

## CHAPTER 8

### A Better Man

Throughout this book, I have told you about boys. I have written about their understanding of themselves as men and as sexual beings: about their insecurities, their hopes, their occasional breakthroughs, and their flaws. I have described the harm they have caused others, whether out of thoughtlessness, recklessness, indifference, ignorance, or malicious intent. Sometimes harm had been done to them as well. And through it all I have wondered: How can we raise boys to be better men? How can we ensure that they see women and girls as full human beings worthy of dignity, empathy, and value in intimate encounters? How can we reduce sexual violence, and, when it does happen, how can we create appropriate accountability? What do we do with boys like Liam in chapter six, who was afraid that admitting to possible sexual misconduct would make him a pariah? Or Jackson, a high school senior who, while drunk, sent pictures to his friends of a girl giving him a blow job? When the incident went public, his female classmates shunned him, folding their arms when he crossed the stage at graduation and banishing

him from the year's final party. He ended up feeling aggrieved, like *he* was the victim. Or Trent, a junior at a West Coast college, who was banned from parties after being anonymously placed on a list of alleged campus assailants? He left school for a semester (without telling his parents why) to commit himself to reading books on feminism, sexuality, and sexual violence; an accomplished musician, he also decided to give up performing to "make more space" for women and other underrepresented groups. Despite all that, he faced hostility on returning to campus and more than once contemplated suicide. And what about Darren, a fraternity brother and a junior, also at a West Coast college, who "stealhed" a freshman girl, secretly removing his condom during intercourse and ejaculating inside of her? The lack of basic sexual ethics revealed by the cascade of #MeToo allegations is clearly well established at younger ages, and, just as in the adult world, colleges (and high schools) have struggled with how to address it: survivors of assault can feel invalidated by school bureaucracy; perpetrators might be punished yet remain resentful, never truly acknowledging the hurt they caused.

That's, of course, when formal complaints are filed at all. A national survey of students on twenty-seven campuses found that even in the most extreme cases of forced penetration, only 28 percent of incidents—and only 13 percent of those involving penetration while incapacitated—are ever reported. Meanwhile, mothers of boys sanctioned for sexual misconduct, each of whom fervently believes her son was wrongly accused and denied due process, have spearheaded a high-profile backlash against anti-assault efforts. Their agenda, however, seems less about equitable reform than rollback. One woman, whose son was expelled after having sex with an incapacitated girl, complained to the *New York Times*, "In my generation, what these

girls are going through was never considered assault. It was considered, 'I was stupid and I got embarrassed.'" (To which one might answer: true, and fortunately standards change; as recently as the 1970s, marital rape was also not considered a thing.) Another, who was among a delegation that met with US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, apparently believed that "You need to keep it zippered" was sufficient sex education (then again, DeVos, an abstinence-only proponent, would likely agree). The prevailing system, it seems, often fails to result in understanding, healing, or justice. Where was the story, the idea, that might move the discussion forward?

Then, through Stephanie Lepp, a colleague who hosts the podcast *Reckonings*, I met Anwen and Sameer.

### "Get Some!"

Sameer grew up in Los Angeles, the only boy among five children. He was raised mostly by his mom, who was from El Salvador, though he often volunteered at hospitals or food banks with his father, who was Pakistani and Muslim. Mostly, like a lot of guys, he spent his time playing video games or sports. No one ever talked to him about sex or relationships. "The majority of my sex education came from LA public schools," he said, "and whatever I could pick up on the internet and through media: so your standard porn, your teen-gear'd thrillers, comedies, action films, TV shows, whatever." On his eighteenth birthday, his maternal uncles and older male cousins initiated him into the rites—and rights—of manhood by taking him clubbing. They told him if he saw a "hot" girl he should "just go up and start dancing on her. She'll turn around and look at you, and if she

likes you, she'll keep dancing. If she doesn't, she'll walk away." According to them, he should be trying to "bang each and every piece of ass I could."

