Nail It to a Post

**“PROSECUTE THE FALSE ACCUSERS!!!”**

The words shouted at me in capital letters, spraying out in Comic Sans WordArt from a meme in my Facebook timeline, drowning out the friendlier status updates above and below it. The thick font topped a scribbled black and blood-red drawing of a lithe but bent woman. Her hands were behind her back where cops were fitting them into tiny silver handcuffs. The image was designed to look like a modern version of the old western “Wanted!” poster. The drawing easily yanked my attention away from work that I was largely ignoring anyway.

It was clear that “Prosecute the False Accusers!” was a battle cry. Although, the identity and motives of the warriors who screamed it seemed less clear. I couldn’t stop staring at the woman though. Directly below the words, the small, curvaceous woman forever stumbled, her long hair flying out in thick black stripes, her hands pulled tight behind her narrow waist by two male police officers who wrenched hard down on the handcuffs that encircled her wrists. Their eyes and mouths looked straight ahead. She, the black-haired woman, looked desperate, her eyes wide and disbelieving, her mouth pulled down in a perpetual thick pout. The policemen, chiseled faces set into identical, square-jawed, and resolute scowls, steered the young woman toward a cop car where she’d presumably head off to jail, for a crime as yet to be determined.

Though the drawing was clearly meant to provoke an observer, the central point or argument was muddled or, at least, not immediately self-evident. Unsure what I was supposed to take away or if I even wanted to know what this meme was about, I looked closer.

A small-print caption underneath the picture cleared up my confusion. This *wa*s a modern Wanted! poster. It sought justice for accused men—the criminal sought was a woman who falsely accused those men of rape. The woman in handcuffs apparently symbolized all these faceless and cunning women. The police officers, then, symbolized justice for the man accused.

I scrolled the page. I wanted to find a source or an author. The post came from a Facebook site called *A Voice for Men*. Squinting, I moved closer to the faintly glowing screen. Ah. Now, I knew why this image appeared in my timeline. My father had also “liked” and commented on the “Prosecute the False Accusers” post. My heart jumped a little. *Did I want to see this?*

Each time I uncovered something like this online, some new little snippet about untrustworthy women or murderous mothers or sly provocative girls posted by my dad, I felt my chest and throat constrict. It had been years since the last time we talked. A decade. Maybe longer. Even though he and I were not “friends” on any social media sites, thanks to the new Facebook privacy settings and our few friends-of-friends connections, his public comments often popped up in my feed. It didn’t take long for me to find his comment beneath the image.

“Sadly, I agree with this wholeheartedly. Lock her up. Sad because of a family member who made such allegations against another family member. As much as it tears my heart out, she should suffer the same consequence that would have been levied on the one who was completely innocent of her false allegation.”

I cringed as I read his words, shutting my laptop with a snap loud enough to wake my pointy-eared pup. He was talking about me. He meant that I should’ve suffered the consequences—suffered for an accusation I never even made. Standing up, I stretched my aching legs. The abrupt movement accidentally toppled my tiny dog and her accompanying layers of warm blankets from my lap onto the floor. I’d been sitting for too long. My knees cracked and I stretched my back. My dog dug her way out from under the covers. I reached down to rub her ears, but she pulled away, irritated with me for disrupting her warm nap. Still, never one to shy away from a snack, even for a worthy cause like indignation, she followed me into the kitchen.

On the way there, I grabbed at my chipped blue mug on the table and nearly dropped it. I paused at the kitchen counter to steady myself.

It was winter in Texas. A lot of people assume the winter here would be relatively mild, but Texas trades in extremes. The weather is no exception. This January had an especially flinty coldness to it. Icy wind howled through every crack in my creaky old home. I zipped up my fleece jacket and headed straight for the still blinking coffee pot. Holding the pot up high, I emptied the rest of the black liquid into my mug and clicked off the machine. Sipping out of a now steaming cup, I leaned back into the counter and stared into the backyard, focusing on the dead yellow grass and listening to the freezer burble and gurgle, loudly going about the job of freezing vegetables and old fish and fruit I’d probably never eat.

