

April 2014

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Recommended Citation

Bacon, Hannah (2014) "Look at Me, Look at You. And Don't Turn Back," *The Anthology*. Vol. 2014, Article 27.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/anthology/vol2014/iss1/27>

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Look at Me, Look at You. And Don't Turn Back |

Hannah Bacon

She woke up unsurprised, unflustered, but could feel the faint stirring of something in her chest.

It was too hot to lie under the old blanket because the windows were always open, and even though it was October, the air was still heavy. The room permeated with the stench of beer and cigarettes and dust moths, but these things comforted her because they remained the same. Smells never changed; they stayed with you, and every time you smelled something baking you remembered Christmas with your grandmother. Every time you smelled pine you remembered walking through a silent forest. Smell was constant.

Pain was constant as well. Physical pain you forgot, but pangs from the wounds scarred deep within yourself stayed. *I have to tell someone what to do*, he had said one afternoon. They were driving down a back road; always driving...*It's in my blood. You fight back a little. It's kind of fun, you know.* He pulled out a cigarette, lit it. *But in the end, you'll give in. Because you know I'm always right.*

You know I'm always right.

In the discomfort of heat and a bad headache, she did her best to shift onto her back, hoping not to wake him up. Peering down at herself, she could see the yellowing bruises on her breasts, her shoulders, her thighs. Faint fingerprints from when he begged her to understand, implored her to know the difference between his love and the rest of the world.

The bottle of vodka was nowhere to be seen, but she knew he had finished it off hours before collapsing onto her in the dark, raising his arm up and bringing it down on her as if it was an unassociated limb. It had its own mind. She fought it at first, made excuses for it. By the time they had both fallen asleep, she had tried to build a fort of pillows around her body as a small defense against what lay next to her.

Where had you gone last night...? Remember it. Feel what was ignited there.

The stupor she was in had worn off quickly, she remembered,

almost as violently and abruptly as it had begun. They left her house in the middle of the night. He had been so proud of her. He had been so supportive. He had held her hand. He made her feel important, if only for a moment.

"Stop crying," he ordered as they sped down the narrow, winding road, which upset her stomach again. "This is a good thing. This is huge. You can't let the distrust of some teenage girl drive your decisions. You made the right choice."

"I'm sorry," she said, knocking her head against the window. "I just hate when anyone is mad at me. I hate when people are mad."

It was true that her sister had pulled her aside in her drunkenness to express her feelings about him. It was decided that she would stay with her friend tonight, so she wouldn't worry her sister more than she had to. "I don't like him," her sister had said. "He tells you to shut up and the dogs are scared of him. Promise me you aren't going home with him." She had promised, then packed a small bag and stumbled into his car. Lying to her sister was something that seemed so necessary, but it cut like a knife all the same.

His large, calloused hand gripped the gear shift tightly. He was annoyed and wanted her to sober up, but she could not stop crying long enough to sit up straight. "You," he began, pulling out a cigarette, "you are weak. You don't have to be. But you are a doormat. Everyone tells you what to do. But really, no one cares about you. They want you to be like them. Your life is driven by others' opinions. I am the only person who can help you see this. You can change."

She gasped, choked. Her wide, makeup-stained eyes searched the blurry streetlights in the dark, as if to ask them if this was all true. It was true that much of her life had been a series of "yeses," and very rarely did such an answer bring about positive outcomes. But she was comfortable with this niche. She knew the right words to say, the right things to do. All she had to do was follow the main character's lead, and then, for a while, there would be love.

Tears halted. "Everyone tells me what to do," she whispered. "Everyone tells me what to do. Nothing is real."

"Shut up."

“Nothing is real,” she whimpered again as they pulled into the driveway. The house was small and not maintained very well. The man who owned it spent most of his days lying on the couch guzzling cheap beers and watching TV Land, only getting up to drink with his friends at the kitchen table in the evenings.

After he finished his cigarette, they went into his bedroom. She wanted nothing but to sleep and escape the painful feeling in her stomach and her head. But he reached for her with hungry fingers, kissing the back of her neck. She groaned in her half-awake state, pushing his hand away. He did not know how to make love. Gentleness was not a language in which he was familiar, and because he had many more partners than she, he taught her what he knew. The rough nature in which he reached for her was frightening. *But this is what it will be like*, she thought. *This is what I am made for. This is what I am supposed to be.*

He was infuriated by her meek protest and cursed at her, threatening to leave. Throwing on some ratty gym shorts, he left the room, probably to smoke a cigarette outside. The fear of being alone in the house beckoned her to follow him. Squinting in the dark she could see he had flipped the picnic table over into the brush. He was snarling, cursing, crying.

These things may have, a week ago, perhaps, moved her, made her feel sympathy. Now they seemed like steps in a procedure. This man, to her, was lifeless. His face showed no anguish, no fear, and no love. He did not know these things. He knew cars, he knew anger, and he knew persuasion. Living was a business to him, a cold thing he could pass over the table and then slip quietly out the door, not looking back to see what happened to the person who had been sitting across from him.

She looked up at the sky. That was the nice thing about October; it never rained and every night you could look up and see stars for ages. Stars had their place. And then they disappeared, died; but there was still a trace of them to see in the big black sky. The only thing to interrupt such a brief peace was a muffled “fuck” from the tall grass nearby.