Sameer attributes some of his attitude to being the "child of two macho cultures," but his perspective didn't sound much different from that of a lot of guys I talked to, regardless of ethnicity. Sexual conquest was the measure of his manhood. An evening out wasn't complete unless he got someone's number. His persistence made girls so uncomfortable that some female high school classmates avoided him. Once, junior year, he badgered his girlfriend—whom he cared about deeply—until she got out of his car, slammed the door, and walked to a friend's house. "I knew I'd done something wrong," he said, "but I didn't really understand *why* it was wrong and she didn't have the words for it. So I was like, 'Why isn't she into this? What's wrong with *her*?' That mangled that relationship really quick."

Even after the mandatory consent assembly during orientation at the midsize college he attended in the Pacific Northwest, Sameer thought of rapists as strangers who jumped out of dark alleys; that, or the scumbag who roofed one of his sisters at a holiday party. "So it was like, 'All right, cool,'" he said. "I will be a bystander, and if anybody looks creepy or a girl is uncomfortable, I will be a hero, save the day, do the right thing! That's about all I got from consent education."

Sameer was introduced to Anwen a couple of months later at an off-campus party. She was from a small northwest city, passionate about partner dancing—Lindy Hop, blues, tango. She even made her own skirts, designed to flare out as she spun. A short, slight girl, she was struck by how tall and broad-shouldered Sameer was, dapper in his gray shirt and black tie. He was taken by her eyes, her smile. "I was like, 'Wow! This person's gorgeous,'"

he said. "I'd like to get to know her better." She agreed to dance with him as long as they didn't grind. Sameer claimed to know some swing moves. "She then proceeded to humor me for the next five minutes while I tried," he recalled.

A few days later, he tracked her down on social media and asked her out. She hedged, not sure that she was interested, but not convinced she wasn't. "Well, we can just hang out," she finally said. They planned to go bowling, but all the lanes were full, so they bought ice cream at a local market—Anwen insisted on paying for hers, to show that it wasn't a real date—and sat outside, talking. Both remembered enjoying the conversation, chatting and laughing for several hours. Another time, they went for a walk together. Sameer dropped Anwen back at her dorm, hugged her goodbye, then leaned in for a kiss—nothing too heavy, but enough for Anwen, who had only ever kissed one other guy, to realize the chemistry wasn't there. Sameer continued to text, showed up at a couple of partner dance events, insisted on bringing Anwen soup when she was sick. She responded coolly. Eventually, she stopped texting back, and, figuring she wasn't interested, he let it go.

That spring, they both went Greek. Anwen hadn't been interested in sororities, but all her friends were rushing, so she did, too. Sameer, who'd been a fan of the National Lampoon *Van Wilder* movies in high school, was eager to pledge. "I thought college was a place to, yeah, learn a lot, but also to party hard," he said. All fall, he'd walked past the fraternity he hoped to join, seen the girls heading inside in their skimpy outfits, heard the music blasting. "It seemed like the coolest thing ever," he said. What clinched it, though, was a conversation he had with a senior brother about their service work, the chance to give back to the community. That appealed to Sameer, who missed the

volunteering he'd done with his dad. "Later, I found out that was very much a sham," he said. "Mostly, frat life was about binge-drinking and hooking up." Like a lot of guys I met, Sameer was quick to tell me that his fraternity was "not the worst," not the "bro-test" or the "fratiest," that other houses had the overreputation for assault. "But then," he added, "that's kind of like saying we were the least deadly of all the sharks, isn't it? Like, 'Yeah, we only kill *one* person a week!' But you're still killing people. So what the fuck?"

Anwen knew Sameer would attend the big party welcoming Greek recruits. She even joked to her friends as they were getting ready not to let her go home with him. The two quickly bumped into each other heading opposite directions on a staircase, just after Anwen had dumped her jacket in a brother's room that was being used as a coat closet. "Hey," she said. "I just want to apologize for completely stopping texting you."

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I understand. You're not looking for a relationship."

