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WE THE MOTHERS

KATHI HANSEN

We sought each other out while trying to shake off a persistent state of shock. We sought each other out because of an urgent pull to speak to someone who wasn't our son, our spouse, our mother, father, sister, the lawyer we'd hired. We sought each other out when our therapist suggested we connect with someone suffering the same devastation we were. We sought each other out while thinking: Our son had been a preemie. *Why didn't I follow the ordered bedrest when I was pregnant?* Our son spent more of his early years with his nanny than he did with us. *Did I really have to work that hard?* Our son was in utero at a time when it was okay to have a glass of wine a day while pregnant. *I should have known better.* Our son has two moms. *Promise you won't tell her I think this.* Our son was born to someone too old to be a mom. *How had I missed the loudly ticking clock?* We sought each other out when we couldn't silence the voice in our heads asking over and over: Was this our fault?

We found each other by sleuthing the Internet, by following craggy trails of gossip, by Googling campus sexual assaults; we found each other through some sort of divine intervention. When we first gathered, it was the first time we'd fixed our hair, worn mascara, blush, a freshly ironed shirt, in months. It was the first time the scent of our own cologne (*La Vie Est Belle, Flowerbomb, Gabrielle*) didn't gag us. When we gathered—every other month, clutching identical paperback copies of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (we can't remember which of us suggested it)—*If anyone asks, we're a book club, right?*—we slid into a corner booth where words

We the Mothers

tumbled fast and we couldn't stop them and the waiter always had to return several times just to take our order. Excuse me ladies. *Cab Franc, or Zinfandel?*

When we gathered, we spoke a unique language steeped in the same dialect.

When we gathered, we the mothers were heard.

We never had to say, "This is only between us." Nor did we tell each other that we'd suckled our boys at our breasts, tousled their first wavy locks, taught them to read, write, count. We didn't ladder our hands to illustrate the notches on the kitchen doorframe that charted their growth, nor mention how we cried late one night when the light from the open refrigerator caught the topmost mark that suddenly we knew would be the last. We didn't say we'd cheered on our boys from too many sidelines to count, or once tried to ease their aching young hearts with platitudes about fish in the sea, the healing properties of time, doors that open when others have closed.

We didn't have to say that we'd watched our boys grow muscles and wills. That we'd watched them grow facial hair and good humor. That we'd watched them grow tall, curious, and interesting. That we'd watched them grow character. We didn't say either that we'd watched them grow sad and quiet.

We didn't argue the distinction between falsely accused and wrongly accused.

There were so many things we didn't need to say.

We got the news while walking to our car after Pilates, while in the middle of a faculty meeting, while on the escalator in the courthouse. We got the news while in the cereal aisle at Vons, while videoconferencing at work, while helping our daughter with her homework. It came the day after Halloween (when our boy had been at college for all of a month and a half), it came right before our boy was headed home for winter break, it came two weeks before he was supposed to graduate. "I may be in some trouble." *We were both so drunk.* "Something bad has happened." *We were both so drunk.* "Justin doesn't know I'm calling you—he figured he

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had to say, "This is only between us." Nor did we tell each other we'd suckled our boys at our breasts, tousled their first wavy hair, taught them to read, write, count. We didn't ladder our hands on the notches on the kitchen doorframe that charted their progress, mention how we cried late one night when the light from the refrigerator caught the topmost mark that suddenly we knew was the last. We didn't say we'd cheered on our boys from too many bleachers, or once tried to ease their aching young hearts with a splash of cut fish in the sea, the healing properties of time, doors that we thought were closed.

We have to say that we'd watched our boys grow muscles, that we'd watched them grow facial hair and good humor. We watched them grow tall, curious, and interesting. That we'd watched them grow character. We didn't say either that we'd watched them grow old and quiet.

We argue the distinction between falsely accused and wrongly convicted.

We do so many things we didn't need to say.

