

# The Barefoot Escape

Cat Esposito

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*Warning: This essay contains depictions of rape*

**O**n an evening in late autumn when I was 17, I stood on Harbor boulevard barefoot, searching for a motel that would cost 30 dollars. My feet were swollen from our long walk from the bus depot, and the weight of my pregnant body had caused my feet to go numb, sending pain up both my legs like continuous needling. The bus had dropped us off 3 miles away, which I had convinced my husband during our bus ride was only a 10-minute walk. I unfolded my crumpled map from my pocket and placed my finger over the red star that marked Disneyland, which looked somewhat close to where we were standing. I silently prayed it was not another 3 mile walk away to Disneyland tomorrow, promising my husband we were very close to our destination. I began to doubt our plan of one full day of amusement park rides and walking for 12 hours, I wasn't sure I could be on my feet for another second. We chose the motel with a sign that read Candy Cane Inn, despite its missing letters on the billboard, offering colorful doors of chipping red and white paint. My husband reluctantly agreed since there was a Denny's across the street, which matched our low budget for our honeymoon. The motel desk clerk asked us if we wanted to rent the room all night or by the hour. I kept my horrified expression to myself.

I wanted to explain to the desk clerk that we had just been married that morning and rode a bus for 2 hours to reach Disneyland. I was prepared to show him our marriage certificate, also folded up and crumpled in my pocket, proving it was legal for us teenagers to share a bed. My husband's expression silenced me, so I stood there dangling my rubber flip flops from one hand, trying to disguise and hide my bare feet under the counter.

I only ordered a plate of sliced tomatoes for dinner, salting them to my own special taste. The puzzled look on the Denny's waitress went away after asking me several times if there was anything else I'd like to eat. My husband finished his "Grand Slam Breakfast" for dinner, without looking up at me once. I felt a sense of euphoria ingesting the salty tomatoes, their juices quenching and filling my stomach,

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reminding me of the summers I spent with my grandfather, eating tomatoes off the vine like an apple.

My grandfather had moved to California during the 1920s, a family of farmers from the Midwest. California was the land of sunshine and opportunity back then, there was no smoggy brown haze blocking the view of the San Gabriel Mountains. They owned a tiny house with a wraparound porch upon 20 acres of orange groves that extended past the dirt roads and touched the hills. His mother made homemade biscuits each morning from scratch, stocking his pail full for his daily journey out until sunset, picking oranges by the baskets everyday. He told me stories about the orange groves he had harvested many times, only a few miles away from where Disneyland is today. We picked tomatoes off his plants each morning, our sunrise ritual that sacred summer, letting the garden hose run for over an hour and watering the rows as we spoke. I was always barefoot, feeling the wet dirt between my toes, giggling as I curiously squatted over the tomato plants, inspecting each one and smelling the fresh earth of his garden. Grandfather taught me which tomatoes were red and ripe to eat, he instinctively knew by feel and touch, as I couldn't confirm until I took a bite.

Our door would not lock at the Candy Cane Inn, the door knob hanging on barely by two loose screws working their way out. There was also no bar of soap in the bathroom. I searched for those little bottles of shampoo neatly placed next to the folded hand towels on the sink, with no such luck either. The TV only provided static and a bent coat hanger placed on top. I know I was stalling for time in the motel room, looking at my husband already positioned on the bed. He was laying on top of the thin bedspread, kicking his shoes off violently on the floor. I knew what a couple was supposed to do on their honeymoon night, but I was filled with fear, unable to move close to the bed. I pretended to look through my knapsack for pajamas with my back to him, as I was yanked down suddenly by my arms beside him. He was not careful about my belly hitting the mattress face-first.

I quietly asked him if we could just sleep for the night, maybe I would feel much better and in the mood in the morning, but he was lost in a world of his own, attacking my body as though it was his conquest and divine right.

I reasoned with myself that this was not rape, and that he didn't need my consent as his wife. I laid there motionless in submission,

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yet screaming inside myself, too loudly to stop. I winced away the pain with every breath, my fingers holding onto the corner of the shabby sheets, taking my mind somewhere else, anywhere else but the chipped paint motel room that was rented by the hour.

I laid there for hours crying on the soiled dingy bedspread of the motel bed as my husband snored loudly in a deep sleep. The bedspread would not cover me as it hung off the bed on his side. I was too afraid to reach for the blanket, even though I longed for any sense of security, it was too great of a risk to wake him. I made sure not to make any noise as I cried, something I had perfected as a child.

How much tenderness the word child speaks, when it's written out loud on paper for the first time. Trauma seems to have a mysterious way of creeping in quietly through the cracks. I was not even close to my teenage years, just a tiny and little frame with messy long brown curls, when I was sexually molested as a child. I learned to be invisible and silent, never knowing how to express my emotions in front of anybody. Not a soul. I was raped by the time I was 14, as trauma continued to follow and open my door. A repetitive violent cycle, I would never escape. No one has ever closed the door behind it.

Even in the darkness, I saw my face blotchy and red from all my crying, feeling the damp pillow beneath me. I was overwhelmed with feeling homesick, yet I couldn't remember a place that felt like my home. If I could escape the motel room, here would I run away with my swollen bare feet in the night? I imagined myself running down Harbor Boulevard as the bright lights of oncoming traffic blinded me and honked at the dark figure of a teenager trying to escape. I wanted to wash my body, shower and rinse away the filth but I felt defeated once again, knowing there was no soap or towels in the bathroom. As I closed my eyes my mind freely began to explore, I envisioned Julia Roberts, her long and untamed curls of brown hair similar to my own.

