

Shush

May 18, 2012, by Nicole Ickes

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“Shh. Someone might hear. Don’t talk about that.”

This has several purposes. One is so that people stop asking, “What happened that year, why was it so bad?” Another is because there is no reason to shush this—discussion is even discouraged at the personal level, as if this was some kind of blackmail people would have on me. To demand reporting but hush up conversation of it, to dismiss its effects? No, that’s contradictory. Thus, this is public because things aren’t personally acceptable until the idea that the topic is shame-worthy—and therefore useful as blackmail—is removed.

The final purpose is that I want answers.

I should state that I’m obviously going to be discussing topics generally avoided in even personal conversations. How badly do you want to know? Enough to override the conventional social judgment that some things shouldn’t be discussed? That people shouldn’t be allowed to control their own personal information, to decide what to talk about when it’s their own lives they’re discussing? Nobody else is identified...so they’re free to continue interpreting events in whatever manner they have chosen. You can always stop reading, you know...but what if my problem is your problem, what if it’s the same kind of problem someone you care about has? Wouldn’t you want to talk about that, wouldn’t you want to know, so they can get help? So that you could get help?

If you’re in the category of people who asked, you did ask—or do you not really care about the answer? And if you don’t care, why ask such a personal question?

I have a dirty little secret. I know several of you have the same one. Not the same details, but the same type of secret.

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A lot of things happened in my 2011. Social judgment says I’m not supposed to talk about it. Silence doesn’t help, especially when people keep asking, and won’t respect “privacy” and “no”. I understand why they don’t respect it; I don’t approve, but I understand. If you still want to know, here it is—it’s neither pretty nor simple.

There’s never a good time to state something potentially damaging. There’s always a reason to “not do it”, there’s always “something I can’t disrupt” or “something I can’t risk”. There’s always a “better” time to wait for.

Perfection doesn’t exist. There’s no such thing as “bury it”.

In this era, people want to know your personal life because that can be found out at any time, and that life supposedly “reflects” upon every other aspect of the person’s interactions, whether or not that is a logical conclusion. I’m not going to live like that, waiting for a friend, a boss to attempt to slander me because I don’t know if those people will approve of my “embarrassing” activities. These are matters that people concern themselves with; however, they need not concern themselves, because everyone present fully consents to being present.

Disappointing, isn’t it?

Are you thinking of your own dirty little secret?

Do you have multiples of them?

The way people think the world works is that you always know whom you can trust, who would never gossip, who would wholly accept you...but that's not how it works. Were that the case, you'd have to know before it happens that a person will gossip, that a person will talk. Not even the most secretive cults and organizations can claim that one. You'd have to know beforehand if someone would do that; but you'd not be friends with such a person if you knew that—so then, why did you tell them? Because you didn't know.

In short, you'd have to know about it before it happened—you'd have to be psychic. No, not psychic, that only allows knowing the current state of things; you'd have to be omniscient, to know how everything to come will play out, to know that—with all the uncertainty between now and years from now—the person with this knowledge won't ever change their mind or encounter a situation that challenges their decision to tell.

Their decision to treat you badly.

Isn't it scary you can't control other people, can't predict them to that extent, no matter what you do?

That kind of omniscience does not exist.

Or you simply don't ever talk about your “uncommon” activities. Simply don't talk about your problems.<sup>1</sup>

Do you really want to live like that, never asking for needed help, bottling it all up, never having the advantage of knowing how other people fixed similar problems? Never knowing that you're not the only one?

I don't.

But people won't stop asking. Because information is important. It's important because it changes our decisions, because it changes our judgments.

I find it incredibly interesting that being badly judged and having done wrong bear very little relationship to each other.

Perhaps this is why there's so much denial and blame going around these days; if it doesn't exist or can be foisted off on someone else, a “problem” or “embarrassing hobby” can't hurt you.

...but if everyone does that, nothing will change. There won't be “problems” because everything will be “fine”, so those problems won't get fixed; and those “embarrassing hobbies” will still be sneeringly judged, so nobody will be allowed to freely pursue them. That's not okay.

Have you ever been outed? Did you deny it?

This kind of climate results in people not talking about anything even slightly out of the norm or anything with even a slight shadow of risk to it. I don't think that's a healthy society. Breeds fear.

If you support that kind of thing, or think the following is simply daily life to brush off like rainy weather, you're not company with whom I would willingly associate. It's sad that few people remember that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.smbc-comics.com/index.php?db=comics&id=2611>

friendship is two-way, that their wanting to be friends doesn't mean you want to be friends with them. It's sad that companies don't remember that an interview also means the applicant evaluates the company, not just that the company makes a singular decision on employment. Simply because one person is interested doesn't mean the other is. Too few remember that.

