

“...if there is motion there is life”

—VIOLA CORDOVA

KATHLEEN HELLEN

this border smells like desert rain
no trail, no signs

to lead the way but still the presence: an energy
groping toward expression

in the hawk soaring over
sleeping rattlesnakes

over swaths of creosote and shrub mesquite
rooting in the dirt as deep as dreams

I make myself small, I crawl through fence-
hole, ascend

through prickly pear and rainbow cactus
up 5,000 feet spurred with the acacia

the sprawling mesa is a place of power
where images abraded in the rock abstract

the human figure
dancing to the mystery called forth

A gesture to the infinite:
one arm upraised, the other pointing
to the earth, the futile explorations

Hellen

MY BRIEF STINT AS A DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIM

KELSEY HONTZ

I chose my outfit very carefully the one time I was a domestic violence victim. What does one wear to a choking? I rejected most of my closet before eventually settling on a rose-patterned sweater with flowy sleeves. It was nice, but not *too* nice. Just perfect.

I was fulfilling my civic duty as an actor with nothing better to do on a Friday night, at least until my roommate's birthday party, where I hoped they'd save a slice of cake for me. I had been recruited to portray a choking victim so that trainees from a Victim Witness group could learn how to interact with somebody who has been involved in a domestic dispute. They would sit down with me, ask me questions about the incident, and try to comfort me while persuading me to press charges or take further action.

The scene took place in a cramped conference room down a busy corridor in the city hospital. Nurses and hospital staff periodically squeaked by in their tennis shoes and shot glances at me, taking up space in their facility, with only made-up injuries to my name. The chairs in the conference room rotated. I had to resist the urge to spin.

My acting partner wore a crisp blue sweater and an appropriately concerned expression. He was a cop and I was supposed to give him critical details about my experience.

"Let's start with the basics. What's your name?" he said.

I gave my real first name.

Then, I thought, I shouldn't give my real name. Cops can't be trusted.

Then, I remembered, he's not really a cop.

I told him my last name was Smith.

“And where did the incident take place?”

I invented an apartment of my own, that my boyfriend had a key to. I tried to make the word “boyfriend” sound realistic coming from me, but it tasted like a bunch of marbles rolling around in my mouth.

“And what does this boyfriend look like?”

For a moment, visions of the perfect boyfriend danced through my mind. I could create any man I wanted; build him up exactly how I had been taught to wish—an actor, a rich man, a walking set of abs that made the perfect French toast. Then I remembered that this man was supposed to have abused me. Creating a fantasy boyfriend became much less fun.

“He’s... tall. About six five.”

A previous partner of mine had been six seven and didn’t know how big he was.

“And... two hundred pounds.”

That same partner had been two hundred fifty pounds.

My acting partner chuckled. “What is this guy, a linebacker?”

I tried to chuckle, too. Suddenly I felt guilty for shrinking down a large person I already knew to create a linebacker with a propensity for choking. I should have just fished in my imagination for any of the abusive demon men that haunt me, though lately they’ve been getting less and less imaginary.

“And his name is... Scott,” I offered. Too many demons are named Scott. I didn’t feel as bad about using that element of reality.

The cop nodded seriously. He scratched out some details on his official legal pad that he had snagged from the file cabinet in the corner of the conference room. Somebody pushed a gurney nearby, the wheels shushing on the tile.

“Do you want something from the hospital cafeteria?” the cop asked. “I’m not much of a coffee drinker, but I could get us some chai teas.”

“Ooh, chai sounds great!” I said. “So anyway, Scott and I got into an argument and he put his hands around my neck.”

“Ok, I’ll get us some chai teas when I’m done interrogating

you. Both hands or just one?"

My mind wandered. I tried to recall whether or not this imaginary demon linebacker used both hands. I also considered that "chai" already means "tea" so saying "chai tea" is the same as saying "tea tea."

"No, it was just the left hand. He put it on my throat and sort of squeezed for a minute, then I started hitting his arm and he came to his senses and let go. Then he took off."

