

“I kept putting the book down to make sure I was still breathing, to interrogate what had happened to my heart. Vanasco is a brilliant craftsperson—blurring the lines between memoir, investigation, and interview, she confronts her years-ago rapist and dives headlong into the complexity of forgiveness and redemption, what was taken and what can be rebuilt. Our cultural discussion of rape is so deeply marked by silence. Enough with the silence. Enough. Vanasco has given us a bridge.”

—MEGAN STIELSTRA, *The Wrong Way to Save Your Life*

“Carrying memories of rape sometimes feels like working, day in and day out, on untangling a hopelessly knotted chain. In this book, Jeannie Vanasco works through the gnarl until its terrifying expanse is stretched out before us. There is so much power in these pages: in the vulnerability she shows in seeking answers, in the deftness with which she builds a narrative where there was once only a mess of questions and silence.”

—ELISSA WASHUTA, *My Body Is a Book of Rules*

“Vanasco performs a literary feminist miracle for all women who have been denied basic rights, been suspect, been labeled, been unbelievable after their rapes and assaults, and shines our collective shame outwardly, to ask a man why a choice to abuse is made. Vanasco is powerful in her vulnerability, gutting in her candor and breaks the fourth wall, artfully, to interrogate the truth of toxic masculinity. Every male who has taken part in abuses of power, from politicians to teenage boys, will see a mirror and wince, knowingly. A modern classic of nonfiction.”

—SOPHIA SHALMIYEV, *Mother Winter*

“Jeannie Vanasco has written exactly the book we need right now: an investigative memoir that scrutinizes the nuances of sexual assault, the false binaries and myths too long used to determine who is and isn’t capable of rape, and the insidious ways that we are socialized to protect our predators. A book that dissects the complexities of sexual assault need not also be a pleasure to read, but this book is. Vanasco’s honesty and willingness to interrogate both her rapist and herself enthralled me from the opening paragraphs. I wish everyone in this country would read it.”

—MELISSA FEBOS, *Abandon Me*

“Jeannie Vanasco continues to shine a light into the unreconciled depths of the past. Fourteen years after being raped by her childhood best friend, the author sets out to track him down, to hear his voice, to salvage something of what was lost that fateful night. Part memoir, part interview, *Things We Didn’t Talk About When I Was a Girl* interrogates the terms of betrayal, the limits of redemption, asking us how can we forgive when we never truly forget?”

—TIM TARANTO, *Ars Botanica*

“In *Things We Didn’t Talk About When I Was a Girl*, Jeannie Vanasco has done something extraordinary. She explodes rape culture at the level of language, shows us how we are trapped and how we might make ourselves free. This is a brilliant book, an astonishingly fierce inquiry into the places language won’t go. It charts a path through the things we don’t have words for yet and the things we don’t know how to say.”

—EMILY GEMINDER, *Dead Girls*

“With matchless grit and a vibrant mind, Jeannie Vanasco performs an absorbing autopsy on a friendship that ended in rape. *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl* cuts through the silence of deep betrayal, gives contour to the aching space between forgiveness and absolution, and offers a living testament to the endless wreckage of sexual assault.”

—AMY JO BURNS, *Cinderland*

“Jeannie Vanasco’s narration of her experience is nuanced and complex. In sharp, purposeful prose, she explores what is demanded of victims—that we live in a world where the consequences for victims and perpetrators are grotesquely reversed, where the identities and reputations of perpetrators are protected, sometimes by the very people they’ve harmed. Unflinching in her honesty and approach, Vanasco interrogates boundaries further shaping and reshaping memoir as we know it. Wickedly clever and powerful, *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl* is a necessary book.”

—KRYSTAL A. SITAL, *Secrets We Kept: Three Women of Trinidad*

“Jeannie Vanasco’s rigorous and nuanced investigation of crime, trauma, secrets, and the telling of our stories applies an agile mind and penetrating insight to the enforced silences that surround rape and its aftermath. Vanasco incinerates shame and beckons us into the holy smoke. Searching, searing, and sacred, *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl* is the cleansing flame we have been waiting for.”

—LISA LOCASCIO, *Open Me*

“In this brave and urgent memoir, Jeannie Vanasco asks if it’s possible for a good person to commit a terrible act. In a moment where morality is so often rendered in flat, simplistic terms, Vanasco refuses to take the easy way out: she is generous yet exacting, fair yet relentless. *Things We Didn’t Talk About When I Was a Girl* is a searching, brilliant book and Jeannie Vanasco is a formidable talent. We are lucky to have her.”

—DANIEL GUMBINER, *The Boatbuilder*

“*Things We Didn’t Talk About When I Was a Girl* is a work of astounding control, able to reach places I never expected a book to reach. It is both a conversation between Jeannie Vanasco and her former friend, Mark, and a conversation between Vanasco and herself—about paradox and betrayal, owing and being owed, and the complex terminology of sexual violence. Vanasco writes not just about whether it is possible to be ‘a good person who commits a terrible act,’ but about having to consider the weight of the word *good*. It has left me transfixed.”

