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# On Being Groped and Staying Quiet. Or, What Kind of Place an Airplane Can Be

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**On being groped and staying quiet. Or, what kind of place an airplane can be.**

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# On being groped and staying quiet. Or, what kind of place an airplane can be.

## Abstract

This short essay is a reflection on the author's own experiences with being groped on airplanes in response to the election of the 45th president, and his proud statements and responses - both before and during the campaign - on how he violates women as a matter of course.

**Keywords:** sexual harassment; groping; women's march; airplanes; president.

## Part 1: the new president (January 21, 2017)

Yesterday, the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States was sworn into office, and today there are *hundreds of thousands* of women and men in the streets of American cities protesting this presidency. The protests could be about any number of things this candidate said and did during his despicable campaign, inciting hatred against so many kinds of people.

But today is the day of the women's march. And that is because, of all the egregious things our new president has said and done, one of the most telling in his own way of thinking and being was what he said long before his campaign, when he thought no one was listening:

I moved on her like a bitch, but I couldn't get there. And she was married. Then all of a sudden I see her, she's now got the big phony tits and everything. She's totally changed her look. ... I've got to use some Tic Tacs, just in case I start kissing her. You know I'm automatically attracted to beautiful — I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. I just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.... Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything.

Each time I re-read this quotation, it is still outrageous, still demeaning, still infuriating. But what came after this news was released, on October 7, was even more horrendous in some respects: the 'boys will be boys' defense; the idea that men, left to their own devices, say – or make claims to - truly foul, violent statements about the things they have done to the women in their orbit; that they cannot *help it*. The idea that powerful men – whether by political or economic gain – have also procured the power to violate the women around them, to use sexual threat as power, to diminish women with the threat.

When the *Washington Post* released this recording during the campaign, it felt disgraceful to hear from a person running for office. Not more or less outrageous than the insults he had thrown at Muslims, Latinos, people of color more generally, people with disabilities, and so many others, but somehow different.

This particular set of comments *hurt*, and they hurt me because the threat was both general and familiar. The threat was the one that women have known about star athletes, bosses, class presidents, bigger boys down the street, smaller boys higher up on the food chain ever since we were little: if they are powerful we should, foremost, be careful. We should be careful because they have, in our cultural logic, earned this power. And this power grants them the right to that violence.

Certainly, we can test that notion, but rest assured that if they use it on us, we likely will not be believed. These comments from the mouth of our president mean: they are powerful, and they will mock you and they will grab you, and they will benefit from the pride and credibility they have earned from other people like them.

In the weeks following the release of the tapes, tens of women came forward alleging that the candidate had sexually violated or harassed them. One of the most well-publicized charges came from a woman named Jessica Leeds, who alleged to have been groped by him on an airplane 35 years before. Per usual, so many didn't believe her: why, if this was so traumatic, didn't she report it sooner? At the time? Wasn't she, perhaps, just a low-grade political saboteur, riding the wave of misogynistic claims against the candidate? Was she doing it for *attention*?

But even these notions were not the most profoundly unsettling. Rather, it was the candidate's grandstanding in the following days, particularly at an October 13 campaign rally, in which he declared that he never would have groped her because 'Believe me, she would not be my first choice, that I can tell you...that would not be my first choice.'

It was the same threat, once again, and so familiar: you are the ugly one; you are the worthless one; no one will believe you because the person who has harmed you is so powerful that they will touch you, and violate you, and then call you disgusting, and they will be right. And then the attention will be on you, and what you have done to deserve this harm, part of which is to be so disgusting and un-beautiful that you deserve nothing more than bodily harm by the powerful man.

And although his claim was not tied to any one space – indeed, the strutting is about doing what he wants wherever and whenever he wants – it was the airplane scene that captured my attention: the small space, the stuck-ness, the desire not to make a scene. And, like a lot of women you know if you ask around, being groped on an airplane is familiar to me.

Today I share my field notes. As an ethnographer I can tell you they are not reliable, of course, coming far too late to be faithful. As a woman I can tell you they come far too late to be regarded as true. But still: my dispatch from the field of groping, unwanted touch, unwanted attention. Three times, three different airplanes.

## Part 2: Being groped, parts 1 - 3

### *First flight.*

I am 22, seated next to a man probably in his forties. I am friendly and chatty, as I tend to be when I am about to spend the next eight hours sitting beside someone. *Where are you headed? Oh – very interesting. Yes, I am coming from Spain, etc.*

It was the end of a long post-college trip; I was embroidering on my jeans and he asked me what I was making. A teapot – I was embroidering a teapot on the back pocket of my jeans. (This was a bohemian phase.) I remember asking him if he knew how to sew, and he laughed as if that were the most preposterous thing in the world – I remember him telling me that men don't sew.