Did you rage quit yet? This is not accusatory. It simply states observations and asks for an explanation, for thoughts on the matter.

Creeped out yet? As in, unsettled, like there's some kind of amorphous threat brushing against your psyche as you read this? Nah, nothing will happen to you by reading this. You might lose your sense of security and trust in justice. But according to "common wisdom", you'll get over it. Right? That's just how the world works and we all need to get used to it. Shush, protesting makes a scene, and we can't have that.

Not at all.

The point of this is that I want to know what happened. Not with the people involved; that's finished. I know their interpretation of these events differs from mine; I know some events they've flat out lied about to protect themselves from the same disaster that befell me. I have the documentation that they've lied. Documentation is a lot of effort to go through, so I won't bother unless they're willing to publicly challenge me on it.

No, I don't want to talk to the people involved. I know what they think. I want to know what was going through the minds of the administrators at Carnegie Mellon to cause them to make the decisions they did. They got this same set of events. I have my own speculation on what the administration believes; I want to know what others think of the situation. You'll see why I want to know the reasoning behind their decisions.

In the interest of putting my action where my mouth is, let's talk about what happened during spring of last year.

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Late February, 2011. Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh campus. Campus dorms, a weekend night. A friend drops me off from another friend's place where we'd just finished a slew of movies and one of those dancing video games. It's winter; I'd usually walk back, but it's cold and snowing and slush is icky. As happens when lots of students and recent grads live near each other, I'm texting other friends who are out that night. Most of my friends know I'm up late in general, on weekends doubly so.

At this point, it's 2:30am, and because I know it'll be asked, no I was not intoxicated—three of us had a dinner party at 8pm that night, and perhaps 3 mixed drinks in those six hours, with the last done at the beginning of the final two-hour movie. (Thanks again for hosting that, it was all quite delicious. Partially because I didn't cook it myself.) Anyhow, my level of alcohol doesn't particularly matter; you're not supposed to play with people who are intoxicated, because such people do not have the capacity to think normally. Unless, of course, you get prior consent that playing with them while they are not fully aware of their activities is okay. And that's the rub, ain't it?

This friend whom I met at 2:30am at my dorm, after leaving my first group of friends, was quite intoxicated. Mobile, but not in a state you'd ethically let walk home themselves. Especially not with the wonderful winter weather we'd been enjoying that week.

We're talking, exploring various music artists online, nothing I'd do out of the ordinary. Because people will ask, what's my "out of the ordinary"? Everyone, including this friend, who knows me is well aware that I'm one of those physically affectionate people—if we're friends and you're okay with it, I'm going to

hug you a lot and generally be touchy-feely. I'm also okay with people being the same with me, as it stood then. Everyone also knows none of this is flirtatious, it's definitely not sexual, and it's neither intended nor taken as such by either person: we're all quite frank about this point—because nonplatonic is a delicate area and not something I take lightly.

If I'm wanting more than a platonic relationship, I have said and will always explicitly say so. Because I don't like misinterpretations.

None of that should matter, though. It's permissions in the moment that matter, and if you aren't sure of your welcome, always ask. Simple. And if you can't ask, you really shouldn't be doing anything—can't ask, both in the sense of you can't say the words and in the sense of they can't give you a reliably conscious response. The kind of conscious consent that you'd be allowed to conduct scientific research upon them if they consented—which rules out intoxicated states and sleeping people, because neither can give fully conscious consent. And if you don't get an affirmative, if they later want you to stop or it appears something is wrong, I'd suggest stopping.

Back in the dorm, I decide I want to sleep. I tell my friend he can either stay the night with me—lots of friends have stayed overnight with me; it happens when people live offcampus or just don't want to walk home, and this particular friend has stayed with me before. It's around 4:30am. He decides to stay with me. Peachy.

Somewhere around 10 to 10:30am (I know because I catch a glimpse of the clock in the mayhem), I'm pulled partially awake. I'm incredibly difficult and unpleasant to wake up; anyone who's tried will attest to this fact. This is that state of not-awake-but-aware where you remember what's happening but can't control what you do, like watching a movie. Have you ever woken up and rearranged yourself in that half-aware state, operating on autopilot, to fall back asleep almost immediately? This is one of those states.