My stomach clenched. I remembered Joy and Uncle Darrell.

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I was eleven and it was a sunny morning in Georgia, humid but not yet sweltering. The wind was cool and long. Huge puffy clouds dragged gigantic shadows along the ground. I stood under a towering pine, still sleepy from spending the entire previous day at the beach with my favorite cousin, Joy, and other relatives.

Yesterday, Joy and I had spent most of that day pretending to be mermaids in the salty water, singing loud songs from Disney’s *The Lion King*, and, later, alternating between running through hot patches of sand and high-stepping through the cool waves. We slept hard the whole way home and all through the night, until early the next morning, when one of my aunts pulled me out of bed and asked me to come outside.

Joy was still asleep, still warm in bed. Outside, under that enormous pine tree, I teetered precariously on one foot in my aunt’s driveway. I kept trying to act like a bird that summer. I had recently become obsessed with birds since my aunt had a parrot. I loved the way it danced when I sang. It would bounce its head and step-hop from one leg to another, but never bounce on both. I wanted to do the same moves. It wasn't easy. The driveway sloped up underneath the massive three-story home. I balanced one arm against the brick wall that lined the driveway and hopped and paused . . . then hopped again. I kept looking down. The heat from the pavement baked my bare feet as I shifted back and forth. I was anxious to get back inside and far away from four faces that now hovered above me.

My aunts and my uncle were the people behind the faces above me. My grandma leaned far away on the wall, watching, quiet, her eyes invisible behind a glare on her large owlish glasses. The aunts eventually stopped whispering to one another and addressed me. Aunt Nell spoke first, her voice soft and gentle like always, but with a strange new tone, thin and sharp like a tiny bell.

“Jenny. . . Jenny, listen. Your Uncle Darrell just isn’t used to being around big girls like you, hon. He is usually around littler girls, just babies really, not little teens like you.”

I stopped teetering at the word “teen,” noting the flattery but not accepting it. I stood still.

It felt like a trick. I nodded at her, my gaze riveted to the cement, my long gangly arms wrapping tight around my waist. I was a skinny and tall child so my arms nearly wrapped around me twice. I had always adored my aunt Nell, with her warm brown eyes and easy smile. Now, I leaned away from her grasping touch, nodding harder and harder at the ground.

Overnight, things had changed.

Aunt Nell was different. Everything was different. All because my uncle Darrell had touched me and Joy and we didn’t like it and I had thought telling an adult might help. I didn’t tell when it was just me because I didn’t know if I was wrong or if he was wrong. I just knew that when he pulled me into his lap and touched the inside of my legs, lingered near my crotch, and petted me there repetitively, I didn’t like it. It made me feel like screaming. But, I didn’t know why. When Joy told me that he did the same thing to her and she hated it, I had to say something. Joy pointed out how he stared at the beach. She’d said it felt like he was burning a hole through our bathing suits. She was right, he did stare at us, and it was scary. It made me feel strong that I knew I could stand up for her. I could be angry, for both of us.

I told Grandma first thing the next morning. She listened. Then, she called my parents who were at my other grandma’s deathbed, far away somewhere in Michigan. The next thing I knew, I was outside on the driveway with a tribunal of my aunts and my aunt Debbie’s husband, uncle Darrell, staring at me like I’d grown an additional head.

Aunt Debbie stepped up next, snapping her words out in powerful pops that reminded me of spankings with a tree switch. She was sweet Nell’s younger sister. Debbie always looked ugly to me. She had beady eyes, a giant nose like a hawk that raised up in a sneer whenever she smiled, and a head exploding with thick wiry hair shot through with silver.

“Jenny. Your Uncle Darrell loves you. He would never do anything to harm you. *You know that.”*

I dug my dirty nails into my arms and ground my toes into the gravel. I didn’t say anything and I didn’t look up. I couldn’t. I didn’t understand what was happening, but I knew that it felt wrong. I didn’t want to know what was going on. Aunt Debbie huffed and threw her hands in the air.

