. Abuse apologists pit survivors against other survivors as a way to fractionalize and disrupt our communities, systemically disempowering us and keeping us in line. That is not my fault or the fault of any survivor. The evil bastards who would use my story as a weapon to attack other survivors are the ones at fault.

I still struggle with what language to use for myself. I say “assault” or “sexual abuse” most of the time. I struggle to say “rape” for reasons I’m still working to unpack, though I don’t mind when others say it unless I’m having a particularly bad day. I prefer “victim” over “survivor” but I accept either category in the political sense and I am politically aligned with both. Language is a big concern for me. Talking about any of this at all is indescribably difficult, and I struggle to pick the right words to use, worried what others might think. I know that no matter which words I pick, someone will judge me over them. I don’t think I could have written this if I had been carefully scrutinizing the words I used, because it was already so hard just to say it. In this piece I used whichever terms felt safest or most comfortable. I’m open to changing my chosen language in the future if the way I feel changes. I’m trying to extend myself the same kindness I have extended to so many other survivors: the right to choose how people talk about my assault.

I am still struggling to accept fully that it was not my fault. Chronic sustained trauma is harder to unwind than individual events, and there have been so many assaults through the years even excluding the ones I described in this. I have days where it feels like this white-hot thing that I can’t mentally touch without getting set on fire. I do not feel anger towards my abuser and I don’t know that I ever will. It took many years of trauma processing to be able to call her my abuser at all, and despite how others might see my progress as small or myself as “stuck in the past” I am proud of the progress I have made. I am proud for not killing myself, even though I tried a couple of times. I am proud of the work I do with other survivors and the community I have built with them.

The worst part of talking about this for me has always been the response. What I want other people to say changes every day, sometimes even from moment to moment. It isn’t fair to expect others to read my mind and so I honestly sort of prefer for others to say nothing at all. Sometimes I want people to coddle me, other times I absolutely hate it. Sometimes I want people to be horrified by how awful what happened to me is, other times I physically can’t stand it. Sometimes I want people to tell me their stories and how they relate, other times it hurts to hear. It’s so inconsistent and unpredictable how I’ll react to any response and it frustrates me to no end that I can’t even engage with the people trying to help and support me because of how much it hurts me. It is absolutely okay to respond to this or comment on it, and I actually really appreciate it. I appreciate any support you might have for me more than words can say. It’s just hard for me to deal with sometimes, but I think I kind of need to hear it.

Maybe one day I will come forward and announce that I was the one who wrote this, claiming my story for all the world to see. I don’t know, and I’m okay with that. I spent so long terrified of not getting it right, of putting out some imperfect account, and I’m still scared of that. But I’ve

accepted that this shit is messy and hard and it's okay if I'm not fucking perfect. It's enough to just say it. For now, it's enough that anyone else will know what happened to me.

I am glad that I got to say this because for me it means letting go. Once I say this I can't say it for the first time anymore. It's like releasing a breath I've spent my whole life holding.

Solidarity to all survivors. I believe you, always.

Thank you to Lohse of Judith's Dagger for sharing your own story. I wrote this whole thing out in one word-vomit rush after reading yours. Something about it gave me the courage to finally type out the words. It feels cheesy to say somehow but it genuinely meant a lot to me. I can only hope my story helps others in the same way. And of course, thank you to Immer Autonom for hosting this.

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