We talk in the news while walking to our car after Pilates, while in the hallway at the faculty meeting, while on the escalator in the courthouse. We talk in the car while in the cereal aisle at Vons, while videoconferencing with our daughter while helping our daughter with her homework. It came to us on the first of the loweens (when our boy had been at college for all of a month) and it came right before our boy was headed home for winter break, the two weeks before he was supposed to graduate. "I may be late." *We were both so drunk.* "Something bad has happened." *We were both so drunk.* "Justin doesn't know I'm calling you—he figured he

could handle it himself— but I'm freaking out. He's been talking suicide." *We were all so drunk.*

At first we thought we'd misheard; that our preoccupation with an upcoming trial, the monotone of the NPR reporter droning through the car speakers, the parent/teacher conferences slated for the following day, that the to-do-list in our head had interfered and scrambled the reception. At first we thought our boys were joking, playing a misguided and immature prank, were day-drunk, or under the influence of a sinister narcotic someone had slipped them. At first we thought they'd fallen down the stairs, slipped on the ice—*I hate winter here, Mom!*—had a car accident and hit their heads on the dashboard. At first we thought it was one of those ruthless scams we'd heard about on the news, a stranger trying to work us up about our boy so as to work us out of our cash. *You need to wire money immediately.* At first we thought someone had put a gun to their heads, commanded them to text, speak, cry. *Where is my boy, and what have you done to him?* We thought someone had stolen their phones, their voices, their identities.

And then began the season of our neglect. We neglected our jobs, our correspondence, our voicemail, our bookkeeping, our hair, our nourishment, our workouts, our sleep, our own reflections in the rearview, the silvery store window, the antique oval mirror in the hallway. We neglected our friends who didn't have sons accused of sexual assault (which—for all we knew—was all of them). We neglected our husbands, our wife, our other children. We neglected our grief, our shame, our souls.

Soon we became actors. We pretended we hadn't noticed that the neighbors, co-workers, the checkout clerk at the grocery store, the barista at our favorite coffee shop—especially her—even the UPS driver to whom we gave generous holiday tips, looked at us differently. We pretended not to notice the sudden silence in the softball stands when we climbed the cement steps to take our favorite seat, the deafening hush when our daughter pitched a perfect inning, the muffled murmurs during our other boy's band recital. We pretended we hadn't noticed the

little boy tugging his mother's purse in the line at the pharmacy. *Is she the bad boy's mommy?* We pretended not to be crushed with dread over the thought that if this was happening to us, imagine what was happening to our boys.

We pantomimed engagement while thoroughly disengaged. We picked at our lunches in the faculty lounge, the company lunchroom, our desks. We fake-smiled when we passed colleagues in the hallway (even when they pretended not to see us), we faux-chatted with the receptionist, about the weather, traffic, but not the twin toddlers who beamed from identical frames on the shelf behind her desk. We accidentally caught our reflection in the women's room mirror, saw lines we'd never before noticed now connecting our brows and fanning from the corners of our eyes. We made a mental note to stop at the drug store on the way home to grab some concealer to try to hide our dark shadows, but when we pulled into the parking lot forgot why we'd stopped.

We searched for words to answer the concern of the judge in Department 35 with whom we'd gone to law school and realized that perhaps she was right—it would be impossible to imagine what we were going through. We thanked the principal for his concern and the suggestion that we take paid leave, and told him it was unnecessary since we had the matter in hand. We met the gaze of our manager in the elevator and secretly wished a similar heartache might befall him and immediately chastised ourselves for our inability to control our emotions.

We kept our phones close by and listened obsessively for the tone we'd assigned to calls and messages from our boys. *How can they possibly reclaim their lives?* We tried to absorb their nightmares, to suffer them so that our boys wouldn't have to. Only our trick didn't work. We suffer their nightmares, but they still do, too.

We'd strapped them to our backs, snugged them to our fronts, taken them grocery shopping, to the petting zoo, the playground. "It's okay, honey, Mommy will catch you!" We'd packed their lunches, wiped their noses, pretended we'd not seen stains on their sheets. One summer we

took them to the ER for stitches twice (eyebrow and thumb), for a splint (wrist), for a cast (arm), for crutches (ankle). *Hey, this isn't how I wanted to spend my summer either, Buster.* The next summer we handed them car keys and told them at first mention of a tow truck they'd never drive again. *And please don't be late for dinner.*

Our boys were athletic and bookish. They were popular and worryingly shy. Jack, an aspiring poet and National Merit Scholar on a full-ride at his first-choice college, had as a toddler named his stuffed monkey PJ and called him Peedge for short. Justin wanted to be a fighter pilot like his grandfather. When he was eight years old, Justin declared he'd skip his senior year and go straight to the Air Force Academy—*if only you had*—but had chosen instead a local state college so he could be close to his brothers. He's the kind of boy you might not notice, his silent attention laser-focused on computer coding, his sagged pants (which drives his father a little crazy) his most obvious form of self-expression. Ryan, captain of his high school lacrosse team, first to be chosen by a popular fraternity (but attending college only because we insisted), once cried for a solid month when the family dog died and refused our offer to get a new puppy. "Why would I want another thing that could die?"

