Blood Above Our Doorway

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Class of 2018

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Author Bio
Katie Bolger is a senior (AHH!!!) English major with a Writing Concentration and minors in Spanish and WGS from West Caldwell, New Jersey. She hopes to go into publishing after college, but for now she’s enjoying her remaining time on campus as a Residence Coordinator, PLA for the English Department, and Managing Editor of The Mercury. Having completed her capstone in creative nonfiction, she’s now finishing her Honors Thesis on Dominican-American immigration narratives. In her spare time, she listens to Pitbull songs and engages in heated debates about movies. She frequently passes off quotes from The Office as her own.

This nonfiction is available in The Mercury: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2018/iss1/51
Sitting in an auditorium surrounded by students three years younger than me, I am scared for them. It’s the third day of orientation, and the class of 2021 is learning about Gettysburg College’s commitment to ending sexual assault and power-based interpersonal and domestic violence through education and awareness. The first-years are tense, self-conscious, and unmoving. We, the orientation staff, have worn them out with hours of icebreaker activities in the unforgiving August sun. So while they’re grateful for the air conditioning of the auditorium now, I know by the end of their third information session warning them against all the things that can go wrong in college, they’ll be begging for more get-to-know-you games and blazing heat. There’s always a content warning at the beginning of this particular presentation: “We’ll be talking about sensitive topics, so if you need to step out of the room at any time, please do so.” Everyone looks around to see who will be the first to leave.

The presentation begins with a slide of statistics: 1 in 5 women will be the victim of attempted or completed sexual assault during her time in college; female college students aged 18-24 are 3 times more likely than women in general to experience sexual violence; sexual assault takes place at the highest rates in the first three months of the fall semester, with the majority of victims being female first-year students. This information is meant to emphasize how prevalent the issues of sexual assault and domestic violence are on college campuses—yes, even small, liberal arts colleges like this one—but it casts a noticeable pall over the room, as if it’s all just another way of saying, “good luck avoiding those stats.” For the past three years, my room has been marked by the words “Resident Assistant,” naming me as a resource for confused new students. In other words, I’m supposed to be an answer to the question, “who can I talk to if I’ve been sexually assaulted?” I’ve yet to have a resident come to me saying it happened to them. I’m not so naïve as to think this means my residents have just seen the lucky ones, and it’s a fact that makes it hard to fall asleep some nights given the statistics projected at the front of the auditorium. But perhaps my final year will prove the toughest, and someone will knock on my door in a state of shock or with tears running down their face. I look down my row to where five new female residents are sitting, and before I can stop myself I wonder, Which one of you will it happen to?

Attempting to sound optimistic, our moderator informs us we can end power-based violence, not only by being decent people who respect others, but also by intervening in situations we think may foretell violence. Like both the perpetrators and the victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, warning signs come in all shapes and sizes: bruises on a classmate’s arm, an excessive number of phone calls or text messages, humiliation and degradation thinly veiled as jokes, isolation, fear, mood changes. When we notice these things, we’re supposed to offer help or look for someone older and wiser than ourselves and ask them to step in. In my transition from college first-year to senior, I’ve had to become that wiser person, although I don’t feel it; I am no less frightened by the prospect of an unwanted kiss on the middle of a dance floor or of being
followed home at night than I was in 2014.

Having heard this exact presentation a number of times, I usually take this time to observe the room: some of these people will commit acts of violence or sexual assault, probably with malicious intent, but maybe because they just “zoned out” during the part of the presentation that provides a detailed definition of “consent;” some will be the victims; and some of these people have already experienced interpersonal violence. They know what happens when nobody notices warning signs. One of my residents asked me this morning if she could skip this orientation session. Of course she can, I told her, she should take care of herself first and foremost. I’d find her later, pass on the pertinent information, name various campus resources, cite myself as someone she could talk to at any time, hope she wouldn’t take me up on it.

After the initial overview of the problem and the staggering statistics meant to inspire caution, we’re asked to close our eyes.

“Picture someone you care about,” says the moderator. During this exercise, I’ve always conjured up an image of my best friend: a college-aged woman like myself, we both fit into the category of “most likely to be victimized.” And although she’s my first thought this year as well, her image in my mind is quickly replaced by another.