No, she thought, *it's more like I'm not looking for a relationship with you*. But of course she didn't say that out loud. Instead, she smiled and headed for the basement to dance with her friends. Sameer eventually joined them, and they began dancing together. Face-to-face swing turned to blues, but as that turned to grinding and then kissing up against a wall, Anwen grew uneasy. Sameer grabbed her hand and led her to an adjacent room, where he pulled her onto his lap. Being held in someone's arms felt good, but Anwen didn't want that someone to be Sameer, and she wasn't sure how to gracefully disengage. She caught the eye of a guy she knew, hoping he'd sense her distress and intervene. He didn't. Eventually, she told Sameer she needed

to get her things and go home. But it turned out that the room where she'd left her jacket, along with her phone, her ID, and the key card for her dorm—basically everything except a tube of ChapStick—was locked, its occupant nowhere to be found. Sameer got the guy's number from someone and tried to call him, but the phone went straight to voice mail. They searched the house to see if he'd stashed Anwen's things someplace else: nothing. What's more, her friends, the ones she'd asked to keep her from leaving with Sameer, had vanished.

Sameer thought this was his chance: since she was stranded, she could stay in his room, he suggested, but Anwen declined. He, characteristically, pushed. "I remember pulling a classic 'soft boy' move," he told me. "Like, 'Fine. Leave me alone. Everyone always does.' Basically, 'Oh, woe is me, my life is hard, you should feel bad for me, don't leave me.' Very emotionally manipulative shit. And it worked." It was late. It was cold. Anwen didn't know what else to do—so she eventually said okay. As they left the frat, she spotted a couple of guys from her dorm down the street and told Sameer thanks, but never mind: she would run and follow them home. Again he wasn't giving up so easily. "You can't just leave after kissing me like that," he said. She gazed after the retreating boys, calculating whether she could actually catch them. If she didn't, then what? So, believing she was taking charge of her situation, she turned to face Sameer. "Okay," she said. "Let's go talk about this." They went inside an academic building that was open all night; Anwen could hear people whistling at them, calling out, "Get some!" They sat on a couch in a lounge and she tried to explain to Sameer that she wasn't interested in dating him, she wasn't interested in *anything*; at the same time, she was trying not to hurt his feelings, to let him down easy, to tell

him he was a nice guy and she'd had fun dancing with him. It all came out kind of muddled. One point she was very clear on, though: "I don't want to have sex with you."

"That's okay," he replied. "I don't have any condoms." Which was not, of course, an actual response to what she'd said.

They started to kiss again, and Sameer, still very drunk, pushed Anwen down on the couch. "I can make you feel good," he said, covering his body with hers.

"He was so much larger than I am," Anwen recalled. "I was totally trapped. That was the moment I started to panic a little bit. So I said, 'No, Not here.'" He led her into the men's room, pinned her to a wall Hollywood-style, and began kissing her again. Again she said, "Not here."

Sameer phoned his roommate, who begrudgingly cleared out—they had a rule against bringing girls home after two a.m., but Sameer pleaded, "Come on, just this once, man!"—taking his bedding with him. When they got to his dorm, Anwen removed the shorts she'd worn to the party, leaving on her leggings and tank top. She popped her contact lenses into a shot glass filled with water (never a good idea). Then she went to the bathroom. Sitting in a stall, she racked her brain for any friends she had in common with Sameer, anyone whose number might be in his contacts. *What are you doing?* she thought. *What are you doing?* Maybe she could sleep in the dorm's common room. "But I knew he'd say that was silly: there was a bed in his room, blankets." Her mind reeled. It was so late. She was so tired. She just wanted to sleep.

Looking back now, Anwen wishes she had thought to go to campus security. She wishes she had followed the two boys back to her dorm. She wishes her friends hadn't abandoned her. She wishes the fraternity brother who locked her stuff in his room

had told her that he was leaving. She wishes she lived in an era where people still memorized their friends' phone numbers. "So many things," she told me. "So many things." But none of that is what happened. Chance and choice colluded: people don't always make the decisions that seem patently obvious in hindsight.