I'm curled up on the edge of the bed. I don't know what it was that pulled me awake, but I do know he's kneeled over me with hands on either side of me. I have the sense he's trying to move me, and I know I've just smacked something into the wall—his hand, his head, I don't know—but whatever it is, I later find my hand is bruised from the force of hitting the wall. I shout, "NO!" He says something with the gist of, "That wasn't the reaction I expected. At least let me put you back where you were so I don't feel as bad." That is said as I am rolling myself to the other edge, into the wall that flanks the bed on that side and curl up against it. All of this happens in less than five seconds. At this point, I am fully asleep again.

I don't know what it was that partially awoke me. I don't know what happened outside that five second interval and flash of him over top of me. I don't know why he said what he did, I don't know why he was trying to move me. No, this was not a dream; all similar experiences to this type of semi-conscious state have all been real, and you don't get multiple sensation in dreams—you don't get the feel of sheets on your fingers, you don't get your hand hitting the wall, you don't get the warmth of curling up around yourself while your skull is pressed against a wall. You don't get all that with the feeling of someone else's weight creating that bend in the mattress that tells you exactly where and how they're sitting. You know that feeling? Ever had that in a dream? Ever had that, with all the rest simultaneously, in a dream? No, I don't, because it's not that specific. That level of detail is only in physical life, not a dream reality my mind creates.

What the hell was that?

No time to think, there's more.

Let's move forward in time. When this next bit is over, it's 12:30pm. I know because I looked at the digital clock. Giant red numbers, can't miss them. I don't know when this event sequence started or how long it lasted. No, I can't give an estimate. I do know what started it, and I do know what happened. I do know it is real.

Sometime after the semi-awake scene, I snap awake. Dead asleep to hyper aware in an instant.

What did it?

It was a hand.

Up my shirt. Under my shirt.

His hand.

Groping my breast.

My brain: WHATTHEFUCKISGOINGONIDONTUNDERSTANDWHYISTHISHAPPENING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!  
You know, primal fear. The kind that makes deer stare at oncoming headlights and bunny rabbits' eyes widen when they think your incoming hand is a hawk. The kind that makes people afraid of spiders and heights, afraid of so many things. It's called paralyzing fear for a reason.

The following runs through my mind in a few seconds after I snap awake—not as worded thoughts, more as taking stock of knowledge:

*You see, two weeks prior, he and I had the conversation about friends and relationships and sex. It's not a problem that the conversation happened; it has to happen if anyone is to express interest in someone else. Being the frank person I am when it comes to these things, I flat said I did not want to be anything beyond platonic friends. I reiterated that I am physically affectionate, that such affection means absolutely nothing in terms of "more than friends" and should not be taken as such. I also said that if my keeping on with that wasn't okay, I'd stop. And that, unless I specifically said I wanted a romantic/sexual relationship, nothing I did was to be taken as romantic or sexual interest. Finally, I said that if my declining a romantic relationship/sex was a problem, I'd understand if he didn't want to be friends anymore—I'd had that issue with a few other people who couldn't let the idea go or weren't comfortable after being declined; it happens, it's okay. I told him to let me know if anything changed. I make sure the possibilities are covered, that there's no judgment so that no problems are hidden, and there are no misunderstandings.*

*Nothing needed to change as a result of this conversation. Minus adding romance or sex, the situation was left up to him. This is because, as long as people don't keep pushing at it, I'm generally still comfortable in the relationship after such questions come up—which isn't true for everyone, hence why I usually leave it up to the other person.*

*As far as I was aware, we'd been clear on being platonic and we'd been clear on boundaries, interpretations, and communications. Clear as in I straight up said the above, not in those exact words but on that level of frankness.*

*I've had two incidents happen, including this one, across all of my relationships. This is two out of hundreds of people. The first isn't a factor here.*

*I don't know what happened between that conversation and the hand up my shirt that led to him thinking this is okay. It isn't okay. It. Really. Isn't.*

*This isn't one of those accidents or experiments, where someone brushes against you in the subway or you're trying out new sex moves with your partner to see what you do and don't enjoy. This is obviously sexual in nature, and this is obviously far outside where I'd drawn my boundaries. There isn't just a lack of "no" for this—I was asleep at the time and woke up to it; I treated this person no differently than I do any of my other friends—there is a clear Do Not Want stamp on this groping that's being ignored.*

*I'd explicitly told him I didn't want anything sexual, remember?*

*It's that last part that's terrifying. It's bad enough when people don't bother to ensure your agreement before involving you in some activity—at least then there's a possibility of miscommunication although that's usually not the case. Here, I'd gone out of my way to say "Do Not Want", to say that I would explicitly state if I changed my mind—which I never did, never said.*

*I now know he's ignored me once when I've said "no"—I know this because he's got his hand up my shirt groping my breast in a highly sexual manner, after I've clearly said I didn't want that. There's absolutely no reason to think he'd stop now if I said no.*

*Because that didn't stop him now, when I'd said exactly that before, did it?*

All of that flashes through my mind as I snap awake. As my body reacts to the fingers pinching my nipple and the hand squeezing my breast, my back arcs up, I twist as I fall and land half-curved in a fetal position—I'm pinned against the wall from the previous incident, otherwise I'd have fully balled up instead of only half. I'm in that shocked state of panic where you don't actually feel the fear, but you can taste the metallic adrenaline on your tongue as it floods your body.