The cop scribbled some more words onto his legal pad. He would be responsible for briefing the trainees on my situation. I hoped I could remember my own story to maintain consistency, but Scott was already a plume of smoke, evaporating in my mind.

"What occurred before this physical interaction?" he asked.

"We were arguing. I was being silly—I had gone to the store but I forgot to get the thing he had asked me for, so he got mad, and then I started yelling at him. I shouldn't have yelled at him and honestly, I can be kind of shrill and obnoxious sometimes, so I can see why he did what he did."

The marble words, so stuck when I had to invent myself a boyfriend, came tumbling out as I described what had happened. They tasted sour. I didn't like Ms. Smith. She blamed herself for a man's actions. And she was exactly as shrill and obnoxious as I was.

"And you said he took off?"

"Yes—he realized what he did and got sort of freaked out, then he ran out of the apartment."

"Where did you go after that?"

"I went to a coworker's who said I could stay with her as long as I needed, and she's got some clothes I can wear and everything."

There was a gentle knock on the door. The first group of trainees had arrived.

"I'll be right with you," the cop said. He turned to me and gave a shrug-smile, like *what can you do? The audience is here.*

"Thank you, Ms. Smith," he said. "I must now discuss your situation with these folks."

He exited the conference room and closed the door on me. I could see him talking with the group of nervous-looking trainees through the small window. I picked at my cuticles. I again resisted the urge to spin in the chair.

The door opened and a young woman gusted in and slapped herself down in the seat across from me.

The acting has begun.

"Hello," I said, trying to sound appropriately choked.

"Hello?" she said back.

She blinked her green eyes at me. The bun on top of her head listed slightly to the left.

"Wait... are you the victim or am I the victim?" she asked after a thick, uncomfortable moment.

I really did choke a little bit then. "What?"

"I'm a rape victim, right?" she said as she scrambled around in her bag to check the information on her phone. "This is the Victim Witness training?"

"No, I'm a domestic violence victim," I said. "I—choking. I've been choked."

She puffed out her cheeks as she scrolled through her texts.

"Well, it said to be in this room.... Oh wait! This is room 110A. I'm supposed to be in 115A."

She adjusted her bun.

"So you're the new domestic violence victim, huh? That always used to be my part. Anyway, I should go down the hallway to my room. I'm supposed to have been like, raped at a college party or something. I'll figure it out."

The rape victim scooted from the room.

The small herd of trainees peered at me as the cop opened the door.

"Ms. Smith?" he said gently. "This is Josiah. He's with Victim Witness and he'd like to speak with you, if that's all right."

I looked at Josiah with cold steel in my eyes. I didn't trust authority. But then I remembered that I did because I just told the cop everything. But he offered to get me a chai. I softened the look

in my eyes. Then I wondered if they should be tearful.

Then I recognized Josiah.

I felt a blush creep into my cheeks as he moved forward and introduced himself to me, like he hadn't been my next-door neighbor for a whole year. Did he think I was really a victim of domestic violence?

I swallowed the urge to blurt "I hope you know this is fake!" and greeted him with a wobbly nod as he arranged himself at the front of the table.

"This group with me is a bunch of trainees with our program, and they're here to observe our conversation and learn how to act in this type of situation. Is that ok with you?" he asked.

I looked at the group, most of whom averted their eyes. One defiant older woman stared me down.

"That's fine." I attempted to add "the more the merrier" then but cut it off as I realized how horrifically inappropriate that would be.

"I'm going to be filling out this form here, Ms. Smith," Josiah said. He spoke in a tone that one might reserve for an old dog who gets to go to the park one last time before euthanasia. "All of this information is absolutely confidential and stays with us. We don't reveal any of this to the police or anybody else. Know that this conversation we have in here stays between the people in this room."

I nodded.

"Could you, just for the record, tell us your name?"

