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## Don't Risk It; Wait Until She's Sober

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Patrick John White\*

It turns out rape is considered a military occupational hazard in the eyes of the US judicial system.

The good people at my local recruiting office never mentioned that.

If a landmine blows off your legs, that's a military occupational hazard. If an IED paralyzes you from the neck down, that's a military occupational hazard. If your drunk commanding officer sneaks into your room and forces himself on you, that's also a military occupational hazard. The difference is you get a medal of honor for the first two and identity-crushing shame for the last one.

In the military, they have what's called the Chain of Command, a system in which a quarter of all servicewomen never bother reporting rape because the rapist is the commanding officer they'd have to report it to.

But even if that commanding officer was one of the good ones (that is, not a rapist), who'd want to make that phone call to their superior officer saying, "*I know I was supposed to ride my subordinates so hard that they were too scared to take a shit, much less rape each other, but, funny story . . .*" Because admitting someone was raped under your watch might lead to leave or termination, which would lead to loss of status and prestige, which could lead to alcoholism and existential crisis.

So, why even admit it happened?

Besides the person who was raped, who's that really going to help? Definitely not the commanding officer. Definitely not the superior officer.

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Definitely not the military (contrary to popular belief, any press is *not* good press).

So why not just develop and distribute a bunch of posters, pamphlets, and instructional videos training women in the fine art of *not* getting raped? Add stricter dress codes and makeup policies? Pawn them off as safety measures?

Well, whoever came up with that idea got a big-ass promotion because that's exactly what the military did.

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I was discharged from the United States Coast Guard for adultery.

When I got home, the doctors told me that I had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but with Veteran's Affairs keeping my claim in a sort of limbo, and my husband and I not having health insurance, we had to pay for all the pills and counseling with two brand new (way too easily opened) credit cards we couldn't afford.

It turns out rape is rather expensive.

A few months later, I got the chance to testify in a series of hearings against the military, an opportunity my husband cautioned against, but supported me on. There must have been over 50 men and women at these hearings from all different branches of the military, most with stories much worse than mine.

One woman explained how her rapist was still sending her threatening e-mails up until the morning she came to court. Another confessed that her rapist took her virginity. One man described how he was traded off between three male officers in a pitch-black janitorial closet.

After hearing everyone's stories, I worked up my own courage to finally tell my folks why I really left the Guard—they didn't take it so well.

My dad thought enlisting in the first place was a trashy move (his words). He said admitting you were raped was like telling the world you're open for

business. My mom wasn't much better. She lived most of her life with my father's arm shoved so far up her ass that he basically spoke for her whenever she had anything to say, which wasn't often.

So, I testified along with everyone else in *Rape Survivors v. Boys Will Be Boys* (a working title I gave it), making the case that, not only did the army, navy, marines, air force, and coast guard provide an environment where sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, and gang rape occurred with disturbing regularity, but that it was also covered up by the people who were supposed to protect us.

After seeing my name and face all over the news, my parents stopped returning my calls. Then, after the sex in our relationship had completely dried up (it also turns out men can't control their libido like women can't control their PMS—or, in my case, PTSD), my husband decided he needed a break, moving to his brother's apartment in the city to "clear his head." One of our last conversations—before I got the divorce papers—was him telling me that I was being stubborn, that I was choosing not to move on.

In the end, the court decided that rape was simply: a military occupational hazard.

The man's name was James Curtis. He was actually promoted in rank the same year he was being investigated for sexual assault and he's still stationed in Washington, D.C., about two hours from the women's shelter I've been calling home.

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I sit in the second to last row of a sterile Greyhound bus, looking through a manila envelope full of information on James that my inexpensive and borderline incompetent private investigator compiled for me over the last few months: James's home address in Bethesda, Maryland, the elementary school his daughter attends, his favorite bar.

I travel in some pretty ragged yoga pants and an old tank top that says *Life is a Beach*, and besides the envelope, I have only a credit card (nearly maxed) and a nine millimeter handgun.

That's it.

No, I didn't leave out my car, my phone, my wedding ring—those are all gone. Sold. History.

When I arrive in D.C., I take a Metro bus to James's little cul-de-sac in Bethesda. I find his address on a weathered American flag mailbox and walk across his beautifully manicured front lawn.

Under a giant willow, a little girl sits on a swing, tormenting an ant mound beneath her feet. I introduce myself to the girl (who I assume is James's daughter) but she doesn't say anything, content reigning down hellfire (her pink, sparkly sandal) on the helpless mass of ants below.

A moment later, her mom comes charging outside like a fucking maniac, descending the porch steps two at a time, clutching a glass of white wine that sloshes all over the place. She immediately wants to know who I am and what the heck I'm doing on her front lawn, around her child, so—thinking lightning quick on my feet—I say I'm a local real estate agent.