“Darrell, look, just explain it to her already so we can get this over with.”

I peeked up and caught Darrell’s eyes before quickly looking down again. They were blue and wincing.

“Listen, Jenny, I’m sorry if you felt uncomfortable. I’m not sure what I did. But your aunts are right. I’m just not used to being around big girls like you—”

He kept talking about littler girls and how much he loved to bounce them on his legs, but I stopped listening. My aunts closed their eyes and nodded along with his words. I looked back at my feet.

I pictured him pulling a baby girl into his lap, a little girl wholly unlike me. A girl who wasn’t awkwardly lanky and tall for her age. A chubby soft girl with peachy creamy skin who spoke in a halting lisp—just a baby. I pictured him being pleased to hold her. Was it okay for him to pull her onto his lap, to slowly and constantly rub inside her leg? And up? To touch and rub places that were private? Was *that* okay?

I peeked again. His eyes looked different now. Different especially than they had at the beach, wider and more honest, not weirdly bright or burning. Maybe Joy and I were wrong about the way he looked at us. Maybe he was just used to babies?

I was suddenly mad. *Why wasn’t Joy out here being talked to, too?* I only told Grandma about the touching and grabbing and staring after Joy and I agreed that it felt weird. I did it for both of us. But she wasn’t here now. She was asleep. And my parents were in Michigan. On the phone last night, they told me everything was going to be fine. But, everything was *not* fine, and it seemed like it was all my fault. I cleared my throat and finally spoke.

“I just felt uncomfortable, is all. He touched me and I didn’t like it. Joy said it felt weird too and then I asked Grandma what to do and she called my dad and he said it wasn’t okay—”

The words rushed out of me and over one another like marbles madly tumbling out of a bag. My grandma stayed quiet, near invisible in the shadow of the garage door overhang.

Aunt Debbie folded her arms. “Now, let’s not drag Joy into this. We talked to her already and she doesn’t seem to feel the same way as you.”

My face flamed, my eyes narrowed, and my small fists clenched tight against my thighs. I thought Joy was asleep. *What was happening?* Fear and outrage ran through my veins, even as my back straightened and my body puffed up in reaction to being doubted by these aunts who seemed like strangers.

“I want to go inside *now*.”

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My little dog paced nervously in the kitchen, her long nails tapping erratically on the laminate flooring. She was still unhappy about the earlier spill with the blankets onto the floor. I needed to get her nails clipped. I couldn’t handle doing it myself anymore. She yelped and bled the last time and then looked at me like I’d tried to eat her alive.

I stood by the counter on one foot, the other tucked up and behind my knee, snacking on salty chips and dark chocolate, now fully and unashamedly Facebook-stalking my father. He apparently had a habit of commenting on images about hating Obama or the evil “feminazis.” Often, his comments jarred with the original posting, trumpeting his rage about lazy black people and shrewd, indecent women for the entire world to see.

One post in particular stood out. In it, a photograph of lovely young man sat on a bench and smiled harmlessly at the camera, his warm brown eyes promising unending patience and positive thoughts. A caption scrawled directly underneath his gentle head tilt read:

*“There is a critical lack of male teachers. The proportion of male teachers is at a record low. With so few male role models and mentors, it’s no wonder that boys are falling behind and dropping out.”*

This young man’s photo and message came from a Facebook page called *The Men’s Rights Initiative*. My dad had shared this image with his friends and made it public. I assumed that he didn’t know it was public. Maybe he did. It was strange behavior from someone who had feared and reviled government surveillance his entire life. He was the one who taught me to never talk to the police if you can help it. When we were little, he would see cops, point them out to my little brother and I, roll down his window, snort like a pig, and shout, “Oink, oink! I smell BACON!” My brother and I would giggle and he’d do it again. He posted Back the Blue things on Facebook now.

But, even though he liked and shared it, my dad’s comment below this particular meme seemed to deliberately miss the point of the post. He was far less concerned with the fate of lost boys and much more concerned with making an adjacent point about a female’s role in this educational failure. In the comments, he wrote:

“All it takes is one female student who failed an exam to allege a male teacher fondled her to ruin his career. I wouldn't want to be there either!”