I offered my first name. It was my real first name. He knew it because he had lived next door. Then I offered my last name. It was fake. He also knew that because he had lived next door. I wondered if he thought less of me because I gave an obviously fake last name, like I wasn't taking this exercise seriously. Or if he thought more of me because I was trying to create and stay in a character. Or if he cared at all because he was working. I was working, too, but for free and a promise of pizza.

We ran through a list of other mundane information—age, gender, ethnicity, address. Then he asked me about the incident.

Like a good little actor, I started to project to the group at large, but their unblinking eyes reminded me of the iced fish at the Asian market meat counter. I focused back on Josiah.

"I had gotten back from the store and was putting away the groceries and Scott was mad at me because I didn't get him the one thing he had asked me for, and I was yelling at him, and I got sort of up in his face, so then he put his left hand out and grabbed my neck and was choking me. So then I hit at his arm until he realized what he was doing, and then he left the room." I was surprised at how quickly it all came out—slippery marbles, hardly a breath in between.

Josiah fixed his comforting eyes on me. He asked me some more questions about the incident and I created some more details about Scott. He has a stupid chain-link tattoo on his arm. That, at least, was entirely fictional.

"I want you to know that there is absolutely no pressure here, and remember that this information stays in this room, but do you want to press charges against Scott?"

I thought it might be more helpful to the trainees if they were met with some resistance. I am not a person who pushes back. But maybe Ms. Smith was. She needed to reclaim some of her power.

Another marble dropped from my mouth and cracked on the conference table.

"But it was probably my fault. I shouldn't have been in his face. It's like that new Pink song, you know, where she says 'you punched a hole in the wall and I framed it; I wish I could feel things like you.' He just *feels* really strongly."

Some of the people around the table nodded. I wished they wouldn't.

Josiah leaned closer. "Ms. Smith, if you don't press charges, we understand. But if you do, we will protect you and they will send people out right now to find him. Does he have a way of getting back into your home?"

I gulped. It came out loud and theatrical, overdone.

"He has a key," I said.

"Do you have someone to stay with?"

"I'm staying with my coworker. She's letting me spend the night. She'll drive me to work tomorrow."

There was more to the conversation, but everything jumbled up as I struggled to keep track of both myself and Ms. Smith's experiences. Josiah gently suggested a few more times that I press charges and I refused, palms sweaty as I kept insisting upon my love for this man who didn't realize what he was doing. Josiah also suggested a hospital examination that could assess the extent of the damage. I learned that choking could possibly leave no marks, yet still cause trauma under the skin that wouldn't be detected until the windpipe started to shut down.

None of the trainees asked me any questions. As Josiah assured me that I could call any time and handed me his business card, I once again assumed my original defiant stare. I didn't need an examination, a formal accusation, or their assumptions. I could do this on my own.

He exited the room with some final assurances and his group filed out behind him, orderly and quiet.

The cop sidled back through the door. I was disappointed to see no chai in his hands.

"They're going to talk to that other girl now," he said. "I think she was playing the rape victim. How did it go?"

"It was weird!" I said, my voice suddenly much higher-pitched in my ears. "I knew him! And he knew me! But we kept having to be like, 'I don't know you at all so tell me about this situation that we both clearly know is made up.'"

I heaved an uncomfortable laugh as the next group of trainees arrived and huddled around the door. I looked at my cuticles again. They had seen me laugh.

The cop stood up to address them and soon enough they gathered around the table. This group made no bones about openly gazing at me. I think they were hoping to see bruises blooming around my neck.

The second group's leader was a woman about my age. She was all business and seemed exasperated with me from the get-go. After the basic information, she also gave the run-down about confidentiality. When Josiah said it, it felt like he was settling a warm blanket over my shoulders. When this woman said it, it felt like she had thrown me a hot cat—still a source of warmth, but one that would scratch if I didn't do what I was supposed to.

I described the incident again, the ghosts of the hands on my neck, sweaty demon palms hovering up from my not-so-imaginary imagination.

"Are you interested in pressing charges?" the new woman intoned.

