

Why We Didn't Tell

by Barbara Desman

When women began speaking out about sexual abuse by powerful men, particularly with the high-profile allegations against men like Bret Kavanaugh, Larry Nassar, and Harvey Weinstein, it led to many a discussion around my kitchen table and among my Facebook friends. To my friends who grew up in the fifties and worked throughout the sixties, seventies, and eighties, reports of such abuse came as no surprise. The real surprise was that the women accusing such men felt empowered enough to speak publicly about it and to seek justice. We all had our stories to tell each other about the many shades of sexual harassment we endured. But when the measurement of whether these women were telling the truth became how long ago the abuse happened and why they hadn't reported it, I decided I had to get up from my kitchen table and away from Facebook and share my own ancient history.

It was nineteen-fifty-four and I was fourteen. He was the second chiropractor I was seeing for painful back pain and the decided limp the injury had caused, the result of an attack by a bully in gym class. Back then, bullying was overlooked. Just suck it up, we were told. It happens to everyone. But this attack had badly sprained my back. Three doctors and two weeks in the hospital in traction hadn't helped.

Thankfully, this new chiropractor's treatments seemed to be helping. I was nervous but hopeful I might again be a normal teenager, free of nightly hot compresses for the pain, free of the ugly lift they placed on my shoe, free of knowing they called me "that little crippled girl" behind my back. I wanted to dance "The Twist" in my socks on the same gym floor where the attack had occurred.

The day my belief in this new chiropractor changed was the first day I went to my appointment by myself so mom wouldn't have to take off work. It was also the first day the nurse left me alone with him to go to lunch.

I lay face down on the table as he pushed on my pelvis above my newly formed full buttocks.

“Turn over on your back.” He pressed his hand on my pubic bone through my pants. He hadn’t touched me this way before. It felt oddly pleasurable and then it didn’t.

“What’re you doing?” I asked, lifting my head off the table to look at him.

“Just adjusting you, he said, lie back down.”

When his hand moved down, pressing between my legs, I knew it wasn’t right. I struggled to sit up.

“What’s the matter? Lie back down.”

“I, I have to go,” I stammered, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. Jumping off the table, I grabbed my purse and ran out through the empty waiting room.

“Mom, he touched me,” I cried into the pay phone, “the doctor touched me.”

“What? What are you talking about? Of course, he touched you; he was giving you a treatment.”

“No, Mom, it was different. It didn’t feel right,” I sobbed, hardly able to hold the phone.

“Okay, honey, calm down,” She whispered into the phone. “I’ll be home in an hour. We’ll talk about it then. Are you okay to ride the bus home?”

When I told mom what happened, she folded me in her arms and tried to console me. “Don’t worry, honey, you’re not going back to him.”

Why didn’t my mother report him? Mom was raised with an abusive father. She watched her mother being beaten. But she was taught to believe that it was shameful if the neighbors knew what was happening inside the family. The lesson in those times was that the woman must have done something to deserve it. Sadly, we hear that same message in a much more covert way today. What was she wearing? Was she drinking? Why didn’t she tell anyone?

We didn’t talk about sex back then. Although my mother never made me feel I had done anything wrong, I understood it was not to be spoken of again.

When Mom was in her eighties, she told me she called that doctor and warned him if he ever tried something like that again, she would call his wife and then the

police. He probably knew it was an empty threat. I wonder how many young girls came before and after me?

I don't remember the date. I don't remember the address of the office. I don't even remember the doctor's name.

I probably shouldn't bring it up since it was almost sixty-five years ago; how can a young girl's memory be trusted?

In December of 1953, Hugh Hefner gave men a big Christmas present in the form of *Playboy Magazine*. The first issue featured Marilyn Monroe as the centerfold. What could the publication possibly have to do with me?

Two years later I turned fifteen I was always home alone after school until mom got off work. We lived in a two-story house that had been converted into three apartments. The stairs up to our porch extended past the entrance under the bathroom window to another flight of stairs leading to the backyard. One afternoon, I was doing homework when there was a rattling and then a knock on our screen door. When I opened the door, the porch was empty but something was stuck in the handle of the door. When I unrolled it, I saw a pretty young woman lying on her stomach on a white fur rug, her bare breasts dipped into the fur, her back arched, her red high heels hovered above her round naked buttocks. Scrawled across her hips in black marker were the words "DO THIS FOR ME." Shaking, I slammed the screen door, quickly locking the front door. Closing the drapes, I sat on the sofa, jumping at any unusual sound for what seemed like hours until Mom arrived home.