When my mom was nineteen, she had long, skinny limbs and frizzy hair. Her front teeth were prominent but had been straightened by braces, just like mine. Her green eyes crinkled when she smiled. Over the past year, my aunt has dug up a cache of pictures of the three sisters when they were young. I am a shade of all of them, but the one in the middle is undeniably my mother. She is gawky and awkward and wearing an oversized button-down shirt, pink leggings, scrunched white tube socks, and Keds. The bangs exploding off her forehead in a poof confirm the year: 1984. But as I sit in the auditorium and picture my mother at age nineteen, it’s not the version I’m used to seeing in old Polaroids.

“Picture them in a room with someone, someone who is hurting the person you care about.”

And he is, he’s hurting her, and her skinny limbs are bent at awkward angles, she’s crumpled in a corner, like my Raggedy Ann Doll when I was done playing with her. My mom’s green eyes aren’t crinkled, they’re swollen shut, and she’s not smiling because her front teeth are on the floor and her mouth is a gaping hole. She is bloody and her clothes are torn, and in my mind, she suddenly opens her eyes, and it’s so hard to tell through the bruises if her face is still her own or if the broken figure lying there is me.

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It was August of 2013, and we had just arrived in Harrisonburg, Virginia, to move my older sister in for her second year of college. Every family in the town seemed to agree: Panera Bread was the perfect place for lunch that day. The three of us found a small table in the corner of the restaurant, tucking ourselves out of the way.

“We’ve sat at this exact spot before, Mom,” my sister noted, surveying the crowd of people. “Last year, when you told me what happened to your teeth.”

“It was something I thought you should know before starting college,” my mom said. A glance in my direction and the thin line of her mouth told me she wished my sister hadn’t mentioned it.
I’d always known my mom’s teeth were false—a bridge of three squares at the front of her mouth, each the ideal shape, different now than in pictures of her as a kid. I admired their smoothness, running my tongue over my own smile, recently freed from three-and-a-half years of braces but still not quite perfect. Why my mother even had a bridge put in had never been a question I felt the need to ask. But then, I was seventeen and entitled to everything. “What happened to them?”

“I had an abusive boyfriend,” my mom answered, softly but definitively, making herself heard despite the chaotic hum of Panera. “He knocked my teeth out.” There were tears in her eyes, the feeling of a hand clenched around my windpipe, the muted sounds of the surrounding people. My mom hesitated, debating whether she’d said enough or should add one more thing. Her voice dropped even lower, but I heard each word perfectly. “I was raped.”

I stared for a moment, trying to remold this strange new person into the shape of my same mother. But she was suddenly much smaller, and she held so many secrets. We still looked alike, but I was seized by the realization she had once been someone other than a mother, a person entirely separate from me.

I closed my mouth and scrambled for something to say. My gaze landed on my sister, who was watching me carefully to see how I’d react. I looked back to my mom. I desperately grabbed onto a difference between her and me, like a vine floating out in the middle of the rolling river I felt I’d just been sent down. I chose to cite my all-girls’ private school’s favorite words: “You should’ve been an empowered young woman.” It was a motto that came at a high cost to my family, but she wouldn’t have sent me there if she didn’t think I deserved this emphasis on empowerment in addition to the prep school education.

She didn’t laugh, although I don’t know if I really expected her to; sarcasm is my family’s native tongue, the one we revert to when we can think of nothing else to say. Maybe I thought that if I used our first language, she’d understand my true meaning: *I can think of nothing else to say.* But she just looked even more sad. “Yeah, I should’ve.”

We haven’t talked about it since that day, leaving questions unanswered for the primary reason that I have not asked them: How long did she date him? Did her family know him? Were there warning signs leading up to it? What was his name? It makes me feel like there are gaps in my memory, and then I remind myself that I can’t remember something that never happened to me.

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Four years later, I was behind the wheel of my sister’s car, driving the two of us home from vacation. The rest of the family would stay in the Adirondacks for another day, but she and I had a concert to attend. Within the last year, we’d begun excavating the skeletons in the maternal half of the family closet: Our grandparents got divorced when Mom was seven, but apparently it was much more than a mere “failure to make it work.” Our grandmother’s affair was rumored but never confirmed. Our grandpa remarried soon after, moved an hour away with his new wife and seven step-kids. Grandma and the three daughters, Mom in the middle, went to live with my verbally abusive, alcoholic great-grandfather and certifiably crazy great-grandmother. It was easy to criticize all of them when we’d heard bits of the story from our dad, who entered the scene when Mom was twenty. He wanted us to know how much she held
things together in that household, sticking around to take care of her grand-
parents, living at home and putting herself through college, when everyone else
came and went as they pleased. I never asked clarifying questions of my dad; I’d
already learned that family history rarely results in better understandings of one
another so much as further confusion and the cognitive dissonance between the
people I knew and who they’d been before.

