

How I Got Away

Otis was 6'3" and 230 pounds easy, and when he slapped me – a swift, backhanded strike – his ring scraped the skin off my right cheek. He raised his arm for a second blow and I saw my blood drip down his wrist.

In the space of one breath I went from half drunk to stone-cold sober. I threw myself over the side of the bed, scrambling for purchase on the too-soft mattress, but he held tight to my hair – long and wild in those days – and dragged me back.

“Don't you know I will kill you?” he grunted against my ear. Not winded or even angry. Just aroused.

The words bounced around my brain as I tried to make sense of them. I had gotten in his car and come to his house wearing my shortest skirt; I'd been drinking with him and kissing him; I had walked into his bedroom of my own accord and climbed on his bed. And then what happened? He was yanking on my clothes, he was pulling on my hair and biting my lips. He wasn't sweet or romantic or sexy. He wasn't what I expected at all.

And I said no, dammit. I changed my mind, I said.

Let me go.

He shoved my head against the wall, hard, and pain shot down

my arm. But this time I didn't cry out. This time I didn't move or flail. This time a calm, icy glaze settled over me, a white frost like what appeared on my car on those mornings before full-on winter.

Don't you know I will kill you?

Words surged up out of my gut, out of my cells, and I clamped my mouth shut to hold them inside.

You're going to have to.

At 19, I was a popular, experienced dater. I was pretty and athletic, and I'd learned to camouflage my brainy tendencies with tequila shots and judicious use of the word "fuck."

Like all my friends, I knew a boy's behavior was my responsibility.

"A boy who doesn't hear 'no' is a boy who wasn't told 'no,'" our mothers said. A "no" delivered with a smile or a hair flip or a shoulder squeeze was not a "no." A "no" while eating a dinner he paid for was not a "no" but a "try harder" or an "ask me again." A girl showing too much cleavage was saying "maybe" or "not right now," but she wasn't saying "no."

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Girls who got raped were promiscuous, running with a bad crowd, or asking for trouble. A girl had to be kidnapped and beaten half to death before it was actually called rape. Even then, no respectable girl could ever again hang out with a girl who had been raped.

My father, a defense attorney, was known in our community for being That Guy You Don't Wanna Mess With. Boys trying to date me had to endure his lectures and threats of jail. Sometimes he'd put his pistol on the table while he talked. Unloaded, usually.

"He scares everybody," I'd grumble to my mother.

"Good," she'd answer, smiling.

He rarely defended rapists – he found murderers more of a professional challenge – but he had been appointed to a rape case around the same time I met Otis. The accused was an 18-year-old college student who was regularly having sex with his 15-year-old girlfriend. One night he brought two of his buddies along. They took turns holding her down.

"She was already sleeping with one of them," he shrugged. "Not a bruise on her." *No victim here. Just a slut.* It was the prevailing view of the time.

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I had dated a few bad boys in high school – boys who ditched school or stole cars or smoked (still felonious) weed – but none crossed the line with me. Ever. I said when. I said how far. I believed myself to be in total control of the males I encountered, all of whom were surely enchanted by my beauty and desperate to please me.

Otis was 29 and worked in a truck yard. He worked with a guy my best friend, Callie, was dating, and we set up couples' night at his house. A guy with his own place! A grown-ass man to charm and tease! My boring summer break was taking an exciting turn, and I was thrilled. But slurping shots in the dorm with other 19-year-olds was poor preparation for what came next.

Otis rolled on top of me, the sheer weight of him immobilizing me, but I tried to gouge his face and his eyes, bite anything I could reach. It was like shoving at a solid brick wall. I squirmed and bucked until we knocked over the lamp and cast the room into darkness.

I wasn't fighting for my virginity; I'd ruined that freshman year of college. I was fighting for what would today be called my agency. I had never been at anyone's mercy. In my 19 years, any problem I had was quickly dispatched by my father. But now, the full weight of the truth crushed me into the mattress: *I can't stop him. I can't stop this from happening.*

I started screaming hysterically like I was riding a roller-coaster on its way to the bottom, and he grabbed my throat to shut me up. But Callie, in the bedroom down the hall, heard a noise that didn't seem right. Her boyfriend tried to dissuade her, but she got up to check just the same.

She knocked on our door timidly. "Kiki? You okay?"

"Tell her to get lost." Otis sucked my ear while he said it, his tongue digging deep, his slime running down my neck.

He eased his grip so I could answer, and the instant he did, I went crazy.

"Callllllliiiiieeee!"

Then she was beating on the locked door with her fists, threatening Otis with death and dismemberment.

It was her boyfriend who got the door open. He stopped Otis from coming after me, yelling, "You're still on parole, you dumb fuck! Let her go!"

I tore through the house in a daze, confused about where I was or how to get out. Dumbstruck that someone or something could take away my ability to be who and what I chose. Could make me helpless and leave me bleeding, with no recourse.

My "no" had to mean something, or else what was I worth?

We wasted precious seconds looking for our shoes before Callie pulled me out the front door. We half-walked, half-ran barefoot all the way home, more than a mile, holding hands and crying like toddlers. We didn't call the police or our parents. We knew we'd been asking for it.

"We're okay," we kept sobbing to each other. "We're okay."

I wasn't a victim. I was just a slut.

I never told a soul about that night.

My tomboy history paid off, as my own mother just sighed in exasperation when she saw my face the next morning. "Did you go skating with the boys again?" she asked.

My skin healed, but the fear remained an open wound. The terror of being utterly powerless. I spent the rest of summer break in my room, reading bad novels and venturing no further than the public library or the Dairy Queen drive-through.

My father fought hard for his accused rapists to get bail, and when they were released they skipped town, leaving thousands of dollars in unpaid legal fees. That made me laugh somewhat hysterically. Nobody knew – or asked – what happened to the girl.

Forty years later, Callie and I are still best friends, and still have never talked about that night. As we partied our way through our twenties, we developed a strict unspoken rule: at a club or house party, we never left each other's line of sight. We took turns with tonic-and-lime nights; we never again drank at the same time.

Today they tell us if we're assaulted, whatever we do to survive is the right thing. If we fight or submit, cower or curse, vomit or beg, say the filthy words he demands or go mute – if we lived, we did the right thing.

Like so many women, I eventually cast that evening out of my consciousness and absorbed it into my spine. Even now it holds me up, steady as steel.

Otis, if he's alive, would be about 70. I can't remember his last name or the color of the house. If I ran into him on the street, I wouldn't know him.

All I remember is the cold fury that shot enough adrenaline into my tequila-soaked veins to help me scream. All I remember is the sickly sound of everything I thought I knew being stripped away, layer by layer.

All I recall is the determination to fight what surely would have been a lost and bloody cause. Because if that's all it takes – superior muscle – to reduce me to nothing, to a valueless body for the taking, then I did the right thing.

(Source: Medium)