Our boys debated politics and religion, the merits of hip hop and whether the earth would survive long enough for them to have grandchildren and without pausing asked for a second helping of roasted carrots, chicken cacciatore, mac and cheese. They vacillated between despising their siblings and adoring them, between hugging us and not. Of all their chores, they hated kitchen duty worst of all. "It's not my turn!" Our boys blasted heavy metal in their bedrooms, cranked Southern rock in their cars, were addicted to classic rock. *How is it you know the lyrics to the songs from my generation better than I do?* They devoured dystopian novels, hated *Star Wars*, loved *Star Trek*, preferred skateboards over video games, lived to surf, adored poetry but refused to read the beatniks.

We didn't cry when we dropped them at their dorms. We didn't cry until we were on the way to the airport, and then not just on the way, not just

on the plane, and not just for the first two days. We cried even though the college was twenty miles away, and Justin promised to come home for dinner the next weekend. We cried because the college was all the way across the country, even though Jack promised to come home for Thanksgiving. We cried even though with Sam gone, we still had two kids at home and it would be three years before we dropped our next boy at his dorm. We cried even though we were tired of doing laundry, editing essays, planning our lives around baseball, soccer, track, band, school holidays, college applications. We cried even though we were tired of not being able to fall asleep until we heard their footsteps late at night, tired of being convinced whenever we heard sirens it was our boy in the back of the ambulance. We worried that we were worrying too much or not enough.

We waited many days to clean their rooms (or to close their doors and declare their room a mausoleum). We stuffed giant bags with clothes they'd not worn in years, a deflated basketball, baseball bats so old our boys could wrap their hands around them twice, shoes so big we could fit both our feet in one (trust us, we tried). The thing we found in the bottom dresser drawer that most surprised us: an unopened bottle of Gatorade, stuffed between stretched-out and faded boxers, as if we didn't keep our refrigerator fully stocked. As if our boys, on their own, were prepared for the next big earthquake. As if they thought we wouldn't provide for them. We pitched smelly socks that had missed the hamper, the unopened box of condoms their father had given them between sophomore and junior year when it sure looked like they were madly in love with Madison Kelly. We dumped the half empty bottle of Grey Goose—*If you're going to drink, do it at home*—we'd found hidden behind the plumbing under their bathroom sink because we couldn't be sure that's what was in it. Our wife didn't ask why Peedge now lived between the pillows on our bed, even at night. She didn't mention it at all.

We weren't there when whatever happened happened. Of course we weren't. Only two people were, one of whom just happened to be our boy. It's not as if we don't understand how it might look to you. Believe

us, we know. We hear you say: "Have you not heard the victims' claims? Are you deaf? Dumb? Blind? Are you in denial? Have you always rushed to your rotten sons' defenses, accused the accusers, refused to see the truth? Have your maternal instincts—your boys so fucking precious and special—overtaken all reason? Are you crazy? Fucking nats? Hormonal? Evil? Can't you imagine how terrible it was for her?"

When one girl claimed she was too intoxicated to consent—*We were both so drunk*—we thought about the morning our freshman year when we awoke sick and dizzy and slowly remembered James grunting in our ear and hoped we wouldn't run into him in Montezuma Hall, especially if our boyfriend was anywhere near. We'd been stupid; we were deeply ashamed, but didn't dream of saying we'd had no say or lacked personal power. When one girl went to the campus police with claims she'd been assaulted weeks earlier by a boy she'd liked in an apartment a few blocks away, we remembered our college roommate pursuing David Patterson for a month before telling us she'd had sex with him the evening before even though he clearly told her he was interested in only that. She cried for weeks when he pretended that nothing had happened. When one girl claimed she'd only escaped something worse by wriggling free, we remembered the sting of rejection we felt when our boys wriggled out from under our playful and loving clutches at five, or six—or was it ten? How from then on we sometimes had to fight the urge to force the physical manifestation of our love on them.

When one girl claimed that the last she could remember was having a drink and then awakening to realize she'd been raped we thought: But wouldn't there be witnesses? And: Only a monster would do that.

