

trigger warning: sexual assault. you are brave, you are strong, i believe you.

Saumeya Suseenthiran

Mr. Greco

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What Were You Wearing?

The Whole Foods parking lot is empty. A tumbleweed could roll through at any moment in a cinematic fashion. His dusty 2001 Toyota Corolla sits far from the green carts and flowers in the front, getting packed and moved inside for the night. The 11 pm crisp cold air feels ominous and stagnant.

He notices a Mercedes SUV while trudging back to his own car. It's clean, with a night colored finish, silver handles, and sparkling windows; he thinks it's beautiful. He approaches and witnesses the interior.

The leather seats are pristine; he can taste the smell. He wants to sit in the car, not drive off and keep it in his driveway, just sit in it. He thinks it's not too much to ask. The seats are meant to be sat in if they look like that. The windows aren't tinted; they're clear and stunningly transparent. The car wants him to see its seats and wants him to plant himself in those cushions and dream.

He grasps the shimmering handle and tugs. It won't open as it's locked, of course. So he tries again. The car says no. He doesn't take no for an answer. He smashes the window with this newly purchased toaster. Glass is on his feet and his cargo pants.

He puts his hand through the window and presses unlock.

This man would be seen as a psychopath. This isn't normal behavior.

You can't compare women to a situation like this!

Why not?

This is different. Women tempt us with their promiscuity when they wear tube tops and shorts and tiny dresses and let straps hang when they should be covered. **I cannot help my urges.**

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This man thought the car was asking for someone to break in and sit in it. The vehicle was clean and beautiful with shiny fixtures. Just because the windows weren't tinted and he could see the pretty seats doesn't mean the car was asking him to sit in it.

You talk about this as if you are explaining it to a child.

Children lack control over their own bodies sometimes. They wet the bed. You claim you can't control your urges, similar to a child, so I'll talk to you as if you are 10 and speak in car metaphors. Boys do love cars.

I am not a boy.

Fine.

Her mom never let her wear clothes that hugged her curves. She never let her wear the Little Black Dresses that the members of One Direction said: "made heads turn."¹ Her mom said it was for her daughter's protection. She didn't want her daughter getting raped like she did at her age; she doesn't wear short dresses anymore, especially the red ones. She knows though it had nothing to do with the dress and everything to do with the man; she hated that he still had control.

She listened to her mother. She didn't know the truth that hid behind the dress code, but she could see the pain behind her mother's eyes.

She loved the coffee place on 5th. It was simple and small, but her sanctuary; the coffee, the people, the chairs, the walls gave her warmth.

She needed a cup to get through her "Why Cornell" essay. It was chilly out, so she pulled on her cable-knit white sweater (it had a cute turtleneck) and her favorite mom jeans. She started walking home after getting her coffee; she hadn't gotten her license yet. She forgot it started getting dark around 5:30 in November.

She ran into a friend from school as she was leaving. He asked how she was and told her he liked her jeans. She said, "Thank you, they are vintage." He asked for her insight on vintage stores, she was happy

¹ *Little Black Dress* is a song by One Direction from their album *Midnight Memories*. There is a lyric in the song: "Little black dress just walked into the room. Making head turns, can't stop looking at you."

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to oblige. She gave him names of her favorites and which ones had the best pant selection. They had physics together; he was always very nice to her in class.

He asked her where she was parked. She said she had walked. He asked her if she could help him carry a few boxes he had gotten from the Walmart across the street. They were building block toys for his brothers. "Santa got them," he said with a smile.

They talked next to his car for some time. The store had closed around an hour ago because it was Sunday. The lot was quiet.

He was very charismatic and made her laugh more times than she could count. He said he liked her sweater. She said, "Wow I guess I put together a nice outfit today." He didn't say anything for a minute, then he opened the door to his back seats and pushed her through the frame. He closed the door behind him, her scream pressed against his palm.

"In 1999, the Supreme Court of Appeals in Rome ruled that a woman wearing jeans couldn't be raped, reasoning that a rapist couldn't forcibly remove a pair of pants."²

What were you wearing?

Had you been drinking?

Did you flirt back?

Did you really say no, though?

It's a "he said she said situation"; who are you supposed to believe?

Believe the victim. Believe survivors.

She was wearing a dress from her grandmother.

They were wearing a heavy coat.

He was wearing pajamas.

She was wearing jeans.³

² Quote taken from an article in the Washington Post, discussing the relationship between clothing and sexual assault.

³ Real examples of clothing worn in a fashion show in Warsaw showcasing clothing worn while assaulted.

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Works Cited

Kendall, Mikki. "Why Dress Codes Can't Stop Sexual Assault." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 1 Mar. 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/04/13/why-dress-codes-cant-stop-sexual-assault/

This article discusses the false inclusion of clothing as an excuse for sexual assaulters and rapists' actions. It maintains that blaming the victim isn't logical and essentially nonsense. The author backs up the point that rapists don't care/consider clothing when acting with several references to different studies, statistics, and research. It also discusses how broad the spectrum of victims is, specifically that men are often victims too. The author demonstrates that men aren't asked to dress differently, even though 9% of sexual assault victims are men. They don't have to endure dress codes. They aren't told to perform any of the necessary precautions women have to take to avoid assault. The article intends to point out the double standard between both victims, making it clear to recognize that anyone can be a victim of assault. It emphasizes the question of why is it that women fear being told the assault could have been their fault, that they are the ones to blame, not their assailant?