I rubbed my face hard and massaged the soft wrinkles on my forehead. *Why I was doing this to myself?* I heard my dad’s voice in my head, something he always said about being self-destructive.

“If you poke yourself in the eye with a spoon and it hurts, why would you keep doing it? Only an *idiot* does that!” Then, he’d make my brother and I laugh by grabbing a spoon and sticking himself repeatedly in his eye. It was funny when it was about someone *else* being stupid. Sometimes, though, we didn’t laugh. Not when he was mocking *us* for making bad decisions. Not when he would yell and jab the spoon at his own face like an enraged baboon. Those times we stayed quiet and still, too afraid to move and invoke further ire.

Either way, I knew I was being stupid, lurking around on his page. Torturing myself with his words and my memories.

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My grandparents, my brother, and I left Georgia soon after the driveway lecture. I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to my cousin. One minute, I stood in the driveway with my aunts and uncle. The next, my brother and I were handed our belongings and sent trundling down the road toward the mossy swamp country of my grandparents’ home in the Florida everglades. That was fine with me. I wanted to spend the rest of my summer vacation pretending none of it had happened. My grandma had a different plan.

Grandpa squinted through his cloudy glasses at the steering wheel while my brother sat next to him, playing with the radio dial. Grandma and I sat legs-to-chest in the back of the small truck. I peered around the front seat to look at my younger brother kicking his feet toward the glove box, making use of all that extra space.

My grandma watched me through her impossibly thick and round glasses. She kept her attention on me while I read and even when I pretended to sleep. So, I pretended not to notice.

“Psst. Hey, gal. Hey, have you had your monthly friend yet?” Grandma hissed at me.

I buried my nose deeper into my book. She was insistent though. She used her two fingers curved into talons—her fingers were twisted due to a bad case of arthritis—to scratch at and pull my leg closer. “Well, have ya had it yet?”  
 I closed my book and marked the spot with my index finger, pulling my leg away from her prodding claw with my other hand.

“Grandma, I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

She repeated her question. I was no less confused. She kept talking about something different than a girl*friend* or boy*friend*, but every time I asked, she couldn’t tell me what she meant. Grandma whispered odd questions at me until the truck finally lurched over the white gravel road leading to their country home.

Grandpa turned and smiled at us and said, “Welp, kiddos, we’re home now. Goan and git settled in!” I sighed a little in relief. Now I had a few acres of land to explore. I needed to put some distance between me and my family.

Sean and I ran straight to the room where we always stayed when we visited, jumping on the squeaky old bed before unpacking our suitcases into the few empty drawers of the yellow dresser in the corner. One drawer spilled over with linens and scraps of soft fabric that I liked to stack up and rub against my cheek.

I loved this old room. It smelled like damp carpet, spicy candles, and ancient, citrusy potpourri. My grandpa’s thin shirts hung in the closet in between my grandma’s plastic-covered dresses. Ceramic baubles adorned every single flat surface. The windowsill had clear crystal figurines lined up on it that spun out rainbow colors against the dark walls and velvet pillows. The painted birds reminded me of home, but my mom would never let a room be this wonderfully cluttered or covered in dust.

The door to the room opened. Light spilled into the corners of the room and the long shadow of my grandma.

“Y’all have enough room in here?”

We nodded and said our thank yous and politely smiled. We waited for her to leave.

“Sean, maybe you should sleep with yer grandpa tonight. Jenny and I can sleep in here.”

Sean and I stared at one another, eyes wide, trapped in a rare moment of total, silent agreement. *Sleeping with our grandparents?* We remembered our grandparents falling asleep on the couch, wrinkled lips hanging open like a gutted animal, huge nostrils flaring wide. We thought about them getting cranky when we couldn’t get comfortable. Or trying to put their veiny, ice-cold feet on us. We liked to stay up at night, wriggling under the cool blankets, talking about the day, predicting what fun the next day would be, falling asleep mid-sentence.