The wife calms down a bit, wary of my story, but obviously a little day-drunk as well. Just like James, she looks to be somewhere in her early 30s, wearing a strapless, light green dress that delicately drapes over her slim yoga body. Her makeup is perfect, and her wrinkle-free skin is tan, but not too tan.

I pull a name from thin air and introduce myself, saying I'm from an office a few miles down the road and that I'm always on the lookout for exquisite properties in this area.

We shake hands.

After I flatter her some more, the wife invites me in for a ballpark estimate of her home, and, realizing I didn't quite think this whole real estate thing out completely, I freak a little, given I know literally no shits about property.

I follow her inside, deciding to just go with it because, hell, I got a nine millimeter in my purse and an ocean of despondent rage flowing through my veins; I think I'll be fine.

The beautiful colonial wrap-around sun porch leads into an entryway of gorgeous hardwood floors and spacious, sunbathed rooms. The downstairs is nice and tidy, full of tasteful vases and faux flowers that I'm only assuming aren't alive because of how vibrant and amazing they look. It's been so long since I've been inside a house, much less a house as lavish as this and, in my pilled exercise pants and tattered tank top, I feel (easily) like the worst thing about the place, like my presence is bringing down the land value as we speak.

The wife turns out to be super sweet, which really mucks it up for me to be honest. Because ideally? I'd like to hate this woman and her fragile illusion of a life. But she's making it kind of difficult with her bullshit hospitality and friendly arm touches.

We get to the kitchen (which smells blissfully like cinnamon pastries) and she asks me what a house like hers could get on the market today given the current trends in lender points fees and skyrocketing APR.

I don't understand what any of that means, so I just explain that it's all very hard to tell these days, what with the seller's market and buyer's climate.

She nods like she *totally* understands, which, just like me, she obviously doesn't.

Taking in this woman's extravagant house and serene life stirs up these intense feelings of envy and jealousy inside me, which, actually . . . now that I think about it, *un-*mucks it up a little. Brings back comforting feelings of vengeance. Brings back my old friend, despondent rage.

This is good.

This is *very* good.

I take a seat at the kitchen table (careful not to let the nine millimeter clank against her hardwood as I set my purse down) and ask about her

husband's career, if he's moving up in the world, since buying a new house in this area would take some serious moola.

Then, I correct myself and say capital.

The wife pours herself another glass of wine (I tell her I don't drink anymore) and goes on and on about how great the coast guard is and how her husband is getting this big promotion soon and how he does *so* much for their stupid perfect community, etc., etc., (I space out during this part, locking eyes with a picture of James from across the room, remembering how he refused to look at me that night, no matter how much I begged him to stop) and eventually an awkward little silence develops where I'm supposed to say something.

I don't.

After downing half the glass of wine she just poured herself, the wife says she's *really* not supposed to talk about it, but a few years ago some woman accused her husband of sexual assault, and it almost tore their marriage apart.

I put my hand over my mouth like,

*No.*

*Friggin'.*

*Way.*

She nods like, *Yeah, can you believe that?*

She goes on about how it was the most traumatic period in her life, and if the accuser wasn't kept anonymous, she would've gone straight to that bitch's house and shat directly down her whore throat.

I think to myself: *That's so sweet to assume the woman your husband raped was well off enough to have her own house.*

The wife gathers herself and quickly apologizes, looking around to see if her daughter heard that last bit, but, thankfully, she's still outside.

Taking a deep breath, she says (with great conviction) that her husband is a good man and she's never, *ever* doubted his fidelity. But all the terrible

accusations definitely wore her down—made her think about things she never wanted to think about.

*You poor thing.*

Then, she gets all choked up and covers her eyes.

*Too much wine?* I pat her on the back and look the other way while she cries.

Then, we hug.

The whole thing takes a *very* weird turn.

The wife sends me off with a cinnamon scone and her phone number and says she'll work super hard on persuading her old lug of a husband to put the house on the market soon, wink wink. I don't know what saying wink wink in that context means so I just say, sounds good.

She asks me for my business card and I tell her that they're back at the office, that I was only out for a jog when I came across her property (I have to explain the shit clothes and distinct lack of makeup somehow). She asks if I always go jogging with a big bag lady purse over my shoulder and—walking across her stupid perfect lawn—I wave, pretending not to hear.

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I take a seat in the very back of James's favorite bar, under a neon leg with a skirt being hiked up and down.

Nursing a Cherry Coke, I think about the marches and ceremonies in the coast guard that always ended in some grandiose pub crawl (to bars just like this) with everyone getting shithoused and singing karaoke to obscure 80s power ballads. Oddly enough, this was not only common but basically unwritten law (the getting shithoused part, not the music selection).

It was strange because one of the videos we watched when I first enlisted was on preventative measures for sexual assaults (the fine art of *not* getting raped) and the big tagline at the end was:

*Don't risk it; wait until she's sober.*

It seemed odd at the time, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I would later realize it was because they were trying to protect the rapist more than the person who'd have their life destroyed by PTSD, marital problems, and suicidal thoughts—though, that was something I didn't really put together until after that night with James . . .