She starred in the movie, *Sleeping With the Enemy*, made in 1991, only 6 months before I got married. In the film, Julia Roberts plays Laura Burney, a woman and victim of domestic violence from her seemingly good looking husband. After faking her death in order to flee from her violent husband, Martin, Laura leaves her husband and moves to Iowa, where she adopts a new identity and starts dating a drama teacher at the local high school. Martin soon discovers that

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Laura isn't really dead, so he tracks her to Iowa and begins to stalk her. He finds Laura and the high school teacher and confronts them, forcing her to fight for her life once again. Laura has a gun; she shoots and kills Martin.

Julia Roberts had devised a plan to escape, saving money and learning to swim over the course of many months. As she only had moments to escape after her treacherous swim in the ocean, her packed knapsack had a wig as a disguise and a change of clothes. She took a greyhound bus across the country in pursuit of changing her identity, not leaving a trace behind so she thought. It all comes down to one moment, one choice, her pulling the trigger and ending his life.

I knew the fights we had throughout our 25-year marriage were not normal and too violent in nature. I understood that doors in our house were not meant to have holes in each of them. I understood that a man should not physically harm a woman, and as I write those words, I have already corrected myself. A human being alone, she, he, or they should not physically harm another human being period. I don't want my permanent record or history of marriage sealed tight in a closed and locked binary box. It is never okay to hurt a living breathing soul. I understood that sex with your husband was not supposed to hurt, it was not supposed to happen without permission and consent. I tried to pack up the trunk of my car many times with all of our belongings and as much clothing as we could spare. I would drive over to my mother's house to escape, watching my kids eat their dinner in a circle on her apartment floor. She didn't own a kitchen table but ate her meals on a small folding tray. I would spread out a blanket and say we were having a picnic at grandma's place, as they stared away at the cartoons on the television. My mother's advice always consisted of honoring your husband as God commands. It wasn't required to love him, she said, his love was bringing home a paycheck each week. As it grew closer to bedtime, I lost my courage of leaving him permanently. I knew I would have to go back home; my kids needed the comfort of their beds and nightlights, and my mother's apartment floor would not suffice. My husband would unload our packed bags from the car without saying a word.

My marriage was over the minute I decided to enroll in college. This had been a forbidden topic my husband would never discuss. I didn't ask his permission to enroll. I just did. How incredulous it

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seems to me now that I strolled across the campus so freely in my 40s with 20 something-year-olds and took my seat in my English 101 class. Many of the students thought I was close in age to them and I wasn't prepared to be hit on by such young and good-looking people of all genders.

The Professor announced we would not be using any computers, nor consulting google, and everything was to be handwritten. *We were going to actually learn to write, from our own brains and our gifts of imagination.* He was an older gentleman and always wore a bow tie and suit to class. The syllabus read that he had a PHD in English and he had worked for the New York Times for 30 years as a journalist, before retiring and teaching at a local community college. I looked around the classroom at all the students like a deer in the headlights. He asked us to do a free writing exercise on that first day of class. We were to write an introduction about ourselves and pick a number, write solidly for 15 minutes about why we chose that number, never dropping our pencil. He said if you cannot think of anything, then simply write the words nothing over and over.

I feverishly wrote away, my mind moving faster than my pencil, and had produced close to 6 pages when the time was finished. Feeling proud of myself prematurely, we were then called upon to read what we had written out loud. That was entirely different. I had never learned to speak out loud in front of ANYBODY my entire life, I had always felt the safety and protection to express myself and endlessly write, behind my words.

I stood there shaking, my hands trembling and crumpling the paper as I heard my voice speak out loud for the first time. As I read my paper, I explained why I had chosen the number 17, I had been married at that age. I went on to announce to the class that I had seven children, I was 42 years old, married for 24 years, and then I paused for the longest 10 seconds of my life. I spoke a little louder with my next breath.

*I've decided that I'm going to file for divorce, and my name is Cat. Not Mary Catherine. I prefer to be called Cat from this point forward.*

And just like that, I discovered my own voice within and my new identity was born.

My escape and new identity I had been planning over the years

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was much different than Julia Roberts. I detested guns and knew I could never hold the cold metal pistol and fire away in my own hands. I already knew how to swim quite proficiently, and I had no plans to jump overboard and swim to safety. I did not need a wig to disguise my identity, nor did I need to board a greyhound bus to travel. My ex-husband knew I was moving away with his children for several months before, but he was too busy with his new girlfriends to stop by on the last day to say goodbye. I knew he wouldn't search for us or claim his undying love like Martin had in the film.

I rented the biggest size U-Haul truck, 24 feet it advertised in large black letters, deciding I could drive it 3000 miles to move away from Houston. It took my children and I only 6 hours to load all my furniture and boxes, enduring the 105 degrees of Texas heat. We had very little furniture, dwindling down to only our beds, mostly there were boxes lining up the walls of the truck. I stood back and viewed our hard work, wondering why I was spending a lot of money I could barely afford, to transport cardboard across the states.

I closed the truck door, slamming it in place and locked it tightly. I searched the faces of my children, we were all drenched in sweat and soaking clothes, as they patiently stood there watching me. I suggested we go swimming one last time in our pool at the apartment complex. I was barefoot, the pavement burning my feet as I ran towards the pool. I could hear the laughter of my kids behind me, chasing me to the pool to get there first. My youngest daughter began to fret and yelled out to me, "we don't have our swimsuits to wear, mom!" I scooped her up with one arm and jumped into the cool waters below us, with our clothes still on. "We don't need our swimsuits, my love." Her golden hair streaked by the sun and swept behind her wet, she giggled and spit out water at me. We swam in the pool until sunset, talking and laughing, excited about our journey ahead. I was beginning my new identity as a single mom, no longer living in violence, and began a life of freedom for myself and my children that Julia Roberts never thought about before her own escape.