“N-n-no, thank you, we want to stay,” We stammered through various excuses, finally settling on, “but we always stay in here. And Sean kicks—”

“And Jenny snores!” Sean yelled and giggled. I punched him in the arm. He kicked my leg and we started to fight. By the time we looked up, Grandma was gone.

“Jenny? *JEEENNY!*”

My grandma’s nasally holler came floating through the bedroom. Sean and I were changing to go outside and jump into the aboveground pool. I rolled my eyes at him and he shrugged. At least it isn’t me, his shrug said. I glared at him. He flashed a grin and ran away. After a second, I heard him hit the pool. I groaned.

“Coming, Grandma!” I yelled. I pulled on my bikini bottoms and tightened my bikini top behind my neck before I went to stand in front of her recliner in the living room. “Yes, ma’am?”

“What’re y’all doin’?” She said everything now like we were girls sharing secrets. Whispers. Weird, knowing looks. I wrinkled my forehead. Wasn’t it obvious what I was doing? *Why did every conversation I have lately have to be so confusing?*

“Nothin’. Getting ready to go swimming. Sean’s in the pool already.”

Why was I always the one answering questions while Sean had fun? Being the oldest sucked. Being a boy was a gift too, though I was only just learning that.

I pulled at my bikini bottom. My mom always made fun of me for my lanky shape and lack of a rear end. She said I’d be grateful for being so skinny someday, but all I knew was having no butt plus any kind of bathing suit equaled irksome wedgies.

“Come're.” She beckoned. I shifted maybe an inch closer to her. She was hissing again. I looked around for Grandpa, but he and Sean were both gone. Probably outside, having fun. “Lis’n to me, now, gal. You need ta put a t-shirt on ovah that bathin’ suit.”

I shook my head. No. T-shirts were a hassle. They billowed up in the pool like jellyfish, getting in the way, trailing after a person, dragging valuable seconds off your time in impromptu swimming contests. Plus, they looked terrible. And, I would tan funny. No way. I let some attitude creep into my voice.

“But I don’t *want* to wear a shirt. Why should I wear a shirt? I won’t burn, I swear, I never burn. My parents don’t ever make me wear a shirt.”

She poked at me again and some kind of emotion twisted her features—I couldn’t tell what she felt. I stepped back, almost knocking over their heavy metal and wood television set. The ribbed silver knobs they would swirl to change the channel poked into my thigh. I wondered if they would ever get a TV that came with remote control.

“Gal. You need to do what yer told. You could make yer grandfather hot in his pants if’n you don’t cover up.”

I blinked. What did THAT mean? *Hot in his pants*? Why were we talking about my grandpa’s pants? Some part of me understood that there was a connection between this conversation and the weirdness with my Uncle Darrell from before, but the rest of me just felt like hiding. I backed away from her crooked fingers. I started talking to her real slow and careful, just like Dad did with horses and people he didn’t like and when he tried to teach me math.

“No. I don’t think that will happen, Grandma.”

Her eyes narrowed. Before she could whisper anything else scary, I turned, ran for the bedroom, and grabbed a shirt before fleeing outside. I decided to take it off as soon as I hit the cold water and dunk under where she couldn’t waddle over and see me. Still, swimming that afternoon wasn’t quite as fun.

The phone rang loudly in the kitchen. It was close to suppertime. Sean and I played card games in the kitchen nook. I looked out the window while he shuffled the cracking deck of cards. It bothered me a little that he monopolized the cards and always took the dealer role, but I was content just then to let him have it. The phone rang again and Grandpa went to grab it.

In the front yard, ducks honked and shook their wings in the pond. The sun was setting behind the neighbor’s house, throwing off the pinks, reds, and yellows of a typical Florida sunset. No matter the time of day, the pond was always blackish-green color. It only got darker as the sun set. Grandpa and Grandma made us stay away from the pond because the marshy reeds and wild hibiscus bushes along the edges hid at least two hungry alligators. My grandpa said the gators were good eatin’ but hard to kill. And, they ate all the neighborhood dogs.

