

## 2017

*I get ready for work and the post has been up for eight hours. While curling my hair, I refresh the page. So far, 224 shares and 875 likes. I put on my black wool suit, refresh again. I dig under the couch for my black flats, refresh. Fasten the gold name tag to my lapel, refresh. Each time, the numbers climb and the comments multiply.*

*You're so strong.*

*You're so brave.*

*What kind of monster could do that to a child?*

I bring up my last text, sent to Strane four hours ago: So, are you ok . . . ? He still hasn't responded, hasn't even read it. I type out another—I'm here if you want to talk—then think better and delete it, send instead a wordless line of question marks. I wait a few minutes, try calling him, but when the voicemail kicks in, I shove my phone in my pocket and leave my apartment, yanking the door closed behind me. There's no need to try so hard. He created this mess. It's his problem, not mine.

At work, I sit at the concierge desk in the corner of the hotel lobby and give guests recommendations on where to go and what to eat. It's the tail end of the busy season, the last few tourists passing through to see the foliage before Maine closes up for the winter. With an unwavering smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes, I make a dinner reservation for a couple celebrating their first anniversary and arrange for a bottle of champagne to be waiting in their room upon return, a gesture that goes above and beyond, the kind of thing that will earn me a good tip. I call the town car to

drive a family to the jetport. A man who stays at the hotel every other Monday night on business brings me three soiled shirts, asks if they can be dry-cleaned overnight.

“I’ll take care of it,” I say.

The man grins, gives me a wink. “You’re the best, Vanessa.”

On my break, I sit in an empty cubicle in the back office, staring at my phone as I eat a day-old sandwich left over from a catered event. Checking the Facebook post is compulsive now; I can’t stop my fingers from moving or my eyes from darting across the screen, taking in the rising likes and shares, the dozens of you’re fearless, keep telling your truth, I believe you. Even as I read, three dots flash—someone is typing a comment right this second. Then, like magic, another appears, another message of strength and support that makes me slide my phone across the desk and toss the rest of the stale sandwich in the trash.

I’m about to head back out into the lobby when my phone begins to vibrate: INCOMING CALL JACOB STRANE. I laugh as I answer, relieved he’s alive, that he’s calling. “Are you ok?”

For a moment, there’s only dead air and I freeze, my eyes fixed on the window that looks out on Monument Square, the autumn farmers’ market and food trucks. It’s the beginning of October, full-blown fall, the time when everything in Portland appears straight out of an L.L.Bean catalog—pumpkins and gourds, jugs of apple cider. A woman in plaid flannel and duck boots crosses the square, smiling down at the baby strapped to her chest.

“Strane?”

He exhales a heavy sigh. “I guess you saw.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I saw.”

I don’t ask questions, but he launches into an explanation anyway. He says the school is opening an investigation and he’s bracing himself for the worst. He assumes they’ll force him to resign. He doubts he’ll make it through the school year, maybe not even to

Christmas break. Hearing his voice is such a shock that I struggle to keep up with what he says. It's been months since we last spoke, when I was gripped with panic after my dad died of a heart attack and I told Strane I couldn't do it anymore; the same sudden onset of morals I've had through years of screwups—lost jobs, break-ups, and breakdowns—as though being good could retroactively fix all the things I've broken.

“But they already investigated back when she was your student,” I say.

“They're revisiting it. Everyone's getting interviewed all over again.”

“If they decided you didn't do anything wrong back then, why would they change their minds now?”

“Paid any attention to the news lately?” he asks. “We're living in a different time.”

I want to tell him he's being overdramatic, that it'll be ok so long as he's innocent, but I know he's right. For the past month, something's been gaining momentum, a wave of women outing men as harassers, assaulters. It's mostly celebrities who have been targeted—musicians, politicians, movie stars—but less famous men have been named, too. No matter their background, the accused go through the same steps. First, they deny everything. Then, as it becomes clear the din of accusations isn't going away, they resign from their jobs in disgrace and issue a statement of vague apology that stops short of admitting wrongdoing. Then the final step: they go silent and disappear. It's been surreal to watch it play out day after day, these men falling so easily.

“It should be ok,” I say. “Everything she wrote is a lie.”

On the phone, Strane sucks in a breath, air whistling through his teeth. “I don't know if she is lying, at least not technically.”

“But you barely touched her. In that post, she says you assaulted her.”

“Assault,” he scoffs. “Assault can be anything, like how battery can mean you grabbed someone by the wrist or shoved their shoulder. It’s a meaningless legal term.”

I stare out the window at the farmers’ market: the milling crowd, the swarming seagulls. A woman selling food opens a metal tub, releasing a cloud of steam as she pulls out two tamales. “You know, she messaged me last week.”

