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To All the Women Whose Names I Don't



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We Keep, and the Silence that Shouldn't Have Been Asked for



Candice Russell Follow

I never wanted to write this letter, to be honest. Besides the obvious complications—that I don't know your name or even how many “yous” are actually out there, for one—I had always assumed, *hoped* even, that some day the right person in the right position at the right organization would catch wind of all the whispers and be the one to finally *do* something about them. I had faith that as a movement, reproductive justice was dedicated to truly living out our values, and taking a stand against the same sort of sexual misconduct we have seen battled elsewhere in the era of #MeToo. But my hope had become increasingly harder to hold on to over the last several months after the Kavanaugh hearings suddenly brought that fight center stage. I saw countless victims treated like they were the ones on trial, their lives completely picked apart, their characters attacked, painful memories they were forced to relive being reduced to nothing but soundbites. This dwindling hope I almost abandoned altogether when for some reason Dr. Parker became everyone's go-to expert on the #MeToo movement and male allyship despite the stories about his inappropriate and predatory behavior, which had become increasingly prevalent. The whispers had become so loud they were more like shouts. Unfortunately I am not exactly good at being a cynic, especially not in regards to something I truly believe in. And as hard as I tried to tamp it down and snuff it out that hope always remained, a tiny ember inside of me waiting to be rekindled. My fire for this work and the love and respect I have for the people within it dormant but not dead, ready to burn again as soon as there is a spark.

For a moment I was convinced that spark had come when my phone began buzzing with texts from friends in Las Vegas for ACN's annual conference. At first it seemed like the

typical movement gossip we all know too well. A few selfies in fancy hotel mirrors and photos from a \$60 buffet line next to a blurry indecipherable image of someone the sender insisted was Carrot Top. Faux admonishing messages about the fact I had decided not to attend, using a generic excuse...the same one I had used for every conference I had skipped since SisterSong in New Orleans. That's when an awkward run-in with Dr. Parker for the first time in a year, coupled with having a complete stranger from another state refer to me as "one of Willie's girls" with enough innuendo in her tone to ensure I knew exactly what she meant, led me to the decision to save myself from ever having to relive something that embarrassing again. Still, I received the sorts of texts you expect to get when your friends are in Las Vegas, and really want to make you sure you feel sorry that you aren't.

Then tenor of those texts made a sudden shift the night of the ACN gala. Three people sent me what essentially was the same video in quick succession, captioned with the same puke-face emoji, the last one adding the words, "So. Awkward," a pair of eyeballs at the end. All three clips were short, with people dancing to something indecipherable. I watched the videos over and over, seeing Dr. Parker dance exceptionally close to a woman on stage. I watched it until my vision blurred, my mind a jumbled mess of questions I knew there was no way I'd ever be able to answer for myself. I wondered what I would have done if I had been there, forced to watch one of our supposed leaders acting like someone's lecherous uncle while everyone watched. Was everyone else as uncomfortable as my friends seemed to be? Had the women on that stage been drinking? Were they drinks that Willie himself provided? Or was this simply a guy letting loose, having some fun, and I had twisted and turned it into something untoward because of my admittedly strong bias against Dr. Parker. Dr. Parker, a man who I once viewed as a hero because of his passion and commitment to abortion access. Now I can't even see a photo of him without feeling the urge to somehow rip myself open and crawl out of my own skin so I never have to think about his hands having ever touched any part of it.

My memories of the night I spent with Willie are as out of focus and frayed around the edges as you would expect them to be after four martinis and an entire bottle of wine, gaps and spaces in time where things get too blurry to be able to make out. Holes that now I am almost grateful for, though I had spent an entire year obsessively trying to fill them. My mind was constantly churning, a strain I could almost feel as my brain searched for all those missing moments as if they were hidden in the corners of shelves I'd never quite be able to reach. Which of us had suggested we have one last night cap afterwards? Why would either of us have thought another drink was a good idea in the first place?

Unable to ever find answers I started to replace those questions with a deep sense of shame and hatred for myself, and for all of the stupid and irresponsible choices I'd made, one after another, that led me to that bed in the first place. That night occurred almost two years after we met. Those years were filled with texts, emails, a handful of meetups for a drink or two when our travel schedules lined up, even a mixed CD collection he mailed as a surprise—one was entitled “Grown and Sexy”. I'd finally given up trying to convince myself our relationship was about him becoming my mentor or even my friend. When he had reached out and suggested that he come into Dallas a night early so we could spend time together I had known what he'd meant, and I said yes anyhow. Because how could I possibly turn down a chance to spend one-on-one time with one of my heroes? Until that point nothing had ever been said outright about anything sexual. However he did talk about how hard it is for him to date because of the work he does and the level of “discretion” it requires from a partner. Something he had circled back to often, and which I now understand was very pointed and deliberate. Still, I had known. And I had said yes, and met him for dinner despite my determination to just steer clear if the evening began to venture into places that made me uncomfortable.

