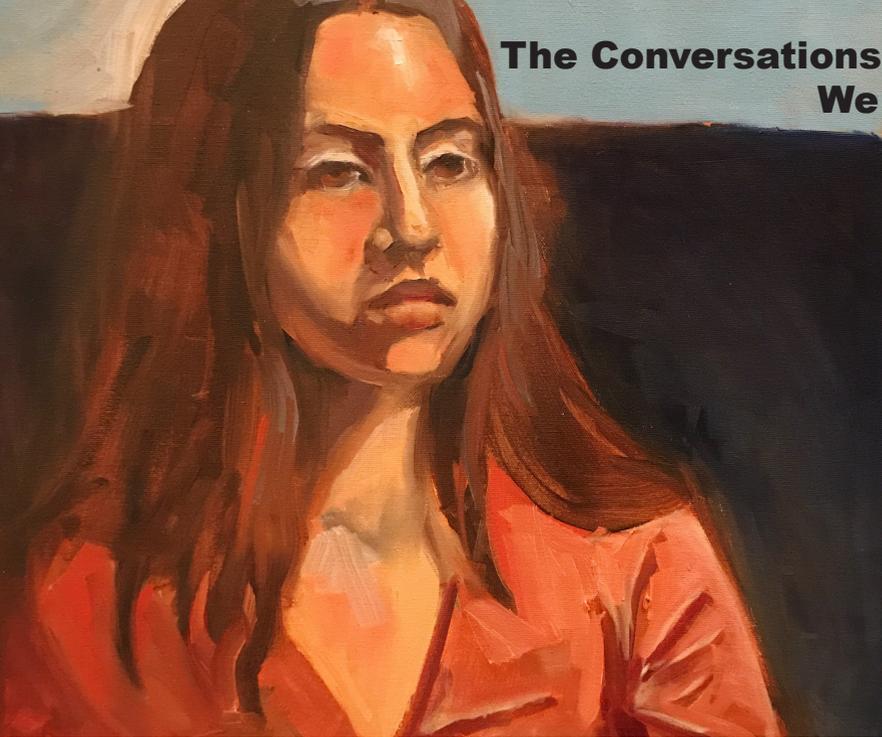


The Conversations We Won't Have



Make a right at the Stop & Shop. Park a safe distance away. Keep your head down when you walk in, but make sure nobody you know sees you. Ask the woman at the front desk to make sure it will not show up on the insurance bill. Pay in cash. Hide the prescription. Hide the pills.

The little white tablets lived underneath folded clothes in my sister's dresser. My mother never questioned it when my sister would ask for more money. This should not be mistaken for acceptance. "Put these away before your father sees," my mother hissed, the disgust dripping from her lips. That's all she ever said about it.

I do not know if my father ever found out about the birth control, or that my sister's asking to borrow the car for 30 minutes would take her to the local Planned Parenthood and back. Any knowledge of this, I presumed, would result in silent denial,

maybe crankiness for weeks on end.

Ever since I could remember, my Sundays had begun with a gentle knock on my bedroom door. I would spring up from bed at my mother's request and match black ballet flats with one of my most conservative blouses. My neck failed to keep my head from swaying side to side as my eyes closed during the priest's homily.

Strangers would have guessed that the right corner of the second pew was reserved for my grandmother, as she arrived ten minutes before each Mass, saying her hellos before sitting back and saying a thoughtful prayer.

I spent most of my childhood too nervous to question any beliefs my family had, especially when it came to religion. My grandmother taught Christian doctrine to kids in Cuba during a time when such an act could get one jailed. *Who am I to doubt the God that*

my abuelita risked so much for? It was not until years after her passing that I finally gained the courage to ask questions. When I did, it was welcomed, and I was even urged by my mother and *tias*, who adopted the same fervor for religion as my *abuelita*, their mother, to come to them with anything I did not understand.

