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Locker Room Talk

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“certainly i’m not proud of it, but this poem is just locker room talk”

Kathryn Willoughby

1. my mother teaches me about scary men at age four. she shows me on herself places that a scary man might try to touch. still small enough to be curled up in her lap, she has me practice screaming. “good,” she whispers, nuzzling my cheek. “again. louder.”
2. ryan kisses me in kindergarten. my cheeks get sticky with his five-year-old saliva. even when he’s across from me in our reading circle, he makes kissy-faces at me. i tell the teacher again and again. “i don’t like it,” i say. she tells me he must like me. that he’s being sweet. “now, drink your orange juice.”
3. my mother tells me at age eight to never wear sleeveless shirts. “i read a story about a man who was compelled to follow a girl around home-depot because of her shoulders. it’s just tempting for men.”
4. my parents have a book called “preparing your daughter for every woman’s battle” that i borrow at age ten. in the section for the daughter, the female author explains her rape at fourteen was because she wore a tight green sweater. there is a chapter on going through your closet and throwing out clothes. in the section for the parents, the male author assures fathers that generally, they won’t get turned on hugging their pubescent daughter. don’t worry.
5. a family friend i cannot name hugs me with his arms at my skinny, age eleven waist. by twelve, they’ve slipped to my hips, then lower. i meet with my aunt cheryl one day and tell her everything. she tells me he’s creepy. “you know, if you don’t like the way he hugs you, you can say no. you can say no to a hug. do not forget that.” i don’t forget it, but it feels so radical it cannot be true. it would be really impolite.
6. the first time a boy pins me against a wall, i am thirteen. his name is joshua and we are at school. his beady eyes are predatory and before

i can check myself, i raise my right foot and kick him in the balls. a rush of power flows through my veins and he yells “YOU BITCH!” anna pulls me away, later telling me that his friends were not so immobilized and they’re looking for me. “what were you thinking?” she whisper-yells. “i don’t know,” i sputter. i spend the rest of the week hiding.

7. at age fourteen, a boy pulls me onto his increasingly uncomfortable lap. he holds me there for a moment, my body used for a deviancy i did not consent to, before allowing me to twist myself out of his grip. he complains “your ass is so bony,” like the purpose of my body’s softness is to be a cushion for his erection. everyone laughs.
8. walking in the snow from the bus stop to my boyfriend’s house, i am a tiny sixteen-year-old wrapped up in miles of scarves and sweaters. i am excited to see him, so i don’t hear the sound of a teenage boy running up behind me. it is only when he puts his hands on my butt and pushes me to the ground that i realize i’m not alone. i look up and see his face, his mountain lion smile full of canines. i grab my bag and run, too scared to stop and look back in case i turn to salt.
9. at age sixteen, i am trying to figure out whether or not i want to keep doing sexual things with my boyfriend. they’re escalating, and i want to be sure. one night i say, “please, no, i don’t want to do this. please, no.” i make my decision and start to sit up. he doesn’t let me. he looms over me like a cloud covering up the sun and with his right hand he – well, i’ll let donald trump finish that sentence.
10. twenty-two years old and waiting at a bus stop, a tall man in all black appears in my line of vision and pins me against a wall. it is all too familiar, but i am smarter now. quieter. i enunciate carefully, firmly. “you need to leave me alone.” miraculously, he does. still, as he steps back, he yells into the portland night, “YOU FUCKING BITCH!”

11.

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