When she returned to Sameer's room, he had queued up Bon Iver's "Skinny Love," which Anwen had said was one of her favorite songs. He began kissing her against the closed door, scooped her onto his bed, then climbed up after her. He knew her sexual experience was limited; his was, too, but the girls he'd been with before "liked it rough," or at least appeared to, so he began rubbing Anwen between the legs, hard. It hurt.

"Oh, fuck," he said, "it would feel so good to fuck you."

"Remember, I don't want to have sex," she replied.

"It's okay, I don't have a condom," Sameer said again.

A few minutes later he told her, "Take off your shirt"—more an order than a request. She had pulled her top halfway off when he grabbed a breast and squeezed. A wave of revulsion hit her, and she jerked away, blurring, "No!"

"It's okay," he said. "That can come later." Sameer figured he'd try again when Anwen was more comfortable: he attributed her hesitation to nerves and inexperience. He imagined he would be "the nice guy," a "teacher" who would help her along with-out judgment. He took her hand, guided it to the crotch of his sweatpants, and began to rub, then he pulled out his penis. "You should play with it," he said. "It doesn't bite."

He continued holding his hand over hers. "Wow, you really haven't done this before, have you?" he commented. Then added, "Your mouth would feel even better."

He put a hand on top of her head and, Anwen recalled, "pushed down, pushed down, pushed down. This was not some-

thing I'd ever done before. And it didn't feel good. I didn't want to be doing it. It felt like I was going to choke. I was gagging."

Thinking that, as a newbie, she was growing frustrated with the "tips and tricks" he was offering, Sameer eventually let her up. "I know I'm hard to please," he said, believing he was being magnanimous. He got up to go to the bathroom. "Let me just go finish up."

Anwen remembered thinking: *I didn't want to please you. I didn't fucking want to please you.*

He came back and kissed her good night. For several hours, she lay in bed, scooched as close to the edge as possible, Sameer's arm flung across her stomach, her eyes fixed longingly on the roommate's stripped mattress. She cried quietly. And then she slept.

As far as Sameer was concerned, the night had been a success. He lent Anwen a sweatshirt the next morning, secretly thinking that if she kept it, he'd have an excuse to see her again.

"It's so big on me!" she said.

He laughed. "I'm so big on you!"

He walked her to her dorm, kissed her once more. When someone opened the locked door to leave the building, Anwen grabbed it and dashed inside. "So, how was *your* night?" her roommate teased. Anwen was vague. A couple of days later, she told friends that she'd spent the night with Sameer, that the two of them had made out. "And," she remembered, "I really didn't know, so I was like, 'Do I have to start dating him now?'"

They got together once more, ostensibly to study. He leaned her back against a table and kissed her, pressing a knee between her legs. "You like that, don't you?" he said. She did not, and wriggled away. After that, she went back to ignoring his texts. Sameer was disappointed but philosophical: "Fairly often at our

school, people stopped talking after a hookup because they felt awkward and didn't know how to communicate." He didn't grasp that he'd done anything amiss, and Anwen wasn't about to tell him. In fact, she avoided him completely, leaving a room if she happened to spot him.

Still, she couldn't get that night out of her head: the images popped up unprompted, causing her to panic and gag, especially if she read or saw anything involving sex or assault. Always a straight-A student, she couldn't focus on her studies and had to drop a class she was in danger of failing. When, sometime later, she began dating someone, physical intimacy, particularly oral sex, felt fraught.

Up until this point, Anwen and Sameer's story was relentlessly, depressingly ordinary, the kind of episode that happens at high school parties and college campuses every Saturday night. Then, at the beginning of his sophomore year, as part of training to become a student orientation leader, Sameer attended a presentation by a representative of Green Dot, a program that instructs students on how to intervene and defuse situations that could potentially lead to "power-based violence." "The person was talking about how assault wasn't only physical force," Sameer recalled. "It could be emotional manipulation and coercing someone into a sexual act. It could be putting someone in a situation where they didn't feel like they could say no. And right away, I remembered that night. I thought, *Did I do that? Does Anwen see it that way? If she does, why hasn't she reported me?* I was terrified. I was terrified that I'd assaulted her. I was terrified that I'd hurt her. I was terrified of what would happen if she reported it. And I was terrified because, if this was true, then who was I?"