If I hadn't been stupid and allowed myself to get so ridiculously drunk everything would have been fine. I would have made better choices. Would have turned around and left

without saying a word after I found out. I snuck over to buy us a round on my way back from the restroom. After two years of refusals to let me pick up a tab, I knew I had to do it on the sly. That's how I discovered that what I had always assumed were vodka tonics had been soda water and lime. Sober, sensible Candice wouldn't have ever gone back to the table at all, never mind accepted some half-hearted mea culpa about decades of sobriety, about how it made things less awkward in public spaces. As if that somehow explained the fact that every single encounter we had ever had since we met involved him suggesting we grab a drink.

Instead I stayed. I drank my fourth martini, and then the bottle of wine he had opened when we got inside that by then I knew I didn't have to share. Foolish decisions made by a woman old enough to have known better, getting herself into a situation she wouldn't ever be able to fix. The missing parts and pieces didn't matter because I knew I was so much smarter than the choices I had made, and there was no excuse for how stupid I had been. No situation where I wasn't the one to blame. If I had done the right thing, left at the appropriate time, stopped after two drinks like I should have, none of this would have ever happened. If I hadn't been so irresponsible I wouldn't have to relive the only completely clear moment I have from that night over and over and over again every single time his face pops up in my newsfeed, or his name is mentioned in a meeting. What do I remember? That sinking feeling in my stomach, the crawling sensation all over my skin when for a few seconds everything felt in focus, and I could fully understand how dirty and uncomfortable and wrong I felt about the fact that I was there and his hands were too.

When I woke up the next morning, simultaneously hungover and still slightly drunk, that feeling was all that was left from the night before. Unable to drive home but desperately not wanting to stay, praying I'd be able to somehow exit before the snoring body beside me woke up and made the last 24 hours real. Instead, I was there when he woke. We had an awkward encounter that morning when he slipped me his key for later, on his way out to give a keynote. A keycard I left behind knowing that there was no way

in hell I'd come back to that room, already dreading the next time we'd inevitably have to share even a public space, let alone a bed.

I hadn't gone back to that place in my mind in a very long time when I watched those videos. Eventually I found out that I wasn't an exception to some rule but a repeated pattern. Eventually I learned about you. I suddenly realized that while I might have been triggered by watching a few grainy iPhone clips of Dr. Parker acting like a frat boy, I hadn't been there, seeing it live, in person, hundreds of other people around me. How many of you weren't as lucky? How many of you were watching, but still didn't know what I knew? Didn't know about his sobriety. Didn't know just how many times this had been rumored to have happened over the years. For how many of you did the secret eventually boil over and spill out when you looked for help from someone you thought of as a leader? How many of you were told, like I was, that disclosing would hurt the movement and our chances at surviving the ongoing attacks being made against abortion access? The weight of something that heavy always on top of you until eventually it felt like you might suffocate, and you were forced to choose between healing and continuing the work you love, knowing you couldn't give it up despite the fact it seemed to be killing you?

I also wonder how many of you knew all of this pain wasn't something you were suffering alone, an assumption I had for years until last spring, when all that pressure boiled over once again but this time to someone who not only believed me but already knew how it ended because she'd heard the same story from someone close to her. She couldn't tell me who, of course, but that didn't matter to me as I sobbed into her shoulder and took in what felt like my first full breath in years. I offered my name. My number. My email. Anything that meant I'd finally be able to have some sort of clarity about how I had been the one he targeted despite the fact that he had a seemingly endless number of women obviously interested in the thing he had stolen from us. When I never heard back I wasn't surprised. I understand the pressure that comes with

having to hold this secret, a pressure for me so strong that it felt like my only choice was to explode.

I also knew from all those times I wasn't able to hold it in anymore, and had reached out for help, that while everyone agreed he was a predator, calling him out wasn't the answer. Doing so would only lead to us losing the very battle I'd given my entire life up to fight in. Of course you were silent, thinking that an entire movement was on your shoulders. I was silent too. Would still be, probably, until someone started a rumor that grew into a crisis and our stories became 3rd-hand accounts shared in gossipy group texts full of accusation and conjecture without our consent. It had come seemingly out of nowhere, until someone finally told me about an article coming out regarding his misconduct in a major national publication. They had all incorrectly assumed I was contributing to it. Nobody could tell me many details and the ones I did have weren't exactly consistent, the whos and the whens and the wheres seemingly unknown.