My eyes are still closed. He doesn't know I'm awake, despite the reflex reaction to being groped. I don't even want to think about what could have been going on before I woke up.

I'm facing him now. I don't know why. Because the wall is on my left, and it was my left breast that was grabbed, and in an unconscious state the idea is to move away from the direction an attack come from? I don't know. Higher brain function doesn't exist in sleep, and it doesn't exist in crisis situations. The point of training for martial arts and ER people is to make action innate so they don't have to think, so it's another memory powerful enough to override the naive responses of the body. To override the fear so thought is possible.

I've frozen. I know he's not going to stop if I say no, I know that a physical fight will only do damage to me and gain me nothing but injury. What would a fight do, anyhow? Its purpose is to get away or incapacitate the attacker... Ha. The odds of me accomplishing that are laughable. And even if I had a fighting chance, would I have done it? Would I have fought someone who was supposed to be my friend?

Remember what my brain yelled when I woke up—the "WHATISHAPPENING!". I didn't believe what was going on, right on top of me. If a friend turned on you, would you immediately condemn them or would there be that moment of doubt, that moment long enough to say "what the hell is going on". Would your fight response kick in if the friend moved slowly enough to not startle you, or would it only kick in if it was a fast move?

How do you know, unless you've been in that situation? And how can you even compare one situation to another?

So we've got this guy's hand groping my breast. He keeps at that for a while, I don't know how many repetitions, then his hand meanders down my chest, across my abdomen...towards my vulva. Amplify the previous fears by I don't know what factor, and log that as a confirmation of my thought that things would get worse...that he wouldn't stop if I asked.

Because it's bound to be suggested, no, this isn't my hand. This isn't an episode of dissociation, where I'm either dreaming this or I don't recognize it's my own hand. How do I know? The fingers of the hand, the palm of the hand, sits on the top of my breast, with the thumb underneath it. That is anatomically impossible to do to yourself, but absolutely possible for someone facing you to do. I know because I actually had to do that experiment to prove to myself that this actually happened, that it was real. Sure,

anatomic impossibility is possible in dreams, but again—not to the level of detail that was aware of. Try focusing on the dream details in that jacket you wear, the tiles in your dream floor, and it'll fall apart—it's not possible. Count your fingers, even. You can't do it.

Why did I doubt it, why do I even have to go through those state checks?

I didn't have these words at the time all this happened. The description for the feelings, for what was going through my head, didn't come until far later. The only thing I had then was the fact of what happened. And because I didn't understand what happened, only knew that this set of events happened, I doubted it. I doubted the reality I had lived; despite stating what had happened to friends and others, it didn't seem real. I couldn't accept that a friend would do that, would completely disregard not only getting consent—but completely disregard my explicit rejection.

Isn't it terrifying to realize that you can't control other people, can't predict them to that extent, no matter what you do? Isn't it terrifying that you actually can't know whom you can trust?

Traumatic experiences make a person realize just how fragile the world is, just how easy it is to manipulate the basic trust that society depends upon to function.

You wouldn't know it...but that was the start of doubting a lot of things. I trust very few people; I see liars and mind games everywhere. That I realize I do this doesn't stop me from thinking it; it merely forces a painful recalibration of whom to trust and whom I cannot. No, it's not as easy as "trust me, I'm your friend".....he was too, remember.

His hand is moving toward my vulva. Stops at the top of my pajama pants, right above my pelvis—all my pants sit low cut due to a quirk of anatomical genetics, unless I feel like wearing them Spongebob Squarepants style tucked up right beneath my bra. That stop is actually more like a pause, just a brief hesitation. Time seems to be slowed down; that kind of perceptual skew happens when your mind kicks into high gear.

Brief hesitation. Do I try to block him, do I continue playing dead? Not much time to decide....

I blend the two choices. Slowly bring my knees in closer to me, as if I'm rearranging myself while I'm asleep. This effectively blocks access below the belt, unless he wants to use physical force on top of emotional trauma and manipulation.