I worried about the ducks. *Would the alligator in the pond get hungry and eat them soon?* I looked away.

“Kiddos, yer Dad wants to say hi,” Grandpa said.

“Okay!” I ran to the den and picked up the extension there. “Got it, Grandpa!”

He hollered something back at me and I heard the line click off in the kitchen. My dad’s deep, laughing voice floated over the phone line. I felt my body relax for the first time in weeks. He would know just what to do. I told him everything. About how Grandma almost made Sean and I sleep separately. About the weird talk with my aunts, about Darrell, about Grandma’s claws, and constant questions, about the t-shirt. Every single detail.

“Oh really? She said *that*? Hmm. I see. You just don’t worry about it, ‘kay, pumpkin? I’ll take care of everything.” I knew he would. He always did. “Put your brother on the line. I love you, chipmunk! Be a good girl.”

“Love you too, Daddy. I will.”

I called in my brother.

“Your turn.” I handed him the phone, then went into the kitchen to check and see how I could help with dinner.

The ducks were gone. I hoped they flew away.

It was pitch black in the room. Something woke me up. I shook Sean’s shoulder.

“Hey. Wake up. You hear something?”

He mumbled at me, brushing off my arm and turning away to sleep.

“You rotten little tattletale.” It was a loud whisper from somewhere in the dark room.

In the dark, my eyes grew big. Sean sat up next to me, fully awake now. He grabbed my hand. My grandma was in here, hissing at both of us now.

“Grandma? Is that you? What are you talking about?”

She flipped on the lights, stepping closer to the bed.

“You little liar. After all we done for you, you brat! Yer a spoiled no-good *tattletale*!” Her voice was getting loud now. Sean and I moved closer together, huddled in the middle of the bed. I put an arm around his shoulders, shielding him from the shrieking woman in our bedroom.

Tattletale was a serious playground accusation, levied against the worst kind of traitor. It occurred to me, then, that I had never heard an adult use that word.

“Don’t play innocent with me. I know tole your daddy a whole truckful of lies.” Her voice lowered now, sneering at me. Her hair stuck out from her head in untamed plumes of blondish gray. We could see through her nightgown, the ripples of fat and skin and the clearly outlined dark circles on her sagging breasts heightening our discomfort. Sean burrowed his face deep into my shoulder. Later, he would remember none of it. I would never forget.

My clear eyes stared directly into her rheumy, emotion-filled ones. I felt my father’s earlier assurance bolster me. I felt sorry for her. For a moment. Just until she spoke again.

“Know what, little girl? I stuck up for you. I shouldn’t have. When everyone called you a liar, I told them no, no, no -- not *my* grandbaby. But they was right, weren’t they? Yer aunt Debbie knowed you for the little attention-getter you are. I told her she was wrong. Maybe I shouldn’t have done. Maybe I should’ve agreed.”

Everyone thought I was a liar? *Why?*

“My daddy just asked me what happened and I told him the truth.” I sounded firmer than I felt. My stomach was queasy and my palms were damp.

“HMPH. Well, that’s just what a liar like you would say. Tattletale!”

She was yelling again. I felt Sean’s hand grab mine tighter and knew I had to do something to make her leave.

“Grandma, you need to go to bed now. We can talk about this in the morning. You are *scaring* us.” I borrowed an impatient, no-nonsense tone from my mother. I borrowed her calmness too. Mom was always the calm one whenever Dad yelled and screamed at her and us. Still screeching, Grandma left, slamming the door.

After what seemed like hours, we finally fell asleep.

The next morning, we woke up to Grandma cooking breakfast and Grandpa whistling while he read the paper. We had fresh eggs from the chicken coop, toast, biscuits, grits, and homemade jam for breakfast, again in the kitchen nook. The sun pierced the streaky window with rays of blinding light. The sky was a clear blue, but the pond was still the color of dry seaweed and coated in ripples of grime. The ducks were back, honking furiously at nothing.

My grandma served breakfast and ruffled my brother's hair. Grandpa asked how we slept. I filled my mouth with scrambled eggs.

Sean said, “Fine, I guess.”