It was a really brutal summer, and we had one of these ridiculously long ceremonies that afternoon. I was feeling like complete shit afterwards, dehydrated from a long day of being out in the sun, draped in like 75 pounds of incubating polyester. So, when we got to the bar later, I ordered a glass of water, wanting at least a small period of sobriety before I'd have to start partying with everyone.

The rest of the night was a drinking marathon; going from bar to bar, new rounds of shots at each one, bad country and hip hop played through blown out speakers, hovering over toilet seats to avoid STDs—i.e., the usual.

Near the end of it, I was having serious trouble getting both of my legs to distribute weight equally, so I ordered another glass of water. Bomed out of his skull, James came running over and, in front of all the other coasties, ordered me *three* shots of whiskey for that act of insubordination. Everyone at the bar laughed and laughed and thought James was the coolest commanding officer of all time, and it was all very funny.

Until a couple hours later when James climbed into my bed and shoved his half-masted dick inside me.

No one was around to laugh then.

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Around the time I'm contemplating getting a cheap motel room and starting over tomorrow, James walks in with a few guys I don't recognize. He wears a bright white polo and some jeans with these ugly stitched designs on the back pockets that look like dragons wrestling snakes.

I keep my eye on James from across the room for over an hour, waiting for him to get good and drunk, which, after seeing him rap to a trash can (completely independent of the karaoke) not once but twice while his buddy records it, I realize he is.

After seven beers, two trash can freestyles, and one *very* poorly sung country rock song, James pats the breast pocket of his polo and pulls out a cigarette. He smacks one of his potbellied friends who sang backup vocals for him and they both head out to an alleyway behind the bar.

I take out the nine millimeter, stuffing it in the back waistband of my yoga pants, and leave my purse on the table.

I step into the unlit alley and immediately smell that familiar mix of piss and nicotine. The brick alley walls are covered in cigarette burns and grease stains that look like a collage of Rorschach tests, hiding patterns and images that mean different things to different people. My eyes adjust to the dim night, and I see the two officers hovering at the end of the alley under a dull, bug-infested light that's only illuminating their little area.

I walk over, letting the screen door slam behind me.

"Hey there," the backup singer says, looking me up and down.

James has his back turned, urinating against the wall.

"Can me and him get a minute?" I say, motioning to James with my eyes.

"This asshole?" the backup singer says, smiling, his eyes glossed over.

"How 'bout you tell me your name first?"

"No thanks."

The backup singer takes a deep drag and stomps out his cigarette, spitting some phlegm at the ground for good measure.

"Just so you know," he says, walking past me, "a little makeup wouldn't kill you."

I ignore him.

James zips up and turns around, his legs unsteady beneath him. Our eyes meet briefly before he sees his friend doing some not-so-subtle humping thrusts behind my back (the asshole's shadow on the brick wall next to me

giving him away). I cover my nine millimeter with the tail of my tank top until I hear him go inside.

Finally, it's just James and I.

"Sorry about him," James slurs, trying to light a second cigarette, looking like he's about to fall over. "He's not very good with the ladies." He pockets the lighter and looks at me. "Hey . . . where do I know you from?"

James looks exhausted. Like someone who's trying to go back to sleep. He's not amused or angry. He's just vacant.

I slide the nine millimeter out of my waistband and aim it at his forehead.

"Fucking shit," James says, back peddling, the cigarette between his lips dropping to the asphalt. "Listen, okay?" he says, feeling the brick wall behind him. "I don't think you know who—"

"Stop talking," I say, a breeze touching the damp spots under my eyes. "Get down on your knees," I say, waving the gun down. "Put your hands on your head."

"Please, just—"

"Get down on your *knees*," I say, cocking the nine millimeter.

He does as he's told.

I stand there looking down at the man who not only destroyed my life, but had the indifferent support of anyone and everyone who could've possibly helped me. James may have started this, but there were many good people who helped him finish it.

"Look at me, James."

He does.

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I feel the blood drying over my eyelids as I try opening and closing them like two old doors with newly greased hinges. *It's time to leave.* I get to my feet, wiping lukewarm goo off my face, trying to focus my eyes. *Let's go, get your keys, find your truck.* Her limp corpse materializes at my feet, her

disfigured, almost unrecognizable face, her jaw attached by only a few taut tendons.

*She's not your responsibility.*

I slowly kneel down, lifting her wrist, the gun in her hand dropping to the cement. *What did CPO Marshall say?* Holding her wrist between my thumb and fingers, I close my eyes, unsure of what I'm hoping for, thinking in seconds, not minutes or hours or days. *It was a one-time thing; you have a family to think about.* And there it is: a gentle, steady rhythm under her skin, between my fingers. *It's your truth or the whore's truth.*

After a minute, I open my eyes.

Bending over, I put my arms under her body and lift with my legs.