Our boys smelled powdery, before they smelled like Play-Doh, earth, chocolate, mildew, grass. Diaper-clad Ryan once squatted beside a crying older friend, bloody-kneed from a tumble, patting his back and whispering over and over again, "Be okay. Be okay." Our boys smelled of musky sweat, the spicy deodorant *Dark Temptation*, freshly sawed lumber, minty toothpaste, cinnamon, beer. Justin carries a smooth black stone that smells of sea salt he'd found on a family camping trip—a talisman—in

his pocket always. It's okay for us to know these things, it's okay for us to hold these visceral memories that bloom unbidden in our nostrils, but it's not okay for us to know what we know about our boys' sex lives.

Our boys were expelled, suspended, or in the one instance in which no formal discipline resulted—*We were both so drunk—are now unable to show their faces on campus, in town, the entire state, in our own neighborhood*. Forget the nicknames that became our boys as they grew: Turtle—because he was shy; Boy—because as a toddler he referred to himself in the third person, “Boy want cookie”; Catch—because he could; Duster—because...how weird that we can't remember.

The names given them after whatever happened weren't those names; they were these: Liar. Monster. Pig. Pervert. Misogynist. Deviant. Predator. Criminal. Animal. Rapist.

Sometimes we thought if only we could talk to the girl. Sometimes we thought if only we could talk to the girl's mother. Some of us thought we should try, but we reminded them, “Do not contact her,” our sons' lawyers had said. “Do not think you can fix this.”

In our homes we had rules. We had respect and manners. In our homes we were mindful of earned praise and demanded only that our boys try their best. In our homes we taught by example. *See how your mom greets each day with a smile even though her chances of finding fulfilling work have dwindled to nothing?* In our homes we didn't rule with an iron fist (as some of us had been ruled), but neither were we afraid to discipline (though our boys rarely gave us reason to lose our temper), and we raised our hands to them only twice). *No means no*. In our homes we told our children that things won't always go their way, to expect roadblocks, and showed them the ways we ourselves maneuvered around them. *Sometimes things happen for a reason*. When our boys didn't make the team, when their front tire went flat at the starting line of the race, when their flu peaked on the last day of the championship game, we watched them shrug as they strode past us, watched in slow motion as

they brushed our hands off their shoulders, as they raised their chins and walked on. When the used car they'd been saving for since kindergarten was sold to someone else five minutes before they showed up with fists full of the cash, we heard the catch in their throats when they said, "It's okay, I'll keep looking."

In our homes we encouraged open communication and demonstrated peaceful management of conflict. *When your father is this tired, it's best to wait until tomorrow. Go for a run—you always feel better after.* In our homes we urged the importance of personal responsibility. When toddler Jack stole ducky buttons off the rack in the fabric store, when young Sam slid a pack of gum under his fat little leg in the seat of the grocery cart, when Derek added a picture book to the bag while we paid at the bookstore, we marched them back in and made them confess their crimes. They were perhaps too small to understand (though their tears said otherwise), but we were weaving important life lessons into their DNA. Halfway into blaming his C in AP History on Mr. Tanaka, the teacher, Justin interrupted himself and said, "Well, I guess I could have studied harder." Before he'd fully formed the words to cast blame on the catcher for allowing the run that lost the game, Ryan admitted to lobbing the toss. "Even with the sun in my eyes I shoulda had it."

Our boys love and respect their sisters, their aunts, grandmothers, their mothers. They loved and respected all their female teachers. They held sweet and steady crushes on girls as they grew, and deeper, more complicated feelings for sweethearts when they were old enough. Justin stood up for the girl who infiltrated his Boy Scout troop. *Wait! She's in my algebra class—she's cool.* Our boys encouraged the enrollment of girls in shop and woodworking classes. *Why shouldn't they have to endure this torture, too?* Our boys took to the elderly widow next door—cutting her lawn of their own volition; the woman in the wheelchair down the street—carrying her newspaper to the front door on the way to school when no one had suggested it; the homeless woman at the corner—stopping to chat and bring her pit bull some treats.

When they started seriously dating in high school, we told our boys that if a girl they slept with became pregnant, we didn't care how many

others boys they thought had slept with her, too, there'd be no DNA test on our watch. *You'll be the father you took the risk to become.* (And then we secretly prayed they'd not make us grandmothers in quite that manner.)

In our homes lived sturdy generational Democrats and lifelong feminists. We're not saying our boys are angels, are perfect, are irreproachable, we're just saying that we the mothers didn't need to teach our boys not to rape.