“Mom was kidnapped that night,” my sister told me without preamble, fit-
tting her words into the silence between songs on the radio. We hadn’t even been
talking about Mom; I’d made a concerted effort to steer clear of this exact topic.

“She was kidnapped. Her sisters called the police to go get her. They found
her with her clothes torn, and she’d been…violated. And her teeth had been
knocked out.” _Crumpled in a corner, like my Raggedy Ann Doll._

Nothing about the situation became any clearer to me: I still didn’t know
his name or how long they had dated or how long she was gone before someone
picked up a phone, but I didn’t want to hear anything else. My grip threatened
to tear the steering wheel in two, the beam of the headlights flattened into a
thin and watery line. Breathing deeply, I surreptitiously wiped at my eyes. I let
my sister talk herself out, grateful when she quickly moved on to stories about
our aunts and great-grandparents before falling asleep in the passenger seat.

I thought about the word “violated.” It was different than the word my
mother had used—“raped”—which I think my sister and I shied away from, scared.
My mother wasn’t raped or assaulted; she was violated. He’d been someone she
was dating, and he had taken advantage of just how much power he held over
her, and he had _violated_ her trust, her body, her being. He left her broken and
bloodied. He wrecked her confidence and self-image, like taking a hammer to
the mirror she looked into, forcing her to try to fit the pieces back together, to
reconstruct herself in a way that looked whole, false teeth the finishing touch.

Summer ended too quickly, and October was underway when I found my-
self alone with my mother in our kitchen, a rare opportunity to talk without
someone else vying for her attention. She was washing the pile of dirty dishes in
the sink, and we were talking about my younger brother having to find a new
therapist. I’d just told her, as casually as possible, I had spent autumn of the
previous year seeing a counselor at college. She was taken aback and asked why
I hadn’t told her sooner. I picked my words carefully, kept my tone even.

“Because it wasn’t that bad, I just went to talk through some of my anxi-
eties.” I was annoyed, hoping she’d leave it at that. She, after all, should un-
derstand better than anyone. She, too, spent most nights awake at 3:30AM
with her thoughts threatening to overwhelm her and her heart pounding in her
chest. “It isn’t a big deal.”

“I _know_ it isn’t a big deal, so I don’t know why you didn’t just tell me.”
Obviously, she thought it was a very big deal.

I bit my tongue, letting a snarky “well, I just told you” sit behind my teeth.
My mother was only ever allowed to hear about things in my life _after_ they oc-
curred. As a kid, I’d tell her I got an A on my test, and she’d say she didn’t know
I had a test. College applications, school events, breakups, all had a waiting
period before they reached my mom, giving me time to process things on my
own. I needed to make sure all damage was done, there weren’t any aftershocks.
I needed to know my voice wouldn’t hitch on the phone. Mom would get the
story after all bombs have been successfully disarmed because I wouldn’t want a sliver of stray shrapnel to leap up and puncture the bubble of today—bills that were always overdue, four kids, two jobs, the daily minutiae that took up her attention and was more important than the things I blathered about to my counselor. My mom never made me feel like one, but it was my goal to never be a burden to her, to never tell her anything that could cause concern.

She paused, soapy hands poised above the sink full of dirty dishes. Her eyes welled, sage green and rimmed with brown mascara, just like my own. “I think therapy can be a very good thing. I went when I was nineteen, and it really helped me regain some of my confidence.”

It was so simple, but her words betrayed the complexity of how we speak to one another, never directly, something always remaining unsaid. What happened when she was nineteen opened like a chasm between us, and in the space laid all the details I’d never asked about, but I could still see her across the distance. I could have reached out, offered words meant to act as a bridge—Mom, I’m sorry that happened to you. I wouldn’t mind hearing the story if you ever want to tell it to me, but I mostly want to know if you’ve found peace. If you’re happy with the way things are now. I want you to know it won’t happen to me. Instead, I let the air lay dead between us, making a note to enter this conversation into my journal.