I continued to focus on my small purple and brown stitches; he fell asleep. Or rather, I thought he fell asleep. And after some minutes of plaintively sewing I felt warm on my left side, the warmth of him near me. This happens often enough on a plane, a row-mate accidentally leaning hard on you in a moment of public drowsiness; you shove them gently and that is the end.

But it wasn't the end because he wasn't sleeping, not at all. The man had arranged his blanket over all of him and over my left leg, and was steadily reaching a hand onto and up my thigh. He was groping me, deftly and slowly so I wouldn't notice, so he could take my non-noticing as consent for as long as possible.

Shocked and utterly grossed-out, I yelped upon realization *what the hell are you doing?* He jumped too: *sorry, miss, I am so sorry.* My eyes narrowed as I pulled my spine up against the window and hissed *you are not sorry. You knew exactly what you were doing.* Sorry he had been caught, he tried to weasel his way out: *I'm sorry, I'm sorry miss, I'll move.*

No. I'll move.

I gathered my things up in one sweeping motion and stood in the aisle, purposefully marching toward the flight attendant and stage-whispering *the man in the seat next to me was groping me – can I please have another seat?*

The look on her face was as shocked as my own, but I imagine she was pleased that I wasn't making a bigger scene of it. She sat me further back on the plane. I asked her what I could do, and she said to go to the airline counter to report the incident when we landed.

As I settled down into the polyester blue of my new seat, I fantasized about marching up to the counter and declaring to the neckerchiefed woman behind it what had happened: where I was sitting on that fateful flight, she dutifully looking up my seat assignment, and his, and then blacklisting that man from ever sitting next to any young woman again, maybe even from flying for the next year, forever.

But instead, it went this way: flight lands, exasperated but strident young woman moves swiftly through the airport, backpack on back, head held high, approaches counter, sets down backpack, explains the groping incident, and the airline attendant responds *are you a minor?*

Pardon me?

Are you a minor?

I shook my head.

I'm so sorry. Nothing we can do.

Stunned. I walked over to the bank of vinyl seats and just sat. I sat and I glared, disbelieving, at nothing.

If I were a minor, as it turns out, I could have filed a police report. Being of age, however, launched me into something like a bracket of consent. If you're seventeen, he's a criminal; if you're twenty-two you might have sort of wanted it, deserved it. Regardless, there is Nothing to Do About It.

Touching a stranger is shameful, and should be understood as such. A man grabbing a young woman - and let's make no bones about the fact that this is most often the dynamic - and then retreating under the cloak of the crowd, the airport, that is shameful. Instead we teach young girls shame, or at least compliance: Don't make a *scene*. Tell someone who can handle the situation. *You don't know what else they are liable to do*. My hunch is that gropers are liable to do what they can get away with, which is quite a lot, and as frequently as they are allowed.

### ***Second flight***

I in my late twenties, he probably in his sixties (though I didn't get a good look.) The incident, frankly, far weirder. In the middle of the night on a red-eye flight from San Francisco to New York, I am jostled awake to the sensation of my head being rubbed by the man in the seat behind me. When I sit up in my seat, stunned, and realize that what is happening is actually happening and spin around in my chair to bark at him - but again far too politely, again with far too much concern for the shame of myself and others around me - he also insists that he is sorry.

Yes, he is sorry he got caught. And I am sorry there is nothing to do about it. And it is the middle of the night. And who wants to make a scene. *And it was your head? Just be glad it wasn't worse*. This is the sort of dialogue that plays out in the mind of the groped.

I am stuck and scared and I sit in the dark for the remaining hours, awake, hoping for nothing more than not to be touched anymore.

### ***Third flight***

I am in my early thirties, he is probably in his early forties. I'm heading from the West Coast, where I now live, to Philadelphia. I am in an aisle seat, the man in the window seat to my left, and the middle seat empty. Relieved not to be crammed three in the row, I flip up the armrest between me and the middle seat, happy to bend my knees, or fill the space between us with sweaters and magazines. I smile politely, ask him if he was going on a trip or headed home, and tune out.

As I settled into the flight, I noticed the man in the window seat turning almost entirely to face me, his back against the airplane wall. He tried to chat more, and when that didn't work, he stared. And stared. And stared. There was not much to say - he was as entitled to make himself

comfortable between cramped rows of coach seating as I was, and anyways I could focus on my magazine.