This newfound openness in my family reinforced my inquiring nature. They started teaching me about Christianity in ways that made more sense than my white-haired CCD instructors with unflattering skirts ever could: “I have faith in God like I have faith that you will score a goal by the end of the season.” I started to understand what my mother meant, and I allowed our question-and-answer sessions to define our relationship: candid.

I paced around the room stunned when my mother explained to me that my cousin did not come around on Christmas or Thanksgiving because he was struggling with depression. She did not wince when telling me that her grandfather had fathered a son with her grandmother’s sister and about the pain this had brought her grandmother before she ultimately took him back. Family secrets seemed to come into the open, and I learned more about my faith than I could have imagined, but I knew to keep my questioning within this scope.

I guess my parents relied on health class to teach my sister and me about sex. Maybe they thought the preachings of abstinence in my Catholic high school would silence my questioning. I labeled a diagram of sex organs, studied PowerPoints of sexually transmitted infections, and paid close attention when my instructor graphically defined

diseases and their symptoms.

Pairing up in class to write a list of 100 activities nonmarital couples could partake in other than sex did not deter my first boyfriend and me from fumbling around topless in the backseat of his parents’ Alpine Green minivan.

39. Count the stars in the sky.

40. Write your names out in the sand of a local baseball field.

41. Create an iPhone app.

My friends and I, sixteen years old, scribbled ideas onto our lists between hushed giggles. It did not matter if our teacher was going to tell us about sex—or our parents, for that matter. We were determined to find out for ourselves.

“Did you know I just went up a cup?” my best friend said, unfazed, shifting her angle in the mirror. I nodded. It did not matter that she was having heinous mood swings, crying to her boyfriend every night before breaking up with him for three days. It did not matter that she had multiplying blackheads on her forehead. It did not matter that she had a major sweet tooth and cravings throughout the day. It did not matter because she had what I wanted: She had birth control. She had a mom who was willing to talk to her about the realities of being a teenage girl. I realized then that my relationship with my own mother was not as candid as I had thought.

Instead, I would have to sit a few inches away from my boyfriend on the black leather couch whenever he and I occupied the living room to watch a movie. Maybe I would sneak in a kiss or two, rebelliously testing my parents’ boundaries. All parties would feel slightly uneasy due to this decision of mine, but I wanted to challenge my parents’ denial

of sexuality.

My boyfriend's mother was even more devoted to her conservative nature and Catholic values than my mother was. Even so, she never stopped him from whisking me upstairs to his locked bedroom as long as we put our plates and utensils in the dishwasher after her carefully crafted family dinners. *Boys will be boys*, I would think to myself, wondering why she would not allow her daughter, two years younger than I, to do the same with her visitors.

I was drunk. I spent the night hazily ordering sour tequila shots from the open bar in the ballroom of the hotel for my date and me. I felt pressure to make sure he had a good time; I gulped hard, pressing a lime to my teeth, allowing any awkward small talk between us to vanish. It worked. He guided me around the dance floor with squinted eyes, introducing me to all of his friends. He would realize later on that his friends were leaving, and I would drag my feet, sore in their heels, across the lobby. A girl I had met a few months earlier offered to split an Uber back to downtown Montreal where we were staying. My date was outside blowing cigarette smoke into the brisk air when the Uber arrived. He sat in the front.

Boys will be boys, I repeated to myself, sitting as close to the window as I could. I choked back disgust and followed the lights of the city. I cannot remember the music the Uber was blasting. I sat back in my seat, adjusted my dress, and folded my arms to feel a little safer, to feel a little more in control.

His hands moved in slow motion across my lower back before traveling to my inner thigh and then under my dress. I moved his hand once time caught up to my spinning

head. "Sorry," the boy flinched at me. I don't think I let it last for long. But I didn't *let* anything happen.