Was it his aim to force this encounter? I don't know. Does the arsonist always aim to set the building on fire, or is the fire sometimes an accident? Does it matter when they ought to know better, and damage is done either way? Does it matter when, in either case, the actor needs to learn not to do that? That it isn't acceptable? If it was force, that's being cognizant of what you're doing—I was in fact asleep, and I did in fact explicitly say no. If it wasn't force, if things seemed okay to him, why stop when it became slightly more difficult to reach my vulva? Why not continue? It wasn't an impossible task, he'd just have to reach a little farther around my leg.

Ya know, if he wasn't okay with being just friends or wasn't okay with the physical affection when I didn't want more than platonic friends, it was entirely acceptable for him to say so or to walk away—I'd stated those as options. I trusted him when he said he could handle keeping things the way they were, I trusted him when he said he understood that I didn't want romance and sex. I trusted him when he said he understood that I would explicitly say if that changed, and that nothing but explicitly saying "I want more" was to be taken as "signals". I said no. What the fuck happened?

He trails his hand back up to my chest. As if he were giving me a caress, no less. This starts the cycle of massaging my breasts and pinching my nipples, and circling back across my abdomen. This continues for

I don't know how long. I lay there in the same state I've been in since the original fear, emotions, and thoughts were amplified by the hand trailing towards my vulva.

Finally it stops. There's a short pause. He leans in and kisses me on the forehead. He leaves.

I stay where I am for another I don't know how long. When I get up and look at the clock, it's 12:30pm. I don't feel anything yet; I've always been good at blocking things out. I have yet to recognize that it was fear and not just cold distance that was beating through me as all this happened.

I go about my week of classes. I don't say anything for a week. Not to say it's off my mind, I just don't say anything. It still doesn't feel real.

But I know it is, at least intellectually, even if I can't accept it on any other level.

Towards the end of the week, I ask this guy what happened. Twice. Both times I open with asking about whether I did indeed slam something against the wall. Both times he says no. Both times he says nothing happened, that all that happened was I was asleep and so he left. No mention of everything I know happened.

***Nothing happened.***

***Nothing happened.***

***Nothing happened.***

If everything seemed okay to him, why tell me nothing happened? Why tell me he did nothing but leave? I didn't say I was asleep the whole time; he'd have to have known that himself. Did he think it was okay and then figure out it wasn't; did he do this on purpose, knowing I didn't want it; did he do it on purpose and figure out I knew, and thus denied it?

It has to be one of the latter two because I specifically said no. There's no way to get around that. He's the one who said he wanted to keep things the way they were; I'm not responsible for how he interprets things, especially not when I've said not to read them like that.

Why do we shush these things when this isn't so easy to parse out? When education on these topics would actually prevent these things from happening?

Do I think it was malicious? No. I think he took something the wrong way, despite all of what I said, to think that this was actually okay. Why do we assume things, instead of checking up on those assumptions? Especially when this is the result of those assumptions?

Why don't we educate people about these ambiguities?

Nothing happened.

I'm already doubting this at every level but the intellectual. I know that doubt will only get worse. The day after last asking, I tell some friends what happened. It comes off highly cavalier because I can't allow myself to feel it yet.

He's online when I tell a few friends what happened. They want me to tell him off, but I can't do it. I don't know why, I just can't. I can't, so I hand them the keyboard and they do it for me, telling him they know what happened, that he's got people who don't like him on the campus, and to stay away from me.

My friends and I go out to dinner.



By the end of that semester, much more had happened.

In late March, I reported what had happened. It took a few weeks to get a response out of CMU, and in that time I find out that one of the people I'd originally told of the assault had been laughing at me behind my back on the basis of my inability to cope.

I already lost a lot of my basic trust in people because of the original incident. Do you really think this extra bit of fun did no damage?

I found that out, and this person decided to shift from hiding it behind my back to overtly bullying me. Deliberately setting off my PTSD despite being told to cut it out. Despite breaking and stealing my stuff—this person was my then-roommate, you see. Despite telling other people intimate details about my assault, which not only is harassment in general but also was specifically banned by the meeting with Student Life and is listed as harassment under Title IX. Under Title IX<sup>2</sup>, that's harassment whose remedy calls for removal of that person from the victim's environment—meaning they have to leave<sup>3</sup>, not me, because burden on the victim is supposed to be minimized. Meaning this is a violation of standards of conduct.