A beat of silence. “Did she.”

“She wanted to see if I’d come forward, too. Probably figured she’d be more believable if she roped me into it.”

Strane says nothing.

“I didn’t respond. Obviously.”

“Right,” he says. “Of course.”

“I thought she was bluffing. Didn’t think she’d have the nerve.” I lean forward, press my forehead against the window. “It’ll be ok. You know where I stand.”

And with that, he breathes out. I can imagine the smile of relief on his face, the creases in the corners of his eyes. “That’s all I need to hear,” he says.

Back at the concierge desk, I bring up Facebook, type “Taylor Birch” in the search bar, and her profile fills the screen. I scroll through the sparse public content I’ve scrutinized for years, the photos and life updates, and now, at the top, the post about Strane. The numbers still climb—438 shares now, 1.8k likes, plus new comments, more of the same.

*This is so inspiring.*

*I’m in awe of your strength.*

*Keep speaking your truth, Taylor.*



When Strane and I met, I was fifteen and he was forty-two, a near perfect thirty years between us. That's how I described the difference back then—perfect. I loved the math of it, three times my age, how easy it was to imagine three of me fitting inside him: one of me curled around his brain, another around his heart, the third turned to liquid and sliding through his veins.

At Browick, he said, teacher-student romances were known to happen from time to time, but he'd never had one because, before me, he'd never had the desire. I was the first student who put the thought in his head. There was something about me that made it worth the risk. I had an allure that drew him in.

It wasn't about how young I was, not for him. Above everything else, he loved my mind. He said I had genius-level emotional intelligence and that I wrote like a prodigy, that he could talk to me, confide in me. Lurking deep within me, he said, was a dark romanticism, the same kind he saw within himself. No one had ever understood that dark part of him until I came along.

"It's just my luck," he said, "that when I finally find my soul mate, she's fifteen years old."

"If you want to talk about luck," I countered, "try being fifteen and having your soul mate be some old guy."

He checked my face after I said this to make sure I was joking—of course I was. I wanted nothing to do with boys my own age, their dandruff and acne, how cruel they could be, cutting girls up into features, rating our body parts on a scale of one to ten. I wasn't made for them. I loved Strane's middle-aged caution, his slow courtship. He compared my hair to the color of maple leaves, slipped poetry into my hands—Emily, Edna, Sylvia. He made me see myself as he did, a girl with the power to rise with red hair and eat him like air. He loved me so much that sometimes after I left his classroom, he lowered himself into my chair and rested his head against the seminar table,

trying to breathe in what was left of me. All of that happened before we even kissed. He was careful with me. He tried so hard to be good.

It's easy to pinpoint when it all started, that moment of walking into his sun-soaked classroom and feeling his eyes drink me in for the first time, but it's harder to know when it ended, if it really ended at all. I think it stopped when I was twenty-two, when he said he needed to get himself together and couldn't live a decent life while I was within reach, but for the past decade there have been late-night calls, him and me reliving the past, worrying the wound we both refuse to let heal.

I assume I'll be the one he turns to in ten or fifteen years, whenever his body begins to break down. That seems the likely ending to this love story: me dropping everything and doing anything, devoted as a dog, as he takes and takes and takes.

I get out of work at eleven and move through the empty downtown streets, counting each block I walk without checking Taylor's post as a personal victory. In my apartment, I still don't look at my phone. I hang up my work suit, take off my makeup, smoke a bowl in bed, and turn off the light. Self-control.

But in the dark, something shifts within me as I feel the bed-sheets slide across my legs. Suddenly, I'm full of need—to be reassured, to hear him say, plainly, that of course he didn't do what that girl says he did. I need him to say again that she's lying, that she was a liar ten years ago and is a liar still, taken in now by the siren song of victimhood.

He answers halfway through the first ring, as though expecting me to call. "Vanessa."

"I'm sorry. I know it's late." I balk then, unsure how to ask for what I want. It's been so long since we last did this. My eyes travel the dark room, taking in the outline of the open closet door, the streetlight shadow across the ceiling. Out in the kitchen, the re-

frigerator hums and the faucet drips. He owes me this, for my silence, my loyalty.

“I’ll be quick,” I say. “Just a few minutes.”

There’s the rustle of blankets as he sits up in bed and moves the phone from one ear to the other, and for a moment I think he’s about to say no. But then, in the half whisper that turns my bones to milk, he begins to tell me what I used to be: *Vanessa, you were young and dripping with beauty. You were teenage and erotic and so alive, it scared the hell out of me.*

I turn onto my stomach and shove a pillow between my legs. I tell him to give me a memory, something I can slip into. He’s quiet as he flips through the scenes.

“In the office behind the classroom,” he says. “It was the dead of winter. You, laid out on the sofa, your skin all goose bumps.”