—THOMAS MIRA Y LOPEZ, *The Book of Resting Places*

“By unflinchingly inhabiting complex emotions and uncomfortable positions, Jeannie Vanasco has given us the rare book that lays bare to readers just how much the writing of it is itself a journey. *Things We Didn’t Talk About When I Was a Girl* explores the common experience of rape with uncommon nuance and intense tenderness. In the process, the book also unexpectedly becomes a warm celebration of female friendship. Vanasco reveals the boundaries of your thoughts and feelings. Then she takes you beyond.”

—YZ CHIN, *Though I Get Home*

“Things We Didn’t Talk About When I Was a Girl is the embodiment of what a book-length essay should be—personal, vulnerable and honest, it follows a spiraling and ever deepening path of questions—questions about the way women and girls are supposed to respond to the trauma of rape, questions about the power of language to both explain and evolve what we believe about sexual assault, and questions about who rapists are and how they become those who enact sexual violence. Vanasco, miraculously, writes with both tenderness and horror of the memories she has of her closest friend turned rapist, and spares no dark corner within herself as she questions what that tenderness means about who she is, her assimilation into a culture that trains girls and women to blame themselves for both the assault and its aftermath, and what the cost of that assimilation is personally and throughout the wider society. Her wildly courageous decision to confront her rapist, question him, meet with him, and then invite her readers into her processing of that experience is, frankly, stunning. This is a book I’ll teach and reread well into the future, grateful that fewer and fewer girls will grow up without the opportunity to talk about these things.”

—ANGELA PELSTER, *Limber*

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**THINGS
WE DIDN'T
TALK ABOUT
WHEN I WAS
A GIRL**

[A MEMOIR]

JEANNIE VANASCO



TIN HOUSE BOOKS / Portland, Oregon

For Hannah

But what is the word for what I experienced after?

From “Nightingale: A Gloss”
by PAISLEY REKDAL

Early evening. We were in your car, at the end of your block, at a stop sign. The streets were empty. My window was open because I hated closed windows—probably because I thought my *why drive if you can't feel the wind* attitude made me profound. We were sixteen.

I just needed to leave my house, you said.

With a few classmates, we'd been cramming for an exam about waves and optics and contemplating why our accomplished physics teacher taught at our poorly ranked public high school. Cost of living? Witness protection? He actually likes Sandusky? When we left, our classmates were writing formulas on their wrists with fine-point markers.

Let's drive until we hit civilization, I said.

You stared straight ahead at something, it seemed, that couldn't be seen.

Somewhere with a bookstore, I said, like a real bookstore. One with a poetry section that's more than one shelf.

You squeezed the steering wheel and suddenly your pale knuckles looked cartoonish, like a badly rendered, unshaded drawing of knuckles. I barely glanced at your face. I sensed you were resisting tears.

You told me I was important to you. I told you I knew that, and you said, No, really, you're the only one who understands me.

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You turned, looked at me, then quickly looked away. I had never seen you cry before. I hadn't seen many teenage boys cry, but I didn't say that.

I know you understand this, you said. I just get so lonely.

This is probably my favorite memory of us.

I know you're sad now, I said, but I promise this will be a happy memory someday. Us at this perfectly straight stop sign.

You nodded, and I wonder if I explained my observation, or if my observation was insightful enough to imply its metaphoric meaning, as in: let's notice when things are right.

The memory stops there. If you were critiquing this, you might say, Come on, Jeannie, it's a little too perfect, don't you think? The memory stopping at a stop sign.

**PART ONE:
THE IDEA**

THERE ARE GAPS

I already predict failure.

I'm afraid he'll say no, or even worse: ignore me. But why wouldn't he agree to speak with me? He owes me that much.

I could disguise his identity, change his name.

Combing a naming dictionary for some rough translation of *friend*, I first land on Aldwin: old friend. I picture a knight, an eleventh-century Norman invader, a sorcerer in a fantasy novel, a president of a Martha's Vineyard men's club, a child of artfully tattooed parents. Between 1880 and 2016, the Social Security Administration recorded only 129 babies named Aldwin. My former friend's pseudonym should be common, modern, unassuming. I want readers to know someone with the same name.

Phil means friend. But he's not the Phil type. Phil orders everybody drinks. Phil shakes your hand, says, Call me Phil. Phil's too casual, too laid back. My former friend may have slacked from one day into the next, but he wavered between anxious and depressed.

Philip, then? Philip contains friend. Friend of horses. But I doubt he ever touched a horse. He preferred the indoors, rarely straying from couch, desk, and bed. His white skin burned easily.

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Forget name origins. What about the origins of words that are also names? Like *nick*. Some of *nick*'s obsolete meanings: reckoning, or account; slang for the vagina.

But I dated a Nick. In college, briefly, between boyfriends. I'd prefer that memories of Nick (him telling me: I could tell you weren't very cultured when I met you, and How have you not heard of Broken Social Scene? and I don't understand why you won't sleep with me if you like me) not influence this project. Though I like the sound of *nick*. So, I want a monosyllabic word that works as a name and contains a *k*.

Mark, maybe? Its main definition: a boundary. And that's what this is about: boundaries.