CMU didn't see it that way. Must not have read the letter they got that spring, long before any of this happened. I filed a formal complaint on the person; they not only didn't bother acting upon that, but also CMU flat out said it was not harassment. One of their Title IX coordinators told me that. Then suggested I have some "mediation" with this other student to solve this "problem". I was later informed the discussion the administration had with the other student consisted of chatting about ethnic cooking instead of my formal complaint.

That's not all they talked about.

My harasser said I was jealous, because she was dating one of my good friends at the time, that I was jealous of the time she got to spend with that friend. That I was jealous of her body, that I wanted to look like her. All of that stems from the fact that I wasn't on board with her dating that friend, because that friend had been in a closed relationship at the time....and her breaking up the relationship meant that she would be disregarding this person's partner, who was a mutual friend of ours. Classic love triangle; roommate likes a taken person, and we're all friends with each other. If they want to cheat, that's up to them—but I'm not going to stand by while the person who's cheated on is left out to dry. I wasn't on board with that happening; I said that should this move forward, I would have to tell my friend's partner that they were being cheated on.

This was called betrayal. This was warped into jealousy. Of course, the fact that I stood by my friend's partner was left out of the equation. What probably happened was that it was changed into a "they broke up, they were on a break and that's when we got together". Easier to rationalize that way, no cheating involved, no questionable values.

My charge of harassment was pinned on trying to get back at her because I was "jealous". Said I made it all up. CMU believed her.

Seems I'm quite the storyteller, making up something new everyday.

Still think I should try to bury this and not talk about it?

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104\\_pg15.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104_pg15.html)

Roommate, I know you'll learn that this exists. You've enjoyed telling all kinds of people about what happened to me, without even the justification of "this is why we're not friends anymore." Are you going to let everyone know these details?

Most likely you won't. It doesn't jive with your perception of the world. Your perception of yourselves.

I heard what she did. Her new romance backed her up.

I laughed and walked away from them both.

What else can one do in the face of such blatant disregard?

Take a look at page 5 to see what kind of effect not bothering to protect harassed students has: it means that students who report their assaults—or accidentally reveal their names to those they seek help from, due to mandatory reporting—won't be protected from harassment. Who's going to seek help, to report, when they're not guaranteed protection?

When they already believe there's no one who's going to treat them well because of what already happened?

Oh, and it turns out that the evaluation of whether harassment has occurred is supposed to be impartial. It just so happened that the person harassing me was the significant other of the the evaluator's favorite student employee. Objective indeed.

I didn't know my Title IX rights until this fall. You'd expect a place as highly reputable as Carnegie Mellon University to get those correct, wouldn't you? Without prompting?

Apparently not. Know your rights, people. You're expendable when keeping things quiet is at stake.

Shhhhh.

So yet again I get to watch promises of safety crumble. Nice reinforcement for the "lesson" of my assault, yea?

It gets better, though.

I left our dorm in mid April, and later that night I had to prevent a friend from committing suicide. I have the texts as proof that this friend actually told me she had taken steps to go through with it. It so happened that my harasser was also involved in this situation, which made things a trifle complicated. The prevention was a success, but it ended up including the campus PD for reasons that aren't applicable to this account.

When I was called down to explain the suicide situation the next day, I found out that both my friend and my harasser denied that anything had happened, that there had not been any danger. Having previously dealt with the wonderful intelligences that administrate CMU, I understand why denial was chosen. I myself wouldn't have mentioned the incident to anyone else had circumstances not forced that call.

The problem with their denial is that the campus PD now has three situations with conflicting reports in which I am involved: the assault, the harassment, and this averted suicide.

Do you see how easy it is to take advantage of someone?

I didn't out my friend on the lie. It wouldn't have changed anything, not when the both of them were denying everything, not with my "track record" of "making things up". The text proof would have been

called a “dramatization”, that “all kids under stress claim to want to kill themselves because they want the attention”. I would have been “overreacting”. The PD had decided the situation before I’d said anything; the two denials had already been interviewed before me.

It shouldn’t be hard to guess what the PD did.

They flat out asked if I fabricated the assault. I was told I was wasting their time by one of the head people. They also asked my friend and my harasser—former roommate, remember—if I’d made up our dorm robbery the month before. Yea, that happened too, and my roommate was even there for that one—there, and at a time before any nastiness happened. My roommate was the one who called it in. FUN!

Nothing is real, huh? It’s not that hard to get people to believe fake memories are their own. It’s not that hard to accomplish the flip, to make people question the reality of their own memories. Especially when said reality is being questioned by so many people. Everything else equal, it’s quite easy to discredit someone; once the initial label is set, that’s the end of it, that’s the track that will always be taken.

Such a lovely environment. I can’t rely on the campus PD for anything because they think I fabricate everything.