Much of his immediate reaction, Sameer said, centered on what could happen to *him* if Anwen filed a complaint—expulsion,

maybe jail—but over the next year, he began to engage in some serious soul-searching. He attended another, longer Green Dot training and successfully lobbied to make the program mandatory for new recruits to his frat. He read whatever he could find about consent and healthy sexual interactions. Eventually, he took courses on human sexuality and romantic relationships. He talked to his female friends about their experiences, too. He began to recognize that most assault didn't happen between strangers. In retrospect, he was also pretty sure Anwen was not the only girl he'd harmed.

The following fall, Anwen, too, became an orientation leader. One night, as Sameer was walking back from an event he had staffed, he heard her call his name from the shadows. It was the first time they'd spoken in over a year. He turned toward her, his heart pounding.

"Can we talk?" she said.

"Sure." They went to a quiet spot and sat on the ground, chatting uncomfortably for a few minutes.

Then, "I want to talk about that night," she said.

"Just to clarify, you mean the night you came home with me?"

She nodded. "Yes. I want you to name it."

Sameer hugged his knees to his chest. He rocked back and forth. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. He tried again and croaked, "Rape."

Relief flooded Anwen. She wasn't crazy. This had really happened. But she said, "I wouldn't call it rape"—although she'd later learn that, according to their school's conduct code, it was—"I'd call it sexual assault."

A moment later, she added, "I forgive you."

"If it's okay with you," he responded, "I don't think I'll forgive myself just yet." Sameer told Anwen all he'd been doing to edu-

cate himself. He offered to turn himself in to the police, but she said she didn't want that. She just wanted them to keep talking, for him to understand how the night had affected her.

"Of course," he agreed, "whatever you need." So periodically, Anwen would text Sameer and they'd meet. "I learned that the reason I hadn't seen her for so long was because she had systematically memorized my schedule so she could take routes to avoid me. Because the mere sight of me could ruin her emotionally for the rest of the day." They met a handful of times, but talking to Sameer face-to-face was too much for Anwen; it overwhelmed her. When she left campus for a semester abroad, yet again, she cut off contact.

The next time they saw one another, the fall of their senior year, was at a campus Take Back the Night march. Anwen went as a survivor of assault; Sameer was supporting his new girlfriend, who had her own history of sexual victimization. "It was strange," he said, "because I was very angry at the person who had done this to her, to this woman I really loved, and yet I was responsible for similar acts." Sexual activity could send his girlfriend spinning into PTSD. "Something would happen and her eyes would glaze over and she would be right back with her rapist. I had to get really good at noticing and zeroing in: stopping everything and trying my best to use my voice and physically be there with her to bring her out of that nightmare and back into reality." Sameer learned to be meticulous about consent: move slowly, carefully, and check in frequently to be sure she was not only okay but enthusiastic.

Sameer worried that he didn't deserve to be at the march, that his mere presence was a form of violation, but his girlfriend, who was aware of his history, said she needed him there, so he went. The evening culminated with an open mic, and Anwen sponta-

neously rose to tell her story. She locked eyes briefly with Sameer, who was sitting just a few feet away. "I was absolutely panicked," Sameer recalled. "All I could think was, *Shit! Oh my God! How the fuck?* I had no idea what she was going to say. She talked—not in detail—about what had happened to her, and one of the last things she said was, 'If the person who did this to me comes out and tells his story, I hope you'll listen.'"

What she meant by that was, she hoped if Sameer could muster the mettle to take public responsibility for his actions that the group could hear him, could acknowledge his humanity even as they condemned his crime. Sameer was floored by her generosity. Even so, that night he remained silent.