We went swimming after lunch. No one said anything about wearing a t-shirt.

My parents showed up a day later. Mom told me that a monthly friend was a period not a friend. I knew what a period was and I wished Grandma would’ve just asked about that instead. My dad treated my grandma a little less cordially than usual. Both of them told me to ignore her. She’s not well, they said. Grandma’s just a little crazy, they said.

My parents believed me. That was all I needed to know. They knew lying wasn’t my strong suit. And that was the end of the story—until one day, it wasn’t.

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I almost closed my laptop for good, but instead opted to take a break and make myself another cup of coffee. I lifted the glass pot high again, watching the black-brown liquid pour into my favorite mug. I drank it black. I had trained myself not to need creamer anymore, but I did miss the way the cream exploded through the watery coffee, swelling and blooming with yellow clouds, a tiny atom bomb in a murky night sky.

I hadn't seen my father for many years. I had left home young, only 15, unable to any longer make sense of the years of painful beatings and isolation. Even being an avid reader did not make frequent and lengthy lockups in my bedroom tolerable. It was there, locked in my room, where I learned a person could get lost in books to the point of exhaustion and delirium.

Dad never forgave me for leaving home. Eventually, he even forgot his starring role in the whole mess. That large piece of fine yellow pine (a heavy 2x4 from the garage) and the mirroring stripes on my body that the cops took pictures of, his heavy hand holding my hair and the other cracking against my jaw, the few nights he spent in jail, the two years he spent on court fees and lawyer strategies, my new but overdue frankness about just wanting to feel safe—it had all faded away in his mind, leaving nothing behind but a warped picture of me sneering at him, *me*, the tattletale, me, the false accuser.

Somehow the image he had of me as the perpetrator grew. I wasn't around to see it happen—only the fallout affected me when everyone in my family believed his story that I was just a rebellious rotten runaway teen—but, I could easily imagine how it grew. Like so many things, it took its time. My dad’s negative image of me was nurtured and trimmed, poisonous leaves made to grow into corners, cover walls, and eclipse empty spaces. It was easier for him to remember or forget me that way. Much easier to agree with Grandma and Aunt Debbie, in retrospect. Easier than acknowledging his own failures, his weaknesses, and his hurts. Or, his fears.

When I was young and he would beat me, Mom would take off my jewelry before he began so that my earrings wouldn’t get pulled off and my fingers wouldn’t swell over the metal rings. But, she forgot her part in it too. Once, when we spoke over the phone, she said, “Your dad just loves you too much, Jenny.”

This thing about loving me too much was the story they all told to each other. Told and kept telling.

I set the coffee down next to my laptop, hunching over the screen a final time. This post was much longer than the others. It featured an image of two healthy young football players superimposed over a snarling, makeup-streaked girl's face. Underneath the picture, a whole paragraph of words swam together.

*“Yesterday, on 1/14/2013, The University of Texas belatedly did the right thing in reinstating two players, quarterback Case McCoy and linebacker Jordan Hicks, falsely accused of rape. The female accuser, according to a police report, met two male students at a local club and, after several drinks, invited them back to her hotel room. There, she said, one of the men had sex with her while the other stood and watched, although she claims not to remember the incident in detail. The police investigation did not result in any charges.”*

My father's response to this news article hit me like a sixteen-foot alligator. Even though I was expecting it. Even though I knew to brace myself. His face smiled at me from the comment section—a profile picture of him wearing an American flag doo rag over his silver-streaked hair while standing proudly next to a red and black Valkyrie motorcycle stood out amongst the hundreds of other commenters. He held nothing back.

“Because she has committed a crime by falsely accusing two innocent men, and that accusation caused them material damage, they should cut off her fucking head and nail it to a post as a warning to other would-be false accusers.”

They should cut off her fucking head. And, nail it to a post. I leaned my forehead against the cabinet counter and breathed in, deep. Slow. Just breathing for a while. I finally reached over and closed my laptop with a soft click, grabbed the leash from its place on the wall, and took my nervous little dog outside for a long walk.