I told the CMU administration about that incident. To my knowledge, they did nothing about it.

I also found out that my harassing roommate claimed a counter charge: that I had threatened to kill her. This came about because—remember the friend I’d stopped from committing suicide?—I’d talked to that suicidal friend earlier about the harassment. This friend said that there wasn’t much left to be done except, quote, “beat her ass”. To which I replied that, not only would I not do that, but given the obvious sheer physical differences between us I could conceivably kill her with very little effort regardless of intent to do so. Statement of fact, it was; it’s like saying that, when a chicken is harassing a fox, the fox could fight off the chicken—but if the fox did so, that chicken would probably be dead.

I have proof that my friend said this. Confronted with that, said friend tried to deny it, claiming that the statements the cops had on file—written in her own hand—“must have some mistake” in them. This person had told me previously that she’d stood up for me and denied I’d said such a thing when my harasser claimed it.

Great manipulator, except when people talk to each other.

In related news, I found out this fall that CMU either believed my assaulter that it wasn’t assault, thought I made it all up, or that CMU didn’t follow their Title IX obligations when investigating the actual assault. I was explicitly told I couldn’t know what was carried out as discipline; Title IX explicitly says I have a right to know<sup>4</sup>, and that if necessary I can sign an NDA.

Of course, that’s in addition to the harassment by my roommate they didn’t acknowledge. And it is entirely perplexing why I would not be informed about the outcome of the decision on this case, not only the discipline but also the determination on whether this was or was not assault. Never got the obligatory written decision on that.

It’s also quite interesting that I was not informed of the academic possibilities<sup>5</sup> at that time. The administration was supposed to tell my professors about all of this, so I wouldn’t have to go through all of that several more times; they didn’t do that either.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104\\_pg13.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104_pg13.html)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104\\_pg16.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104_pg16.html)

I went and did it myself; they helped me out. I tried to finish the work, but I just couldn't. It was too soon, and it was all tied up with everything that had happened. I didn't have the emotional control over those ties to get the work done. It's the nature of PTSD.

Had I known I could academically wipe everything from that semester, I'd have dropped most of the classes. I was told the following fall that I "would have a pretty strong case" to retroactively drop my classes from that spring.

Which isn't the same as the guarantee laid out in Title IX.

It's almost as if nobody wants to acknowledge that spring happened. Why would I believe I'd get those wiped from my record based on a "strong case", when that's what I thought I had with the administration with the harassment and assault in the first place?

I failed most of my classes that semester. The following fall, things were going well until the middle of the semester—in one week, I ran into all my idiots from previous semester, had a bunch of triggering topics in my classes, and generally had a shitty week. The hardest to deal with is when you think you've got a handle on it, when you're sort of okay...and then it all comes crashing back, as if some ant hill god needs to make sure the lesson to never try, because it'll all just be destroyed, is branded onto your neurons.

Most people wouldn't be able to tell what was going on. Nobody could, except those I'd told myself about what was still going on.

Why did it still bother me "so much later"? Think of it like this: a person who is "normal" can withstand a negative event if they have support, because they know this negativity isn't how the world actually is. A person who has a huge negative event and doesn't get that support for whatever reason settles in the idea that the world sucks, and that this fact is not changeable. The mind's job is to learn; this is what I learned. Read this again for why I learned that. As for why not many people knew what was going on in the beginning?

Shush. We don't talk about that.

Would you tell more people when the first set you'd told had turned on you? Would you believe they, even if they wanted to help, wouldn't eventually turn on you too?

Shhhhhh.

I failed my classes that semester too. And because of the treatment from spring, and because I didn't know that spring's classes weren't supposed to count against me, I was slammed with a suspension.

Successfully fought that off. Why did I fight it? Because I was fine until outside forces, namely everyone who wished me ill from the previous semester, popped up again. One of those wouldn't leave me alone. I shouldn't suffer for the activities of idiots over whom I have no control. Whom I'd told I wanted no contact with, and who had clearly ignored that statement.

The administration asks that I go to them for help if things seem rocky, so that problems can be addressed. I'm okay with that.

Into spring 2012, a year after all this began, things are going okay again. But I'm in one class from that previous spring that I can't deal with. The project I finished for that class when I took it the previous year was a direct result of my assault. I can't focus on the lectures, I can't focus on the work. The physical is easier to heal than the mental, and even that isn't demanded to heal this fast. And we don't even know how to heal mental wounds.

I fail any of these classes this semester, I'm going to get suspended without option to appeal. Such an interesting consequence for having gotten assaulted and being disregarded.