Somehow despite all of that vagueness and inconsistency the news of a story breaking on that grand of a scale seemed to spark immediate action from movement leadership. Emergency meetings were held. Impromptu crisis planning sessions occurred. And while my initial reaction was panic and fear that at any moment I might be named or alluded to, my story shared without my knowledge or consent by someone I may or may not even know, I also felt a tiny bit of hope returning. That even though I had pretty much given up, it turned out that in the end there would be justice for all of us. Justice and maybe even closure, something I never thought I'd actually achieve.

I thought of you then too, wondering if you were in Vegas and getting this information in real time, and how hard it must be to try and process something so huge without letting on that you felt anything other than their same shock. Imagining what it was like to be forced to listen to everyone's conjecture about who it was he hurt, and how exactly he had hurt them, while holding all the complexities that come with feeling fear and joy and regret all at once and not being allowed to share them. Unfortunately as I began to piece together the puzzle of what had happened it became increasingly obvious to me

what at this point I am sure everyone else knows—the article that sent our entire community into panic had never actually existed, and instead was some bit of gossip that had somehow escalated into something quite visible and real, serious concerns being addressed that hadn't ever been spoken out loud despite the fact everyone felt them. Things set in motion that couldn't possibly be undone or taken back, not now that so many people in positions of power had explicitly heard just how many stories were being told about the person lifted up as our figurehead.

I knew it wouldn't take long for everyone else to put the puzzle together and realize that they'd managed to turn a rumor into a full-fledged albeit manufactured movement-wide crisis. I also knew, deep down, that once the spotlight was gone, and the threat of negative optics removed, all of it would be swept under the rug, handled “internally” but never publicly acknowledged. The justice we were hoping for would come in the form of a silent and unseen slap on the wrist so as not to disrupt a very busy appearance schedule. I have never been so desperate to be wrong in my life. Still there were the same excuses I'd been hearing for years about the importance of not ruining someone's reputation on conjecture, about how dangerous anonymous complaints can be. Something inside of me that had been strained for far too long finally gave way, cracking under the weight of secrets I wasn't allowed to tell despite the fact that I'd discovered I wasn't alone.

There is no way for me to know how many of us are out there, how many of the dozens and dozens of stories being whispered about by friends of friends overlap and repeat. How many still stay shrouded in silence brought on by undue pressure and misplaced shame? Should it even matter really? If this only happened to two women and not twenty does that make Dr. Parker somehow less of an abuser? What about how much alcohol we might have been drinking? Or whether or not we said yes to his invitation up to his room? Do these details make a difference too? Do the “gray areas” that we've spent the last year calling other people out for, when they attempted to paint them as

justifications for abusive behavior, suddenly become valid points when it's one of our own that's being accused? Even I have been guilty of letting my vision be colored, always framing what happened that night as “problematic” and “an abuse of power” and “misconduct” but never rape. Never that.

It has taken me days to finally finish writing this, each one reaching a part of me I tried never to go back to and hurting just a little more. And without an amazing group of friends supporting me I might not have made it through at all. I've lost a few along the way, especially after the Mississippi 6 week ban, because they feared that this wasn't the time, that news like this would hurt our fight, and in the end cost us the war. I had to turn off the email on my rarely-touched website last night after I was spammed by a repeated message telling me that coming forward was selfish, and warning me of the blood that would be on my hands. If I hadn't known better I would have thought it was just another hurtful threat from an anti, the sort of harassment I'd gotten used to since I first shared my abortion story in public. The kind of harassment that doesn't phase me anymore. But it hurt like hell when it was coming from someone I thought was on my same side.

I won't pretend that this will have no consequences, ones that unfortunately won't be limited to the individual who deserves them but that will be felt by everyone who works and fights for abortion rights. Unfortunately there will never be some magical “better time” for this to happen. There will never be a time access isn't under attack, and we aren't constantly under the microscope of people trying to undermine anyone who defends it. This is a movement led by entire communities not a religion worshipping one single deity—especially if that deity is a cis-gendered heterosexual male using his power to exploit and abuse the very people standing at his feet. We cannot allow our success to be predicated on the protection of a known predator as if his life is somehow worth more than the women he has victimized. How can we even continue to fight if at our core we are sending the same message as our enemy, one where the lives of women are completely disposable in the right circumstance?

Despite what we have been told, sharing your stories and seeking justice is not what is going to bring down this movement, though the hypocrisy of the people who have ignored your pain just might. And even if after all of this they still decide to turn a blind eye to what everyone knows is true, at least you now know there's someone out there who sees you, and who won't stop until everyone else finally admits that they can too.

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15



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