

I am a Princess

There is a picture of me, and a friend taken in Boston, late last May. We posed, with big smiles, while swan boats and ducks lazily drifted beneath sweeping willow branches behind us. I'd gone through three different outfits before settling on one that I loved: a cropped black shirt with blue jeans that hugged my body just the way I liked it. An outfit in which I feel beautiful.

A couple of hours after this was taken, we ended up in a train car completely empty except for one person, a man, with patchy gray hair who was surely older than our own parents. He stared at us for the entirety of our 20 minutes on the train, never looking away when we uncomfortably met his gaze, nor when we moved our bags to cover our bodies and attempted to discreetly shift further away from him. I looked down at what I was wearing. If only I had a sweatshirt to hide my body, anything to stop his eyes from devouring me from afar. He didn't react to my discomfort and if anything, he enjoyed it. Perhaps our fear, our evident youth appealed to him. Or maybe he never considered our thoughts or feelings at all; were we merely objects on display for his viewing pleasure, our clothing an invitation? Stomach rolling, I grabbed my friend's hand tightly and pulled her off the train a couple of stops early, then watched the doors until they closed, and the train thundered away without us on it, to ensure he wasn't following us.

The next 20 minutes spent waiting on a bench outside for an uber were almost as agonizing as the ones on the train. My arms folded across my chest, hiding my shirt that was too tight, the neckline that plunged too low. In my head, I silently begged the passerby to look away from my legs, from the jeans that fit too well. More than anything, I wanted to hide my body from a world in which its existence is viewed as an invitation, where my own autonomy is less important than the desires of those who look upon me.

Since the time I was young, I dreamed of being a princess. One of the beautiful women I saw on television, spinning in elaborate dresses, winning over handsome princes with their innocence and virtue. Everything I saw in the media confirmed the view that my purpose in life, my ultimate source of happiness, would be receiving love from a man. In most of the television shows I watched as a child, the majority of characters were male. These characters would be assigned roles like the funny one, or the smart one, while female characters were simply the girl; usually either as a love interest, or as a means for feminine traits to be parodied and mocked. In the superhero movies my brother watched (that taught him he could do anything, be anyone he wanted to be), I only saw myself represented as the damsel in distress, or as an oversexualized hero who conquered her enemies with the mystical powers of the conventionally attractive female body. I preferred my princess movies that focused on someone I could see myself as in a light that wasn't intensely sexual and offered me happiness. So what if it meant that my entire happiness in life would be dependent on seeking male validation, proving that I could be an ideal woman, the picture of obedience? I wanted to be a princess.

In an interview for the film *This Changes Everything*, Natalie Portman describes how “we definitely internalize the representations of women on screen when we're young girls. It's important first and foremost to have men see you in a certain way. I definitely felt from a very young age that you're being ... turned into an object, as opposed to how do I look at the world, what do you desire, what do you want?” What do I want? My mother taught me to behave. To be kind, polite, and obedient; the kind of woman who could win over a prince. I learned to put all others' needs above my own, just as I've watched her do for my family my entire life. I learned to never ask for what I want, what I need, but instead hold it inside, with a smile on my face. Better for me to suffer than to risk burdening someone else. I look at the way my brother

behaves, so often going after what he wants unapologetically, and it stuns me. Where is his regard for other people, how is he so self-confident even when he is horribly wrong? Perhaps my lack of confidence is not an inherent trait of mine, but something I've been taught my entire life; to not take up space, that my worth is negated by who chooses to love me, and that my goal in life should be submission to another. Superheroes and princesses. Is this what I've learned to be, an object? Putty in the hands of those who wish to use me, mold me to suit their needs?

Scrolling on Instagram the other day I came across a post by poet Rupi Kaur, an excerpt from one of her books, reading: "I'm busy learning the consequences of womanhood when I should be learning science and math instead" (95). Being a woman sometimes feels like continuous punishment. After a childhood spent daydreaming about gallant princes, my body changes and the men who look at me in a different way are not princes but people who wish to use me, harm me. When I am eleven, a boy on my bus tries to force me to kiss him, not caring that I don't want to. I beg my parents to drive me to school to no avail. When I am thirteen and hate my body, my father tells me not to worry; boys like girls with a little meat on their bones, not ones who are stick straight. Up until this point, I hadn't given any thought to what boys saw when they looked at my body. When I am fourteen at a Christian retreat with a local evangelical group, the rest of the girls and I are pulled away from intense games of Ping-Pong to listen to a female leader explain to us the importance of modesty, after tearfully recounting her regret over losing her virginity before marriage. Upon receiving my phone back at the end of the weekend, I create a graveyard of archived Instagram posts, primarily photos of me in bathing suits, smiling at the pool, at the beach. How awful would it be for a man to see me, practically naked, outside of the context of having sex with me! When I am eighteen in my first month of college, my fresh start away from the small town that had suffocated me, a string of sexual assaults occurs; one on

the street next to my dorm, another in a class building. My studying is put on hold because would it really be safe to walk to my classes or the library, armed only with the hot-pink pepper spray I don't know how to use?

I remember the facetime call late on one January night of my junior year in high school, when my best friend confides in me that the boy she'd begun dating at fifteen had sexually assaulted her. Nearly four months after it had last occurred, three months since she'd finally broken up with him (at the time citing her desire for independence), one month since she admitted to herself for the first time that she hadn't wanted to do it, any of it, is she now able to say the R-word, rape, in the tiniest broken whisper. A word that a part of me had suspected but been too afraid to ask, too afraid of what it would mean if it was true. And now it is. My body yearns to hold hers, squeeze her hand and tell her that it's okay, that it's not her fault, over and over until she starts to believe it. But we are multiple states away, talking over the phone, so instead I just cry with her and remind her how much I love her. That she did nothing to deserve it.

He blamed her body for being too tempting, he just couldn't resist, and she carried that weight as we've been trained to do. My gentle, creative best friend, the kindest person I know, was for months carrying the burden of the immense violence she'd endured completely alone. Then there is him, who shattered her body, and who is the reason depression dragged her beneath the surface, numbing her body to the point at which she couldn't even cry. The reason she still has panic attacks, fighting to breathe when the air has been stolen from her lungs, despite the time that's passed and the hundreds of miles between him and her. I bet he still blames her for it.

When he sees me in school and tries to talk to me, ask me how she's doing, I want to scream at him until my throat is raw, or pummel him until he's reduced to a pile of dust, but I

don't. I hate that I don't. I am sixteen. I am a good girl, a good Christian. I do what I've been trained to do my entire life, and keep my head down, mouth shut. I am a princess.

Being a woman is grief, visceral and raw. How can I not feel it after learning that one of the people I loved most in the world had her body stolen from her when she was little more than a child? How much worse it is, when she has nowhere to go for help, no resources, no one with authority she can trust to believe her. And I, as much as I want to, have no idea how to help.

Being a woman is also continuous guilt: for wearing that outfit on the train, for caring what men think of me, for letting others see too much of my body on Instagram, for thinking I could be safe in a city, for hating a rapist, and even more for not standing up to him. Even writing this, I feel it with me; a ghost latched onto my sternum that is slowly but surely dragging my body into the earth. Maybe I always will.

Works Cited

Kaur , Rupi. *The Sun and Her Flowers*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2017.

This Changes Everything. Dir. Tom Donahue. Perf. Natalie Portman. 2018. Netflix.