Around the same time, one of Anwen's closest friends filed a formal complaint against a guy who had, essentially, done the same thing as Sameer: the only difference was the girl had been incapacitated at the time, while Anwen had not. She asked Anwen to accompany her to a hearing where both students, as well as witnesses, would give statements and be questioned by a three-person panel of specially trained faculty and staff. The committee found the boy responsible for misconduct, but not much came of it. He was briefly suspended, possibly faced some other minor sanctions. The girl was satisfied—she had just wanted *something* to happen—but Anwen suspected the guy, who until then had been a friend of hers as well, never really believed that he'd done anything wrong.

Going through the process, meeting the staff at the office of student conduct, and booking a few sessions with a therapist friend of her mom's made Anwen realize that she, too, wanted to file a formal complaint, but she was put off by the standard disciplinary proceeding in which neither the accuser nor the accused had a voice in the outcome. The assault had made her feel pow-

erless; she didn't want the resolution to do the same. "My friend wanted a higher authority to tell the guy he'd done something wrong and what he had to do because of that," she said. "That's totally valid. But I needed to be integrally involved in creating something that wouldn't just fix our issue but could also maybe open a couple more people's minds." She wasn't looking to have Sameer suspended or expelled. She wanted him to be actively involved in deciding how he could make amends. She wanted to be an agent of change, not punishment. "I didn't want his power taken away, either," she continued. "The current system creates resentment because the verdict is just handed down by someone. There's never a point where you get to understand the other person as a human being. I believe we have such potential for compassion and understanding, but you have to *talk* to each other. You have to hear that firsthand experience."

**From "Monster" to Man**

The school's director of student conduct, Frank Cirioni, had long been interested in what are called "restorative justice (RJ) practices," though he'd never personally used them for a sexual misconduct case. Unlike conventional disciplinary proceedings, in which a disinterested panel determines whether the accused has broken a rule then metes out punishment accordingly, restorative justice (a term encompassing a range of interventions) seeks to "repair harm," to the extent that is possible. Trained facilitators guide everyone involved—those who have been hurt, whether an individual or a community, as well as those responsible for damage—through a multiterred, collaborative process in which they describe the incident, its impact, what needs have

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been created, and what obligations and engagement should result. Although its primary emphasis is on healing those wronged, RJ aims to be transformational for everyone involved by creating true accountability and reducing the risk of recidivism. Restorative practices have been used around the world to address issues as diverse as juvenile crime, murder, genocide, and the aftermath of civil war; they are already used on campuses for other violations such as cheating and underage drinking. In his study of 659 conduct cases at eighteen colleges and universities, David Karp, a sociologist and director of the University of San Diego Center for Restorative Justice, found that students engaging in restorative versus retributive procedures were more likely to say they had a voice in the proceedings, to feel that they'd taken responsibility for their actions, that the process was fair, and that they were ready to move on. They also felt stronger ties to their school communities.

RJ is not a magic bullet. "Respondents," as they are usually called, must, from the beginning, be willing to admit fault, and there will always be those who refuse, or who are indifferent to the impact of their actions, or who aren't capable of moral engagement. Nor can RJ replace all other forms of justice, though it may reduce their application. As with conventional hearings, it may fail in its purpose, requiring additional measures as a backup. There's a risk that victims who might, in fact, want a process with a more potentially punitive outcome (such as expulsion) could feel inappropriately pressured to forgo that route by administrators or peers. What's more, as Judith Lewis Herman, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard University Medical School, has pointed out, without feminist-forward leadership, the "community standards" guiding RJ could reproduce traditional biases against victims of sexual violence. There is no perfect system, but

RJ does offer an important alternative to current campus adjudications that so often leave survivors retraumatized and offenders hostile. Ideally, its attention to victims' needs, to education, and to strengthening communities would increase willingness to report assault, expand the proportion of offenders who are held accountable for their actions, and inspire authentic cultural change. "My mantra," Karp said, "is 'What are the conditions in which it's possible for students to admit responsibility for the harm they've caused?' The systems we've put in place do the opposite. They put these guys in a position where it's only rational for them to deny responsibility, or to minimize or displace it. They hear from their parents, from their lawyers, from Brett Kavanaugh, from everywhere that that's the only thing they can do to protect themselves from this terrible accusation of being a sex offender. We're creating a pathway to acknowledging and hearing the harm they've caused. That is absolutely the goal of the process."