"No, no!" I said, loudly. "Scott's like... have you ever seen those Great Danes that think they're lap dogs? They just don't know how big they are. They don't even realize when they're not being gentle."

I was suddenly a source for many similes about giant men. They're like oversized dogs who *feel* too much, apparently. I wondered who had taught Ms. Smith that idea.

"Will you consent to a hospital examination?" the new woman asked.

"Um, I'm not sure," I said, because I had forgotten the details and also forgotten that I wouldn't really have to do it. "Would Scott get in trouble?"

The woman slanted her eyes at me. She wore a beautiful, perfect wing of liner. I realized then that she disliked Ms. Smith as much as I did. She couldn't stand by a woman doing nothing to protect herself against a terrible man. I suddenly felt defensive of Ms. Smith's actions. She had fallen in love with this man—how could she have known what he was capable of?

"The evidence procured in the hospital examination could be used against him if he was brought before a court, yes," she said. "But you said you don't want to press charges."

"No, I just... I guess I don't," I said. Ms. Smith wouldn't be bullied into doing something she didn't want to do. Not again. It was a

confused defiance, but at least it was defiance.

"If you change your mind, here's one of our business cards," the new leader said. She slid the card across the table. I put it into my backpack right next to the other one I had collected that evening.

She turned to her group. "Any questions?"

The youngest leaned forward. "Yeah, where did you get that sweater? It's so cute!"

I balked. Would a domestic violence victim talk about her sweater?

Was I still a domestic violence victim?

"Um, I think I got it from Ross," I said. "You know, dress for less."

Another trainee piped up.

"So, what's your deal? Are you a real person or like, an actor?"

I adjusted my cute sweater. "I'm just some actor they found off the street. Ha!"

I said "Ha!" as its own syllable because I didn't quite remember how to make a laugh out of it.

"What?"

"Oh," I said quickly, "I know the guy who arranges this training, and he asked me if I was available to play a domestic violence victim, so here I am."

The new leader slid her well-manicured finger over her phone, waking it up.

"You're like, really good," one of the trainees said. "Did you know that your hands kept going to your neck when you were talking about the choking?"

A last flash of the demon men crawled over my skin, leaving goosebumps. I had not known that I was touching my neck. It wasn't an intentional acting choice.

I offered another quip about being an actor, blasé and casual and much funnier than Ms. Smith.

The trainees tittered. The new leader squinted at her phone for a moment.

"Looks like we're done here," she said. "The other group just finished up with the rape victim."

I blinked at her. "I thought you also had to go see the teen suicide and burglary cases."

She showed off that winged eyeliner again. "No, those were the other groups. We're done."

"Ok, bye!" her group said as they clambered to their feet and noisily exited. I waved to them. I spun for real this time in my chair, both giddy and sad. They liked my sweater! But I had dropped the character. Ms. Smith was all dusty from the conference room floor. I had done her a disservice.

The cop returned, and shortly after him, so did the rape victim.

"Apparently we're done!" she said.

"I thought we had to do two more rounds," the cop said.

"No, I just got a text that there were really only those two groups today, so we're free to go! They're doing the suicide case a different day. We can go get that pizza if we want."

She exuded the strange mix of nervous humor and tension that I felt, and I wondered how imaginary her demons had been during her scene. I think we were both happy to make our way to the fresh air outside.

I remembered my obligation to attend that party for my roommate and sadly turned down the free pizza. The cop insisted that he give me a ride there and transformed back into the mild-mannered actor as he buckled his seatbelt. We waved goodbye to the rape victim and meandered up the hospital hill to the party. The actor/cop told me it was nice to meet me, and we both joked about how we'd never do this again.

There was pizza at the party anyway, and as I walked in everyone blossomed with happiness, surprised to see me so early. We sang lots of Disney karaoke and pet the dogs wandering around the living room. My roommate and her friends told me how fun it was to have me there, just me playing the role of myself. I wondered if they would be as excited to see Ms. Smith, who was shrill and obnoxious, who defended awful men who did awful things, who had