Our boys were called before the campus police, the dean, committees of stone-faced administrators. The sheriff, the detective, the cop insisted they didn't need a lawyer, to be Mirandized, or to stay quiet. The worst thing, Sam said, is that nothing I say matters. Nothing I say will ever matter. To our entreaty we'd repeated since they were little about things sometimes happening for a reason—what, they asked now, do we think was the reason *this* happened? So we'd never be able to show our faces again? So we can never date another girl? So we'd drop out and what? Park cars for a living? So, Justin said, from now on I'm just supposed to be a fucking eunuch?

Sometimes their siblings or their fathers or our parents accused us of favoritism, but we would never choose one child over another. (Ryan is an only child, so what do you say to that?) We love our children equally, but our boy Jack was the apple of his maternal grandpa's eye and our boy Sam has dimples exactly like ours (his siblings decidedly do not), and our boy Justin plays piano by ear; a trait we never recognized in ourselves until we noticed his. It's just that sometimes our husbands said the wrong things:

"Did you ever think maybe he did this thing?"

"For Chrissake, give it a rest."

"It'll blow over."

"Maybe he'll learn from this."

When our wife dissolved into tears, we realized that anger or frustration or overwhelming helplessness could suffocate the both of us.

Sometimes when Jack was in the shower or Ryan was running around his old high school track late at night, we'd open our boy's email or scroll through his texts and delete the hate. Sometimes a stranger found their way to our inboxes, and we sent them to junk, permanently destroyed the ugliness, and tried to remember the rhyme about sticks and stones. Once, someone egged our car and damaged the paint, and once, someone painted MOTHERS OF FUCKER on our garage door in oil-based color with perfect penmanship, and the next morning our wife tried to paint it over and the neighbors closed their blinds. A young woman in a car we may have recognized drove past twice and flipped the bird, and our boy's grandma picked that very minute to stop by with banana bread. It was the first time we saw her cry, and we looked up the street and prayed our boy wasn't on the way home. Sometimes we sank to the floor shrieking and pulled out our hair in tangled strands. Once, after reading the newspaper, we threw a cup of coffee across the kitchen and only while picking up shards and sopping up the mess, did we wonder who we'd become.

Sometimes we slept through the night, and it was a few minutes after we opened our eyes before we remembered. That for our boy there'd been a presumption of guilt. That we'd emptied our retirement accounts, spent our college savings, that we'd maxed out our credit cards, taken second mortgages, borrowed from our parents (who really couldn't afford to lend to us) to pay for therapists and lawyers. That we'd called in favors, used our knowledge of the school system, the legal system, the workings of public relations firms, to help us wage our uphill battles. Sometimes we slept through the night, and it was a few blessed minutes after we opened our eyes before we remembered that our boys had been badly wounded. That our boys were marked, blemished, flawed, damaged.

Liar. Monster. Pig. Predator. Misogynist. Criminal. The names persist even for our boys whose suspensions were reversed, the criminal case abandoned, the comments on transcripts expunged. When we call them

Catch or Duster or Boy, our boys look at us like they don't know who the hell we're talking to.

The afternoon our corner booth grew suddenly quiet, we the mothers grew anxious. We glanced at each other nervously and then at Liz who stared at her hands crocheted tightly together on the table in front of her. The air around us tightened. The silence spread outward. To the nearby tables. To the tables beyond them. To the windows in front. To the ceiling above us, the door across from us, the floor beneath us. In our suffocation, we felt dozens of eyes boring down on us. Our own gazes tumbled about. Waves of pressure warbled our heads. Our breath caught. Our throats constricted.

We willed her to snap out of it. We willed her to remember all that we'd shared. We willed her to stop thinking whatever it was she was thinking.

And then so quietly we had to lean in to hear, she said: "I think he may have done this thing."

We watched an elderly man cane slowly pass the hostess stand. We heard the tap-tap-tap of his stick on the tile. We glanced at the middle-aged couple sitting at the nearby table, busy with their phones. We heard their fingers push glass. We watched our waiter bounce on his toes, his moving reflection caught upside down by the stainless steel hood in the kitchen. We heard his muffled questions to the cook.

We considered waving our hands, asking what in the world was taking so long. "Our wine," we almost said. "Where's our wine?" Instead we said nothing. Instead we tapped our fingers atop the paperbacks set as always in front of us; we slid our index fingers over the shiny covers, ran them down the stiff spines, along the edges of the unthumbed pages. We flipped the books over, covers to table, and like the faces of those girls we dared not imagine, *The Sun Also Rises* became unseeable.