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The Thanksgiving leftovers were barely in the refrigerator when I went off on a rant about sexual assault on college campuses, all the factors that create and maintain the climate of abuse known as “rape culture.”

And my mom had said, “Young women need to start protecting themselves! If they’re not going to respect themselves, how can they expect other people to?” She said something about tight clothing, something about drinking too much. I looked at her and saw someone who was a teenager thirty years ago, before people began spreading the radical notion that sexual assault is never the victim’s fault.

In all my training sessions on what to do in the event a sexual assault is reported to me—from Residence Life to orientation to the online tutorial we watch before the start of every school year—one thing consistently emphasized was the importance of believing the victim’s story. Acknowledge how difficult it must have been for them to even get the words out. Tell them it wasn’t their fault. What they were wearing, how much they had to drink, whether they’d had sex with their assailant before were all pieces of information that didn’t matter when someone has been violated. So just believe them.

I wanted to shake my mom and scream, what are you saying? I didn’t know how to tell her that I can’t hear the word “rape” without thinking of her expression that day in Panera. When I think of anyone getting assaulted or taken advantage of or abused or violated or any of the myriad other words we use for the terrible things people do to one another, I see her, alone and scared and missing her teeth. Was all of that, then, a result of her lack of self-respect? Her words stung me because I wanted her to know when I talk about sexual assault prevention, I’m advocating for her, the nineteen-year-old version of her who I can’t erase from my mind, especially not when she looks so damn much like the person in my mirror. I was working toward a world in which moth-
ers wouldn’t have to tell their daughters they were raped (with the unspoken warning that it might happen to them too).

My dad suddenly entered the conversation. “The burden of proof rests on the shoulders of the accuser,” he reminded me gently. “A rape case, like any other criminal investigation in this country, still relies on the notion of ‘innocent until proven guilty.’ Once physical evidence is lost, adjudication proceeds with the accounts of the people involved. And it’s almost never enough.” I knew he was right.

While half the battle is getting a victim to report sexual assault to the police—a mere 31% of rapes are reported, as opposed to 62% of robberies and a similar statistic for assault and battery—only 6 out of 1,000 perpetrators will ever see jail time. So, despite outcries of support through movements like #MeToo and the urging of my college administrators to just believe them, the overwhelming statistics present a different narrative. How can anyone honestly think we believe them if we’re simultaneously holding the door open for their attacker to walk free?

I don’t know anything about the abusive boyfriend who hurt my mom. Maybe he saw the inside of a jail, or maybe he joined the 82% of suspected rapists who are never even arrested. And maybe he, like my mom, came from a place of turmoil, a fractured home. Maybe alcohol was a fixture in the hands of the people who raised him, loosening tongues so they only spat words of hate. Or maybe “love” in his household was spelled with clenched fists and split lips; one third of abusers are the children of abusers. But I can allow him no excuses. In my head, he has hateful eyes and a smile made of razor blades. I hope he never saw my mother again. I hope he is haunted.

My interest lies in the children of the abused; am I statistically less at risk because I’m the daughter of a survivor? If one in three American women is likely to be the victim of attempted or completed rape in her lifetime, maybe my mom was the unlucky “chosen one” from our household. And now she has painted her blood above our doorway, warding off the Angel of Rape, hiding my sister and me: There’s no one else for you here. We’ve made our sacrifice.

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The moderator of the sexual assault presentation speaks once more, her voice breaking through the image of my mom at age nineteen.

“Now picture a third person in the room, someone who knows the person you care about is getting hurt. They can do something to stop it. Wouldn’t you want them to? Or, better yet, wouldn’t you want them to say something before it ever got to that point? Wouldn’t you want them to notice the warning signs?”

But there wasn’t a third person in the room when she was beaten and raped, when he tore her clothes and knocked her front teeth out. Nobody saw the warning signs. Nobody did anything to stop him before he had the chance to take her from her home and inflict that pain. They didn’t know he was hurting her until they saw the blood.

I squeeze my eyes tightly, praying my new residents won’t see me cry, hoping I won’t be the person who quickly walks out of the room, drawing the attention of everybody and making them think I’ve been assaulted—I haven’t been assaulted. My mom was the one who took the abuse, and despite how much we look alike, maybe now I won’t have to. We’ve complied with the statistics; her
daughters have been spared. My cheeks burn redder than usual, and my breath catches in my throat. The exercise suddenly ends, and we’re all told to open our eyes.