

Words Not Spoken

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I'm a bit of a doormat. Pushover. People-pleaser. Whatever you want to call it.

Growing up, maybe not as a young child but as far back as I can remember, I was terrified of making mistakes, letting people down, disappointing them. While the “nobody’s perfect” adage seemed like a universal truth, I was determined to somehow be the exception. Even greater than my fear of mistakes and determination to be free of them, however, was my terror at the cascade of memories that would inevitably follow when I did slip up. Slowly but surely, the present moment would remind me of another mistake, and another, until my brain was rapidly cycling through all the worst things I’d done. For days after the episode, I’d struggle to fall asleep at night because of my preoccupation with my mistakes, no matter how small. This fear followed me, intensified, into adulthood.

These days, when I make a mistake or think too hard about one I’ve made in the past, the onslaught of memories afterwards comes to settle on the same regret each time. The one that even still, two years later, keeps me from making peace with myself. I’m in a small, warmly-lit classroom with two other girls and we’re filming a fake news report for a French assignment. It’s early springtime. I check my phone in between takes to see missed calls and a stream of texts from a friend urging me to call back when I can. I excuse myself for a moment, step to the other side of the classroom, and call back.

In his friendly, familiar voice: “Hey Rains, how’s it going?”

“It’s going well, what’s up?”

“I don’t really know how to broach this, but I was wondering what’s going on with you and C. The two of you don’t seem as close this semester. Some other girls apparently had really unpleasant encounters with him and are planning on reporting what happened to Project Safe, so I wanted to check and see if something similar happened to you. If so, it may be a good idea to report it.”

I don’t remember what I said in response. I gave some made-up story explaining why you and I hadn’t been spending time together. All I know is that I lied. A close friend, someone I admired and trusted, had asked me to speak out about an assault so that other people could be protected from going through the same thing. And I pretended like nothing had ever happened. Even worse, I went back to being your friend, comforted you when you complained that you felt guilty for assaulting me.

“These things happen,” I said. “It’s not a big deal.”

What was I thinking? Why was I consoling you? Why was I more concerned about your wellbeing than my own? And why had I put other people in a position where the same thing could happen to them?

To this day, I can't shake the memory of the day I got that call and denied everything. I can't shake my regret at my decision or the worry about what you might be doing to other people now. I can't shake the rage I feel at myself and I don't know that I'll ever be able to, really. I'm plagued by a seemingly irresolvable tension between the guilt I feel over not speaking out and my shame and self-blame over what happened. I mean for God's sake, I can't even bring myself to write your name down because I don't want this to reflect poorly on you. Why the fuck do I care?

If ever a friend were in this situation, I know that I wouldn't treat them the way I do myself. I know that. I'd tell them they were loved, they weren't ready to speak about what happened, and they weren't the perpetrator. But no matter how much I argue these points to myself, my conviction that I should have done something differently is unrelenting. It's tiresome.

It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. At this point, I can't count the number of people who have said those words to me. And at this point, I still don't believe them. All I can do is hope that maybe, if I say them to myself and repeat them enough, they will someday ring true.