It wasn't until I drifted off to sleep, magazine in hands, and woke up to him still staring that something felt *wrong*. My eyes fluttered open to his still-staring face, and as I looked up he grinned and offered, 'if you want, you can rest your head on my shoulder.' *No no no no no!* I muttered, still half asleep as I slammed down my armrest. He stared more, now as if surprised that I had turned down his perfectly kind offer. And he stared. And stared. I pretended to sleep, trying to muster the anger of being grabbed by the thigh, being stroked on the head, being disbelieved, not wanting to make a scene so I could finally do something.

This time no one touched me at all, but here I was again, made to feel surrounded, powerless, stuck.

I promised, I thought. I promised myself I wouldn't let another one make me feel this way. Another creep on another plane. Here's my chance: I will stand up and I will announce what has happened to the surrounding passengers, and they will be angry, and this finally won't be my problem anymore. They will back me up. He will have to sit on the floor for the rest of the flight. In the bathroom. A terrible punishment will be meted out by the flight attendants in honor of me – the woman who finally spoke up.

But I didn't. Instead, I sat in my stuck place.

In my mind, I considered what it would be like when, after raising a fuss, another passenger would look at me and say 'he was just being friendly – what's your problem?' I got angrier at myself, all the while hearing the voice saying *he didn't touch you – it could be much worse. This one didn't even touch you. Are you really going to make a scene this time?*

No scene. Just the lonely, sad, frustrated, disappointed-in-myself, 22-years-old-and-nothing-we-can-do feeling that stayed with me for days. A feeling which may have gone away forever, until Jessica Leeds spoke up, and - even with good public knowledge that the perpetrator was of the scummiest sort – was greeted by a chorus of people raising their hands saying *wait – but why 35 years? This is politically motivated, isn't it? Couldn't this be a he-said, she-said? Don't women make these sorts of claims all the time?*

Even as I write this, I worry that you, reader, will judge me. That you will think this professor lady has gotten to travel all over the place, and she was met with some unsavory characters, and now she wants us all to listen about how sad that is. I even worry that you are right.

### **Part 3: A powerless, stuck place**

An airplane is such a strange ship. It can move us so far, and so fast, but in order to use it, we are bound in place. Such small but constant amounts of human trust are necessary for the unpleasant scheme to work: sharing of armrests, handing over of drinks, quieting of devices.

This trust, ironically, is what the groper/grabber/starer depends upon: the desire to keep disturbances down. That, and the faith that women will likely behave as they have been socialized to do: to keep it down, to not make a scene, to be mindful of the threat they live with. And as the

groper becomes president, so many places that seemed open are also that capsule, flying through the air, the threat condensed inside and around us.

I watch as we battle over the allegations of Jessica Leeds, allegedly groped by the ‘grab them by the pussy’ President. As I hear the story over the car radio, I shift in the driver’s seat knowing exactly why she never spoke up, even aside from the fact that it was a Famous Guy doing the groping. I am so deeply saddened by the fact that she is made less credible by the fact of her not reporting the incident over 35 years – I have kept my stories to myself for at least fifteen.

Of course, the groping and the grabbing are not a relic of the 1980s when it happened, as we are so often led to believe. You know the line: ‘that sort of thing *used to* happen all the time.’ We know that women – today, now – are taught, first, that we were lucky it wasn’t worse and, second, not to make a scene, or we could *make* it worse. The threat of ‘worse’ hangs over our heads – or more, important, our bodies.

Leeds did what I have done and – if you start asking around – what so many of us have done in these situations. She (we) piped down. She (we) moved. She (we) hoped not to cause a fuss. And we kept it quiet – not because we weren’t sure there would be consequences for the perpetrator but, rather, because we could be certain there would not be. In fact, not only would there not be consequences, there would be a cheering crowd awaiting the man who violated her, a jeering crowd so pleased at him calling her ugly, worthless, which she must be.

So now the Women’s March. Clever signs, hats with ears, all sorts of people saying ‘pussy’ out loud, and giggling, but also not giggling, because the political stakes of saying ‘pussy’ out loud do not often seem so high as they do right now. I am home, actually, too pregnant to go to the march, but watching it from afar, stunned at the beautiful numbers of people in the street. 22-year-old me is so thankful for these rallies, it’s like they have been thrown in my honor. These rallies are a sign of honor, so much the cardinal opposite of shushing, of unbelieving, of the threat. All these people, bodies and voices prying open the spaces, making them no longer small, no longer stuck.

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## **Notes on Contributor**

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