Cirioni had a personal stake in restorative practices. As an undergraduate RA in the early 2000s, he had sexually harassed a female colleague for over six months, pestering her to go out with him, even more so after she'd dated one of his fraternity brothers (*Why him and not me?*). She eventually reported him, but, while he was found responsible for misconduct, there was neither reprimand nor consequence; he didn't even lose his RA job. More important, he learned nothing from the experience. A few years later, as a graduate assistant, he harassed another, younger student, expressing sexual interest, touching her inappropriately, trying to convince her to meet him outside of class. She, too, reported him, and while again, he faced no meaningful penalty, he was required to read a formal statement she'd written describing the impact of his actions on her. That hit him in the gut. "It was the first time I could truly hear how I had made some-

one else feel," Cirioni recalled. "It's when my life really changed, and may be why I found myself learning about restorative justice a few years later and thinking, *This feels like a way to connect.* You have a better chance of making change when you say to someone, 'We're not going to exclude you or remove you; we're going to help you. You are not a bad person, but your behaviors are concerning, and we need to examine those and where they come from and why you engage in them.'

"We're all flawed humans," he continued. "We've all caused harm. Some wells are definitely deeper than others. The real question is, how do we have a chance to take responsibility and make things right?"

If Sameer's initial behavior toward Anwen was a perfect storm of gender socialization and ignorance, his actions in the aftermath—along with Anwen's self-awareness and desire for an alternative process—made Cirioni believe they would be an ideal test case for applying restorative practices to sexual misconduct. "When I told Sameer that a report had been filed against him," Cirioni told me, "he immediately said, 'I know what you're talking about, and I take full responsibility.'"

Over the course of a semester, Cirioni met separately with Anwen and Sameer on multiple occasions in what is called a "preconference": educating them about restorative practices, listening to their narratives of the incident, preparing them to meet. Anwen had previously told Sameer how profoundly that night had affected her, but now she needed him to know specific details. She wanted him to read everything she'd written about it: poems, essays, journal entries, her formal "impact statement." It was the hardest thing Sameer has ever done. "I saw that what I had thought was an 'awkward hookup' where I was trying to be kind of a teacher was, for her, an account of fear and discomfort

and violation and—just *pain*. In my mind, I had always tried to be someone who did right by people and treated them with love and respect. But this guy who forced himself on this girl? That was me.

"It was hard not to view myself as a monster," he continued. "That's the biggest word I can use. How could I have made a person like Anwen, who is so nice and so kind, feel this way? I genuinely hated myself. And beyond that—I grieved. I felt fucking awful. And anything I could do to make her life better and easier—*done*. Absolutely."

Anwen wanted a letter of apology, but she didn't need Sameer's guilt. She didn't need his shame. She didn't need his acquiescence to her every request. She needed him to act, to think, to come up with his own ideas for making things right, or as right as they could be. Eventually, they developed a plan. Sameer would tell his story publicly: he wrote an article for a campus magazine (signing his real name); he cowrote a spoken-word piece with Anwen that they performed together at a Green Dot training, which, in part because of Sameer's efforts, was now mandatory for every recruit to Greek life; he talked to me for this book. Sameer would also strive to educate other men about consent and assault. He met with officials from local high schools, hoping he could talk to boys to show them that someone who perpetrates assault could be an ordinary guy—to encourage them to make better choices; to keep them from having to learn, as he did, at the expense of someone else's suffering. No one, though, was eager to have an admitted assailant address their students. I think that's too bad, as Sameer is exactly the kind of guy that young men need to hear from—someone just like them, someone just like they *could be*, for better or worse. "Nights like the one with Anwen are so common," Sameer said. "That's how

guys learn to operate in a lot of ways; our level of understanding of how to communicate and navigate sexual relationships is so infinitesimally small. They don't have the frame of reference to understand what it means to be a good partner, a good lover. So a lot of us are guilty of doing things like this, and we need to start talking about it and owning up to it."