Perfect.

Mark, then.

Why should I protect Mark?

I enter his work address in Google Street View. Instead of his pale yellow office building on an industrial one-way street, I aim my view at the clouds and telephone wires. The wires don't line up precisely. There are gaps of just sky.

Gaps between communication . . .

I should stop searching for metaphors.

Mark and I stopped speaking to one another in college. He was in Ohio, studying engineering. I was in Illinois, majoring in journalism.

He dropped out shortly after we last spoke, which is not to say I'm the reason, or that what happened between us is the reason.

But I hope it's the reason, or rather: what he did to me—during winter break of our sophomore year—is, I hope, the reason.

I can't forget: I was passed out.

Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl

Mark now manages a camera shop. I recently found an on-line forum where he answers questions about cameras. Someone asked if a blur in a photo can be good, and Mark replied: If the intent is to give an abstract rendering for some artistic reason, then it's acceptable; when no such intent exists, it's merely bad technique that has caused something that should be sharp to blur.

If he could photograph that night, would he blur it? Where would he blur it?

My memory is blurry. There are gaps.

But I know what he did, and he does too. The next day, or maybe a few days later, he apologized: I should not have done that to you. I am so sorry. It was not okay. Can you ever forgive me?

I said I could. I said I would. I told him to read J. D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, my favorite novel back then. I cringe at the memory.

He read it and told me it reminded him of us.

But no one in the book carries his drunk friend into a basement, takes off her clothes while she's passed out, fingers her, masturbates over her while she cries, and tells her: It's just a dream.

I'm so glad you liked the book, is what I said.

A year later, Mark dropped out of college.

He moved back home, tried therapy, became a mechanic—at least, this is what his dad told my mom. By then, our friendship had ended, though I doubt his parents and siblings knew why. Friends grow apart, is probably what they thought. As with many things after my dad died, I never told my mom.

Mark, according to LinkedIn, returned to college, earned a bachelor's in interdisciplinary studies, and, several years later, a master's in civil engineering.

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When we were friends, I told him: Someday you'll become a famous engineer. You'll discover a formula so complicated that high school students will write it on their wrists before exams.

Every time I think about him, I feel pissed off and sad. I understand now why nostalgia, for hundreds of years, was considered a chronic mental illness.

I want to hate him, but I can't.

IF HE SAYS NO

First, do I call or email?

If I call, do I call from a disguised number?

It's too easy to ignore an email.

Do I tell him immediately why I'm calling? Or do I warm him up with small talk pleasantries? So, uh, how have you been? What's new?

I'm not flying to where he now lives.

But it is harder to say no in person.

I know where he works. A nine-minute drive from the airport. Only thirty-four minutes if I walk. And suddenly, I'm wondering, *Would it be safe to walk?* I consider arrival times.

Let's say I confront Mark in person.

Let's say I tell him, This is the only way I'll forgive you.

I unforgave him. I forgot to update him.

My word processor says *unforgave* isn't a word, suggests I make it *unforgiven*.

If he says no, I'll do it anyway.

Why not *unforgave*, or *unforgive*?

Why do I need his permission, anyway? I never gave mine.

What would the book be without him?

Who would I be had I never known him?

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I want to include him—because without him, the book will be: yet another story about yet another sexual assault.

Why do I assume yet another story about yet another sexual assault can't be told? Or can't be interesting?

I ask my editor what she thinks.

Either way, I want to work with you again, she says. But you might be right, unfortunately. The book will certainly stand out if you include him, but even without him, I still want to do it. It will just be a different book.

I hate that I feel dependent on him.

I need a script. No drifting off into accommodating his feelings.

If he says no, here's what I'll tell him: You are supposed to say that you're sorry, that you will do this for me. That's how this works.

Though that wouldn't be a genuine apology. And he already apologized. And anyway, I don't want another apology.

I want his consent.

IF HE SAYS YES

If he says yes, I won't thank him.

I won't tell him that everything is okay between us.

I won't comfort him.

I am assuming he'll need comforting.

Politeness isn't needed.

You ruined everything, I'll tell him. You realize that, right?

I can say everything.

I'll ask him:

Do you still think about what happened?

Is it the reason you dropped out of college?

Did you ever tell anyone? A therapist, maybe?

How did you feel the next morning? The next month? The next year? Today?

Do you remember how I felt, or seemed to feel?

Did you ever miss me?

Has my contacting you upset you?

Have you dated anyone?

Have you done to anyone else what you did to me?

Do you know what your brother told me earlier that night?

He told me that I wasn't as pretty as you and the other guys made

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me out to be. You want to know the fucked-up thing I thought after you did what you did? *At least I'm pretty enough to assault.*

What did you think of yourself back then?

What did you think of me?

Are you still in touch with friends from high school?

Why would you ruin what we had?

What are your favorite memories of us?

Is it messed up that I sort of want to see you? For so long, I believed that seeing you would break some rule: Boy sexually assaults girl. Girl stops speaking to boy.

Remember how we railed against boy-meets-girl movies? We could be so pretentious. We rolled our eyes at rom-coms.

I'll tell him:

I still have nightmares about you.