

A DECADE OF BROWN-HAIRED MEN

HELEN BURNS

The distant laughter echoed throughout the hallway as I walked out of the bathroom stall. I was never like the other kids, entertained with nothing but a play set and a basketball hoop. I would always rather sit and talk with Meg and Emily.

Cold water rushed over my hands, the low-budget powder soap creating bubbles as I rubbed my hands together. I never cease to remember its scent: something along the lines of Kindergarten classroom mixed with Tide detergent and crayons. I dried my hands and looked back at Meg coming out of the middle stall.

Meg was from Japan. She moved to America when she was quite young, but I still had to help her with a few English words every now and then. She was so kind, one of the kindest people I have ever met to this day. She moved back to Japan after the third grade. I still remember the ache in my heart the day I had to say goodbye to her. I haven't spoken to her since.

Meg opened her mouth to say something, but she was suddenly interrupted by the buzz of the school's loudspeaker: "STUDENTS, THIS IS NOT A DRILL. PLEASE REPORT TO YOUR CLASSROOMS IMMEDIATELY AND FOLLOW LOCKDOWN PROCEDURES. I REPEAT, THIS IS NOT A DRILL."

"Who's that kid?" I asked my new friend on my second day at my new school.

He sat at the table in front of me, his cheekbones and brown stubble drawing my attention. He was wearing a leather jacket and skinny jeans, his smile giving me butterflies in my stomach; a new kind of excitement and longing I had never felt before.

"Oh, him?" She giggled and looked at me with disbelief.

"Yeah, he's kinda cute, I guess..."

The one look we gave each other said it all. Meg and I ran as fast as we could out of the bathroom. The distant echoes of children's laughter turned into a roar of fear and confusion. Meg and I turned the corner and ran down the hallway, finally making it to Mrs. Berquest's first grade classroom. We had just had a lockdown drill the day before, was this some kind of test? No, this was real; the fear in our teacher's eyes clarified our hesitance.

"Hurry, get under your desks!"

"Your truck?" I asked him.

"Yeah, we could just hang out."

It was our first official date. I didn't realize we came all the way to the mall to hang out in his truck, I thought we would go see a movie or eat lunch. But what harm could hanging out in his truck do? He seemed like a good guy.

I ducked under my desk, my body barely fitting under all the way. There were so many of us in one space. My back arched while my hands held up the upper half of my body, knees digging into the carpet. Mrs. Berquest turned off the lights.

"There is a bad man on campus."

The kiss was fatal, for somehow he seemed to think my lips granted consent to glide his hand up my thigh and between my legs. I grabbed his hand and moved it away. It kept coming back.

The actors glowed from the screen. I could see their faces so clearly. I wish they could have seen my face from the other side of the screen. I would have had a witness.

My back ached. I collapsed into a ball, my arms clenching my shins. I was so sore from hiding under the desks for so long.

Mrs. Berquest was quietly reading us one of "The Magic Treehouse"

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books. After hours of 35 seven-year-olds having to keep still under our desks, she was desperate for a way to keep us all calm and quiet. Our lives could have depended on it.

The adrenaline began to wear off. The fear set in. I turned my head and looked out the classroom window. What if he was right there, about to bust the window open and get us?

Once mom told me that if someone pulled out a gun, I should punch them in the balls and start running in zig zags, so that if they started shooting I would be a difficult target. I kept this in mind as I clenched my shins and tried to make myself as small as possible.

I wish I could tell Mommy I love her.

"I'm so scared. I don't know if I'm ready."

"It'll be fine.

He pulled down his underwear. I winced. He grabbed my hand and pulled it towards his body, placing it on his dangerous organ. I try to calm my shaking figure. I knew what he wanted me to do. *Just shove the emotions under the rug.*

He didn't care how scared I was, that I had just said I wasn't ready. He took my hand and wrapped it around further, telling me I was doing it wrong. The rest of my memory is gone; it is too painful to remember.

Nick Bellwitz sat to my right; he was my seat partner this month. In years to come, we would be in the same class until we graduated middle school and I seemingly dropped off the planet, rumors circulating that I was dead. I wonder if he knows I'm alive.

"Thank god Emily left early today," I whispered to him.

Emily was my best friend back then, along with Meg. The popular girls always teased Emily because she lived in a bigger body than most of us. I didn't care about that, I thought she was nice and I didn't understand why the popular girls couldn't see that. I don't even remember Emily's last name anymore, she left that school after the first grade and I never spoke with her again. I wonder what ever happened to Emily.

"Yeah."