Sameer also started talking more directly to his male friends, challenging their hookup narratives. "They'd be like, 'I hooked up with this girl! It was great!' And I'd ask whether *she* enjoyed herself. Guys are taken aback by that response. I'd be like, 'Did you ask her?' And they'd either be silent or say that it would be too weird. But why is it weird?"

"I got into the habit, and I'll say this to my guy friends, of doing a kind of—debrief, I guess, with my partner. Like, 'Hey, what did you like? What didn't you like? What might you like to try?' Just the standard conversation that needs to happen or else people will just keep having bad sex and faking orgasms and lying to each other about what makes them happy sexually."

As part of their process, Anwen and Sameer also met once together, with Cirioni carefully facilitating. Even though they had spoken before she filed her complaint, seeing Sameer in an official setting made Anwen anxious. Sameer was nervous, too, unsure of how to behave. Anwen wanted answers: *Why did you do it? Didn't you see I was panicked? How do I know you'll never do this again?* Sameer talked about the reading and thinking he had done, the conversations he'd had, the classes he'd taken: "If all this work and awareness doesn't stick," he told her, "then there's no help for me."

Sometimes in our conversations, Sameer would refer to his past self as "younger Sameer" or "freshman Sameer." I understood that. He was such a different guy now—so reflective, so

empathic, so conscious of others' feelings and comfort. His arc seemed almost too good to be true; I was tempted to write him off as a unicorn. On the other hand, there was nothing about "younger Sameer" that hinted such transformation was possible. He had been a regular guy, someone who'd absorbed regular guy ideas, who'd behaved like so many regular guys do. He was not exceptional; if he could change so profoundly, maybe others could as well. "When you realize that you've done something terrible, you're terrified of being judged and ostracized by your friends—to be fair, rightly so. That's why I'm such a big proponent of restorative justice: I want to believe that people, men especially, have the capability of being kind, empathetic, over-all good humans who, if we're told that we're doing something wrong, have the ability to step up."

Anwen and Sameer had graduated college by the time we spoke. He was back in California, working as a bartender; she was living in a woodstove-heated cottage in the Pacific Northwest. They still checked in with each other every month or so and expect they'll always be in touch; although it isn't the goal or expectation of restorative justice, they've come to share an unanticipated intimacy. "It's pretty cool," Anwen told me, "and it's taken years to get there. But I know the worst thing he's done, and he knows the thing that's hurt me basically the most in my life. So I'm pretty comfortable talking with him about other things that have been hard. Because I know that he's taken these steps to become a really understanding, caring, growing individual."

These days, when Sameer tells people his story, they often try to let him off the hook, saying what he did wasn't really "that bad." That rankles him. "This is not a competition," he said. "And also, what do you mean by 'wasn't that bad'? Forcing someone to do sexual things against her will, emotionally manipulating her,

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*wasn't that bad?* Perpetuating a culture that makes people feel like they can't say no or can't be themselves or makes them feel scared *wasn't that bad?* You're affecting people's lives. You don't think it's *that bad?* That's simply not a qualifier I'm willing to accept.

"It's weird, though," he continued. "Some people are so quick to come to a perpetrator's aid, to justify his actions and try to make him seem like he's not a bad guy. Then there's other folks who are like, 'Are you fucking kidding me? This person is actively garbage, a piece-of-shit monster.' But there's not really that middle ground. Going through the restorative justice process and talking with Anwen gave me an opportunity to view it in a different way. The end goal is to view myself as a person who has done bad things, not just as a bad person. That's a really hard thing to do. I don't know if I'll ever quite get there. At the very minimum, the silver lining becomes that you realize what you did was wrong and won't ever do it again, and maybe you become someone who actively works every day to be a better person. To be a better man."