"So, you didn't see anyone? Is there anyone at school who might have done this?"

"No, Mom," I assured her. "I don't know anyone this creepy."

Since I was home alone every day after school, Mom decided to report the incident to the police.

"I'll fill out a report but it probably won't happen again," the policeman who responded said. "Don't worry. It's probably just some boy from school who likes you," the officer said, smiling at me. "Be sure to lock the door when you get home from school and let us know if you think of anyone at school who might have done this."

The next day, it happened again, except this time mom arrived home a few minutes later trembling and out of breath.

“That boy was here. He left this,” I said, my hand shaking as I handed her another *Playboy* page.

“I know. I was watching from the backyard. I saw him come up on the porch, and when I went around the garage, I ran into him face to face,” she exclaimed, dialing the police.

At school, I became hyper aware of every boy around me. *Was he smiling or smirking? Did he mean to jostle me in the hallway?*

I became aware of behavior that might have escaped my attention before. Our Art teacher was young and pretty. The boys would ask her for help so she would bend over their desk exposing her ample cleavage. A few days later, a policeman knocked on our door, a teenaged boy in tow.

“Is this the boy you saw?” he asked Mom.

“I don’t know. I can’t say for sure. I’d hate to have you arrest the wrong boy if I’m not absolutely sure.”

The policeman didn’t tell us why he had chosen this particular boy to bring to Mom. Maybe it was because he matched her sketchy description or maybe he had been caught doing the same thing to another teenage girl. I told the policeman I didn’t recognize him from school or even from the neighborhood. I was grateful for that. We never knew if they arrested him. As I think back, it was a terrible thing for the policeman to bring that boy to our house and ask mom to identify him. We breathed a sigh when the visits stopped.

Then one balmy Saturday in summer, Mom was cleaning the bathtub. A large window over the tub was open to the summer heat. When Mom straightened up, she came face to face with the boy. He was leaning into the window up to his waist above her. Mom screamed. He screamed. By the time Mom got to the door, he was sprinting across the back yard to the alley.

“He probably thought you were taking a bath and he was going to get a thrill,” the policeman said, suppressing a smile. The attitude of the police officer and the fact that

we never spoke about it again taught me that women were simply supposed to put up with such licentious behavior. As men are fond of saying, “Boys will be boys”.

I don’t remember the address of our apartment and I only know the year.

I probably shouldn’t bring it up since it was almost sixty-three years ago; how can a young girl’s memory be trusted?

I carried that lesson of my youth into the workplace so, at the age of twenty-one, when my boss made flirtatious remarks or stood a little too close, I acted as though I didn’t know what he was trying to do. It was just something women had to put up with. It was just he and I in the small regional office. Who would believe me? I needed my job.

One day, he walked up behind me while I was typing and kissed me on the back of my neck. I spun around and shocked myself by saying, “If you ever do that again, three people will know about it, you, me, and your wife.”

I don’t know where I found such courage but he backed away and told me I must have mistaken his actions. Not long after, we received a visit from the President of the company based in Phoenix, who offered me the opportunity to transfer to Arizona to be his secretary. I didn’t connect the two events until recently.

I don’t remember the address of the office and can only estimate the date. I don’t remember my boss’s name.

I probably shouldn’t bring it up since it was fifty-seven years ago; how can a young woman’s memory be trusted?

Later in my career, whenever I earned a promotion, I was upset but not surprised to hear rumors that I must be sleeping with my boss to have achieved success in the company. After all, my mother heard the same rumors about her success during the forties and fifties. You were expected to act like you didn’t hear the dirty joke. You smiled at a flirtatious remark and walked away. Who would take your side? You needed your job. So when women began to come forward with allegations against media moguls, athletic coaches, bosses, and celebrities, I cheered. It was only when I began to hear people questioning their claims because it took them so long to speak up,

that I took it personally. Would we ever learn what psychologists have tried to teach us, that victims sometimes need decades to admit to themselves that what happened to them was abuse, let alone to muster the courage to file a report about such traumatic physical and psychological betrayal? I knew why.



Barbara Desman has always been a storyteller; just ask her family and friends. She is now enjoying committing her stories to the page. Her thirty-nine-year career in the airline industry afforded her the opportunity to explore and observe the culture, people, and sights of many international destinations. Barbara is currently working on a novella about human trafficking in Thailand. Her stated intention for this chapter of her life is to become the Grandma Moses of prose. Barbara writes from Scottsdale, Arizona with her Toy Fox Terrier, Bubbles, at her feet.