I read this article awhile ago before deciding on my topic for this essay and immediately thought of it when I chose my subject of the relationship between clothing and sexual assault. The article does an incredible job of weaving in points that back up the author's message and showcase that victims are victims, no matter what. The idea of a double standard didn't occur until I read the article, and I found it so intriguing and real. I also realized that it isn't just that women receive blame for their own assault, and men don't; men aren't even considered as victims. It's hard to think about this circumstance happening to anyone other than women. The author used evidence to show us that it genuinely isn't the case. Although I only used one section of the article in my essay, the article in its entirety really inspired it.

Simmerling, Mary. "What I Was Wearing' Poem By Mary Simmerling." *Sexual Assault Prevention and Education Center*, 27 Sept. 2017, sapec.ku.edu/what-i-was-wearing-poem-mary-simmerling.

This poem is compelling in the way it is written and the message it presents. Simmerling starts by describing an outfit she was wearing in great detail. She says she knows how to describe well because she was often asked to describe it. She says that she was raped and questions what details she could give that would make people believe she was the victim, stating that she wishes clothing could change the circumstances of rape. She wishes it were that easy to just change clothes, and the fear would dissipate. She lastly states that she knows exactly what her assailant wore that night. Still, nobody cares about

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that, referencing the double standard set against men and women regarding the relationship between clothing and assault.

The poem really shook me as a reader. The way it's written, and the pauses she made through her lines was something I wanted to replicate in my own lyrical essay. I wanted my writing to be just as impactful as hers. She tells a story that isn't uncommon. The way she has to remember exactly what she wore so she can defend the questions of "What were you wearing?" is something every woman who has ever experienced this has to do. Simmerling's clothing wasn't provocative, but I'm sure many made it out to be. "Oh you were wearing lip gloss? You were kind of asking for it." She is brave and strong for putting her experience into words like this. Still, it doesn't change the fact that this happened to her, and she had to remember every detail to defend herself as if she had done something wrong.

Brettan, Juliet. "Rape Survivors Hold Fashion Show in Clothes They Were Wearing during Assaults." *Notes From Poland*, 26 Mar. 2020, notesfrompoland.com/2020/03/16/rape-survivors-hold-fashion-show-in-clothes-they-wore-during-assaults/.

Women in Poland modeled clothing worn during assault at a fashion show to further the message that there is no relationship between the two because of how much variety the catwalk showcased. They directly combated the theory that there is some relationship and called it "absurd." The article then discusses the common occurrence of sexual assault in Poland. It employs statistics surrounding the issue, notably divulging how difficult it is for victims to obtain justice. The fashion show was meant to create debate around the topic and support victims telling them that they don't need to be quiet and hide but rather know they are alive and strong.

Reading this was uplifting and empowering as a woman but also scary as hell. The clothing displayed included jeans and heavy coats, pieces I wear frequently. It was so incredible to see women so bravely taking a stand against their oppressors. But at the same time, knowing that they exist in multitudes makes it even scarier for me to go out into the world. It reinforces the possibility that I could experience something so horrific in my lifetime. Still, I have hope that will never happen because women are fighting for progress and fighting for change.

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Intention Statement

For my lyrical essay, I wanted to choose a topic that had great importance to me and an issue that needs to be brought to attention. I am grateful to have never experienced the horrors of sexual assault; however, it is disconcerting to know this circumstance could change in the future. Through my research on the topic, I learned that there is a high chance of me getting assaulted in my life, and that shouldn't be something I constantly have to fear. Women have to take this fear into account whenever deciding what to wear when they go out. When deciding whether they should go to the bathroom at a club with their drink or just toss it out entirely if they came alone. We have to remember to run to our cars if we are alone at night and have parked a fair distance away. We have to remember to lock the doors as soon as we get in the front seat. Women hold weapons on their keychains. They have saved recordings to play in the back of their Ubers that say, "Hey your older brother is going to meet you when your Uber arrives and we are tracking you right now okay girly!"

I wanted to take this subject and specifically discuss clothing as it has relevance in my life. My mother and father have regulated clothing my entire life and to this day because of this fear. I have to buy clothes with their approval. I can't wear clothes out without their permission, especially if they are unsure of where I am going. It's a struggle, I understand, as they are doing this for my protection. But regardless, I want to wear what makes me feel pretty without fear. Why is it that I have to change clothes that empower me as a woman because of a hypothetical occurrence of assault? It is an unfair but valid concern, and it is one that shouldn't exist.

With the writing, I started by using a metaphor of breaking into a car, not for the normal reasons one would break into a vehicle but explain the situation in more simple terms. I've had to use this metaphor as an explanation before. The indented conversation that occurred is a variant of what actually happened when I used this metaphor to explain sexual assault before. The second anecdote uses bits and pieces of horror stories I have heard from other women. These women are stronger than anyone I have ever encountered. I used it to explain how it's the people you least expect and how the clothing choices have absolutely no effect on the circumstances of assault, something I also learned through my research. I used a quote from an article I had read to help validate my point and directly contradict that stance. I included questions always asked when one speaks up about being assaulted; irrelevant and hurt questions undermine the victim. Lastly, I talked about the types of clothing people were assaulted in showcased in a fashion show that took a powerful stance against the connection between clothing and assault. I wanted to make sure I included every pronoun because this can happen to anyone; it's important to remember that. My header has a trigger warning and a message for those who the warning is for, a message that I believe they always need to hear.

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