So I talk to the department head to ask if there's anything I can do to get help with the class.

Says no. There's nothing that can be done. I tell her the problem is that the class is triggering. At this point I still don't know about the academic provisions of Title IX.

Still says no, there's nothing to do. Either I do it as is or I get suspended.

I go home. Stare at the walls for a while. Why bother doing any of the classes when I'm just going to get suspended anyhow? Why bother doing anything when, clearly, trying gets me nowhere and people keep smacking me down when I need help? Even when they've said they would help?

Why bother, when I can focus on taking care of myself and trying to convince myself that it really is worth it to try, that some people can be trusted?

Because knowing the mechanisms of warped thinking doesn't mean you will always recognise what your mind is telling you is wrong, doesn't mean you'll believe what it's telling you is wrong, doesn't mean you can stop acting upon what it's telling you. Because it's your own mind thinking it; why ever would that be wrong?

It's what I study. But knowing isn't the same as being immune to it.

Sounds like an extreme conclusion; it is. Remember, though, that what I lived through was pretty extreme—and the brain's purpose is to learn from its experiences. Especially bad ones, so that they can be “prevented” from happening again. The worse the experience, the farther seared into your mind the lesson is. The harder it is to recalibrate—and the catch is that you don't know what needs to be recalibrated, and what you should keep. Because it's your own mind thinking these things.

The lesson my mind settled upon is that nothing can be trusted. If nothing can be trusted, there is no reason to do anything, because nothing can be accomplished without outside help. Because anything you can accomplish will just be destroyed.

Doesn't that sound reasonable, given what happened over the last year?

My professors this spring tried to help. My friends whom I'd told later on tried to help. It just wasn't enough to counter the seared brand of “not worth the effort”.

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That's the story. I'm going to be suspended starting this summer. As of typing this, only a handful of people know that. Only a handful of people knew some of these events; only I knew them all.

Now everyone who cares to look it up does. This is no longer a threat.

Revenge? No. Revenge accomplishes nothing but to continue the cycle of violence and hate.

There are consequences for actions, though.

This should not happen to anybody. It should never be repeated. But shhhhh we don't talk about these things. Right?

I'm through being told to "let it go". I'm done being told to deal with it and cope. This isn't something to "cope" with. It's not about coping with a lollipop I didn't get to have for dessert<sup>6</sup>. This is something that should never happen.

I'm going to talk about it, whether or not you think it's appropriate to talk about.

Because it's not going to be fixed until we do talk about it.

I ought to make clear that I did get support, that I do have friends and family supporting me. The issue at hand is this climate that says we don't talk about any of this, that when I asked for help from the people who were supposed to help me—who had promised to help me—they told me "tough luck" or betrayed me. Those people who could have helped me, who should have helped me, were the administrators at CMU. They're the ones who had the power to stop the people who harassed me, they're the ones who had the power to put these things to rights.

But they didn't. And now, the chain of reaction is that I'm not graduating, that I'm getting suspended for what was begun last year.

Because the administration decided that I made it all up, decided that Title IX should be selectively applied. I don't know exactly how many other students have had things like this happen to them; I do know other such events have occurred. I know because those who have suffered have told me so. But their stories are not mine to tell.

How many suicides does CMU not tell people about—and how many could have been prevented? How many of those are due to things like this being brushed under the carpet? How many of the dropouts, the transfers, the suspensions are due to things like this happening?

How many other problems are students hiding because they know what happens when they ask for help?

How long until those students break, how long until one of them decides to handle things a little differently than I have?

Carnegie Mellon administration, why do you do these things?

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For those of you who know more than I've said here: I'd suggest recognizing what I've deliberately left out of this account, and why I would do so. And what more I could have included, could have made relevant, before anyone reading thinks I've deliberately skewed this to present these people in the worst light possible. And the things I went out of my way to leave out, because they are not relevant to this account. Think about that, and then decide if this isn't a fair accounting.

\*\*Update: People are dismissing this on the basis that it is one side of the "story". Silence goes both ways, people. Do you really think the other side—the people who treated me badly—are going to admit fault, much less come out and **publicly say**, "Yes, I assaulted her, bullied her, called her crazy when she said I attempted suicide"?

Do you automatically call "liar" on everything you read, or only when you can't envision people actually being capable of the atrocities listed?

You know, you can always contact CMU and ask. I have no problem with that; you all know who I am.

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.reddit.com/r/depression/comments/tlpp6/to\\_the\\_kids\\_reading\\_this/](http://www.reddit.com/r/depression/comments/tlpp6/to_the_kids_reading_this/)