I close my eyes and I’m in the office—white walls and gleaming wood floors, the table with a pile of ungraded papers, a scratchy couch, a hissing radiator, and a single window, octagonal with glass the color of seafoam. I’d fix my eyes on it while he worked at me, feeling underwater, my body weightless and rolling, not caring which way was up.

“I was kissing you, going down on you. Making you boil.” He lets out a soft laugh. “That’s what you used to call it. ‘Make me boil.’ Those funny phrases you’d come up with. You were so bashful, hated talking about any of it, just wanted me to get on with it. Do you remember?”

I don’t remember, not exactly. So many of my memories from back then are shadowy, incomplete. I need him to fill in the gaps, though sometimes the girl he describes sounds like a stranger.

“It was hard for you to keep quiet,” he says. “You used to bite your mouth shut. I remember once you bit down on your bottom lip so hard, you started to bleed, but you wouldn’t let me stop.”

I press my face into the mattress, grind myself against the pillow as his words flood my brain and transport me out of my bed

and into the past where I'm fifteen and naked from the waist down, sprawled on the couch in his office, shivering, burning, as he kneels between my legs, his eyes on my face.

*My god, Vanessa, your lip,* he says. *You're bleeding.*

I shake my head and dig my fingers into the cushions. It's fine, keep going. Just get it over with.

"You were so insatiable," Strane says. "That firm little body."

I breathe hard through my nose as I come, as he asks me if I remember how it felt. Yes, yes, yes. I remember that. The feelings are what I've been able to hold on to—the things he did to me, how he always made my body writhe and beg for more.

I've been seeing Ruby for eight months, ever since my dad died. At first it was grief therapy, but it's turned into talking about my mom, my ex-boyfriend, how stuck I feel in my job, how stuck I feel about everything. It's an indulgence, even with Ruby's sliding scale—fifty bucks a week just to get someone to listen to me.

Her office is a couple blocks from the hotel, a softly lit room with two armchairs, a sofa, and end tables holding boxes of tissues. The windows look out at Casco Bay: gulls swarming above the fishing piers, slow-moving oil tankers, and amphibious duck tours that quack as they ease into the water and transform from bus to boat. Ruby is older than me, big-sister older rather than mom older, with dishwater blond hair and granola clothes. I love her wooden-heeled clogs, the *clack-clack-clack* they make as she walks across her office.

"Vanessa!"

I love, too, the way she says my name as she opens the door, like she's relieved to see me standing there and not anyone else.

That week we talk about the prospect of me going home for the upcoming holidays, the first without Dad. I'm worried my mother is depressed and don't know how to broach the subject. Together,

Ruby and I come up with a plan. We go through scenarios, the likely ways Mom will respond if I suggest she might need help.

“As long as you approach it with empathy,” Ruby says, “I think you’ll be ok. You two are close. You can handle talking about hard stuff.”

Close with my mother? I don’t argue but don’t agree. Sometimes I marvel at how easily I deceive people, doing it without even trying.

I manage to hold off checking the Facebook post until the end of the session, when Ruby takes out her phone to enter our next appointment into her calendar. Glancing up, she catches my furious scroll and asks if there’s any breaking news.

“Let me guess,” she says, “another abuser exposed.”

I look up from my phone, my limbs cold.

“It’s just so endless, isn’t it?” She gives a sad smile. “There’s no escape.”

She starts talking about the latest high-profile exposé, a director who built a career out of films about women being brutalized. Behind the scenes of those films, he apparently enjoyed exposing himself to young actresses and cajoling them into giving him blow jobs.

“Who would have guessed that guy was abusive?” Ruby asks, sarcastic. “His movies are all the evidence we need. These men hide in plain sight.”

“Only because we let them,” I say. “We all turn a blind eye.”

She nods. “You’re so right.”

It’s thrilling to talk like this, to creep so close to the edge.

“I don’t know what to think of all the women who worked with him over and over,” I say. “Did they have no self-respect?”

“Well, you can’t blame the women,” Ruby says. I don’t argue, just hand her my check.

At home I get stoned and fall asleep on the couch with all the lights on. At seven in the morning, my phone buzzes against the

hardwood floor with a text and I stumble across the room for it. Mom. Hi honey. Just thinking of you.

Staring at the screen, I try to gauge what she knows. Taylor's Facebook post has been up for three days now, and though Mom isn't connected with anyone from Browick, the post has been shared so widely. Besides, she's online all the time these days, endlessly liking, sharing, and getting into fights with conservative trolls. She easily could have seen it.

I minimize the text and bring up Facebook: 2.3k shares, 7.9k likes. Last night, Taylor posted a public status update:

*BELIEVE WOMEN.*