I don't know how long the drive was back downtown. I ducked out of the Uber and reached for my date's arm. "Goodnight!" I giddily hollered as we pushed through the revolving doors to our elevator. I felt my consciousness go in and out. My eyes still squinted as I changed into pajamas. The ceiling lights spun in circles as I explained to my date what had happened in the Uber.

The hands were nameless before I told him. My date assured me he would talk to the boy. I'm not sure what I wanted him to do, but when the boy waved at me the next day, I felt my eyes widen and the hair on my arms raise in fear. I figured I would be okay with it.

My date told me that the boy was sorry and wanted to apologize. "I told him never to talk to you again," he told me sternly. I went on with the weekend, then with the semester.

I texted my best friends, allowing their horrified reactions to validate the reality of the assault. I hesitated on the phone with my sister. I didn't want her to worry about me. Her voice cracked when she offered her heartfelt support. She would check up on me periodically. I would call my mother, but only to tell her through a pursed grin about the clothes I had bought and the poutine I had tried.

Over time, it started to matter less to me that I couldn't tell my mother or my father what had happened. I was still hurt that our relationship could not be more candid, more open, but I knew that if I told them what happened, we would cross a boundary that we were all fearful of crossing. If they had denied the possibility of me being sexually

active before, I could only imagine the embarrassment and discomfort we would feel if I told them of a nonconsensual experience.

That weekend faded a little in my mind. By the end of the semester, as we moved into the summer, I could act around my parents as if I didn't have a painfully burning secret, reminding myself that a hug from my mom couldn't take away the violation. I could strap on my seat belt and drive to the dark, vacant parking lot of the post office, where I would climb into the backseat of my ex-boyfriend's parents' Alpine Green minivan, reminding myself that my mom wouldn't want to know anyway—*our relationship isn't that open*.

It could have been a harmless glance to him, but to me it felt like more like a stare, demanding that I pay attention to him. My eyes shifted in a quick, obvious fashion, continuing my conversations at the long table in the café.

He didn't take the hint. He walked over. Some how-was-your-summer's later, it was time for class. We walked side by side awkwardly as I squirmed to make conversation out of uncomfortable politeness. He held the door open for me as I walked to a seat as far away from his as was available. I wouldn't take any notes. He would repeat this routine before every class.

I'd confide in my friends, and we'd outline the conspiracy that he was trying to assert some sort of sick control over me. Maybe our clumsy small talk from the café to the classroom door was his way of reassuring himself that he couldn't be that bad a guy; if he were, wouldn't I just run away? Not talk to him at all?

I hugged the stoop outside the dining hall. Enthralled with the funny texts my friends

were sending, I hardly heard his weak "Hey, can we talk?" I scanned my surroundings, hoping the friend I was meeting for lunch would appear behind him.

"Sure, what's up?"

He explained how sorry he was for what had happened last semester. That he was never going to do it again. To anyone. To me. I gulped hard, practically tasting the sour mixture of tequila and lime. "Thanks for saying that." We looked at each other blankly before he advised me, "You really don't have to say anything if you don't want to." I knew that. He reminded me again how sorry he was, clearly hoping I would tell him it was okay. I refused. I didn't allow myself to be as uncomfortably polite with him as I had during our walks to class. It wasn't okay.

I dug my fork into the teriyaki chicken, exchanging jokes with my friends around a circular booth in the dining hall. I went back to my room as soon as I could. The CNN updates on the Brett Kavanaugh case lit up on my phone screen, helping me understand why the boy might have picked this day to apologize to me. Holding my tearstained blanket closer to my chest, I texted my best friends. I called my sister.

I'm forced to wonder whether telling my mom would make us closer—or make our relationship more candid. I wonder whether telling her would make way for whispered question-and-answer sessions about my sexual history, each discussion probably growing more embarrassing, with my being able to sense her disgust. This fear ultimately overpowers any desire I have to open up to her. I remind myself instead: *Talking to my mom about what happened wouldn't erase the foggy memory of helplessness. Our relationship isn't that open.*