With his sweaty body on top of me, he shoved his fingers inside of me, taking a part of me I will never get back. I froze, eyes glazed over and my body paralyzed. His fingers scraped the walls of my interior, his face so close to mine that brown hair fell in my eyes as my head hit the side of the truck in a haunting rhythm with every thrust from within.

The last thing I remember is my hands on his chest, an unfamiliar shriek coming from my throat, and the bolts on the floor of the white truck digging into my pale, helpless skin.

The rest is blurry images of my cold, vulnerable, naked body hunched over in a ball with my arms clenched around my shins. By some miracle I got my clothes on. I remember the overwhelming feelings of shame and confusion as I contemplated how to get myself out of the truck before he could rape me.

Case Smith needed to use the bathroom. However, we weren't allowed to go to the bathroom because the bad man might have gotten us.

Mrs. Berquest offered him a blue bucket in the corner.

His body slammed against my pelvis, dry humping me so hard, so fast, that I could hardly breathe. He didn't warn me, he just pushed my body down and said, "I want to try something with you." He never told me what he was going to do. He never asked if I was okay with it. He didn't even give me a chance to say "no." *How was I supposed to say "no" to a question never asked?*

I lay there, taking the pain, every strike to my pelvis taking more and more life out of me.

Just shove the emotions under the rug.

They finally let us out after a few hours. Our first look at daylight was horrendous: cop cars everywhere in sight, helicopters circling the campus, news stations with big, black cameras surrounding us.

My mom started running towards me.

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"You were weak."

"Why did you keep going back?"

"You got yourself into that situation."

"Well, how big was his dick?"

"You just weren't strong enough."

"If you told your parents you had a boyfriend, they would have stopped this sooner."

"Well, you did some things right and some things wrong."

"Why didn't you leave the truck?"

"But what part of that happened *on* school campus?"

"Just tell him 'no.'"

"Why didn't you break up with him?"

"But he said he respected your boundaries."

"That's just what teenage boys do."

"Just trust me, forgive him."

And they wonder why I was hesitant to report it.

I ran to my mom as fast as I could. She opened her arms as I plummeted into her chest. She was practically in tears. To this day, I have never seen her that worried.

"Mommy, I was so scared."

The meetings with the school. The conversations with lawyers. The interviews with the police. *Every single time*, I had to defend myself and fight for my safety while all they seemed to protect was *him*.

The big, black camera pointed at my face as the guy with the microphone asked, "What was it like, sweetheart?"

"It was scary," I replied.

That night, my 7-year-old face glowed from the TV screen.

"Look, honey! It's you!" My mom said as my words echoed in my mind.... *It was scary.*

It had been a few hours since I'd gotten home. I thought it was so cool that I was on the news. Yet, fear still lurked in the shadows of my young mind.

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The story came out about what really happened; a girl a few grades above me was waking to the bathroom when a guy with brown hair, a black tee shirt, and beige shorts tried to grab her. She managed to struggle out of his grip and find a teacher. *What was he planning on doing to her?*

I was in the other girls bathroom when it happened. *It could have been Meg and me instead of her.*

But the day was all over. On with life. On with bedtime stories and Barbies and strawberry popsicles.

Just shove the emotions under the rug.

I didn't leave my bed. I didn't eat. I didn't drink. I didn't shower. I didn't sleep. I just lay there and stared at the white wall next to me.

Sometimes I would get flashbacks or panic attacks. Sometimes hours would go by when I thought I had been laying there doing nothing for just a few minutes.

The therapist wasn't doing anything, I was too ashamed to be vulnerable during sessions. Most of my friends were immature teenagers caught up in the world of high school and didn't understand; on the other hand, I was grateful they couldn't relate to the feelings that seemed to consume my every move.

School was dangerous, my abuser walking around with full capability of throwing me in the school bathroom and raping me. But you know, that probably would be my fault too, in the eyes of this fucked up world.

A few days later we got the news: the girl lied. There was no man on campus trying to grab her. She made the whole thing up. A nine-year-old girl fabricated the entire situation, keeping her story straight for days, even explaining the man to a sketch artist. There is something I still find strange, and somewhat worrisome, about a girl that young following through with such a detailed story.

Everything went back to normal. The girl was expelled. No one ever talked about it again. It was as if it never happened. *Just shove the emotions under the rug.*

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But for the next few years, I couldn't sleep alone. I was scared of the dark. I was scared of a man with brown hair grabbing me in my sleep.

I am currently scared of a boy with brown hair grabbing me in my sleep.

Brown-haired men.

Body curled up in a ball.

Arms wrapped around shins.

Emotions shoved under the rug.

One decade apart.