The dirt looked comfortable, so she sat in it. The tire tracks had worn their path into the ground and the earth was flat. This could be all she knew. She could live in this silence. And yet, somewhere,

she heard herself speaking. No one was listening, they couldn't be, because she was used to hearing noises in the silence. The cold was welcoming, wrapped around her naked legs and forearms, reaching under the tee shirt she wore and hugging her waist. It pulled at her, and at the same time, the ground and sky pulled as well.

Please, please, show me something real.

It took her a moment to realize that these words echoed from her own mouth. The words drew from her full lips, the ones dotted with a freckle he teased her so mercilessly about earlier. He treated these small things, these flaws, like problems. She was a problem and he loved her violently because she listened. And she listened because she mistook his words for caring.

She spoke the words again, louder now. “Please show me something real.” The request was turning into a demand. She felt powerful, she felt lighter. Her head hurt. She looked over and watched as he kicked over a lawn chair, drooling and crying hysterically. *Let him. Remember this again. Do not forget this or you will go back.*

After brutally finding his place between her legs he would slide off and squeeze the soft flesh of her stomach in his hand. *It's kind of nice that you're chubby*, he'd say in his gruff voice. *Former fatties never truly gain confidence. It means you can lean on me. You're going to need me from now on.*

Now, she stared at a reflection that wasn't there in the ground. “Show me something real.” Tears sprung back out of her eyes again, spotting the dirt, turning its dust dark. She could no longer tell if there was nervousness there, if this was a cry for help, or if the words were her banner, her affirmation that she had flesh and bones and a heart. Again she said it, her throat clenching and her words catching.

She remembered sitting on the shower floor. Hot water pulsed on her naked back, razor in hand, legs spread. She heaved out another cry as the wave of humiliation washed over her. She could hear him sigh from the other side of the shower curtain. *It's a quick fix. The way that looks...I have taste. It's distasteful.* Leave me alone, she had said, her voice high and shrill. Leave me alone so I can do this for you.

Now, he looked over at her sitting, and then approached her. She stood then and he grasped her arms, holding too tight. She couldn't

get herself to reciprocate the physical plea he made. He sensed this and was then anxious. She had seemed to be unshakably loyal and now she was wriggling free, was running past breaking waves in the ocean where she could no longer be touched. She could be carried off by the water and never be seen again.

It was then that he stood on top of the car and reached for the phone line. "You don't fucking care," he croaked. "I could kill myself right now. I'm going to do it and you'll be sorry." It was then that he tore her back down again, just as she pulled him off of the car in that moment. She felt her gut being tugged on, as if something yanked her back down into the darkness in which she had tried to escape from.

You had been so close again.

He smoked another cigarette and then gathered her trembling body under his arm, pushing her into the house. He did not touch her again that night, but the arm did, rising up and crashing onto her over and over again until she could make no more protests.

So she lay in bed the next morning, feeling something that was not quite desperation. In the course of this time, something had died; her soul, however small it had been before, was shriveled in a corner of her. But now, a possibility of resurrection... it enthralled her.

It was a persistent, gentle nudge, as if someone was gently pulling her in to hear something. It told her to lean in, and with shaky apprehension, she waited. She inhaled sharply. She lay there, fearing the words which she knew would come. She waited a long moment. And then the voice again—whether it was hers, she did not know...

Get up.

The words were not so much of a command as they were a reminder. His arm, draped over her middle, seemed like a prison. He was a snoring corpse now. The drinking would keep him down until late afternoon at best. And yet his arm, the attacker that came for her so often, held on. Hopelessness flooded her. And yet, the ever-present voice called out again. It said, *Get up. You can.*

They had driven her car. Actually, *he* had driven her car; he criticized her driving often. She thought of the old silver coupe parked in the gravel driveway...but where were the keys? Her best guess was

in the pocket of his jeans, which lay next to his side of the bed. If she waited for him to wake up, they would probably spend the day together, driving her car, using her gas.

I hate short hair on women. You're hot, but you kind of look like a dyke with nice tits.

He would grab her thigh in public, take her nose between his thumb and forefinger and say something about its size. He would hiss at her under his breath in front of their acquaintances. He would pull her on top of him, forcing her to give everything she had until she could no longer feign ecstasy and would fall against his chest. And this would go on.

Stop acting like a bitch and freaking the fuck out... I'm just saying that I'm smarter than you, okay? I'm being honest. You're good at other things. You have compassion, at least.

The words burned. They singed into her soul, resuscitating it. *Get up.*

She remembered him handing her a razor, laughing at her humiliated tears as he pointed to the bathroom door. *Fix the fucking problem, there shouldn't be hair down there—*

GET UP!

And then she was moving, her heart boiling with a slow anger. Confusion was there. She had been a fighter. She had believed in goodness. He had been good. He had looked at her with some sort of admiration...*because she listened.*

Running shorts, shirt. Never mind brushing her teeth. Now, where were the keys? She glanced at his seemingly lifeless body, listened to his staggered, drunken breathing. She picked up his jeans and reached in the pocket. Cold metal met her hand and it felt like running into an old friend on the street. Her pulse did not quicken, but she was afraid.

So many times, now. Let this be it. There is the door.

She could hear the television from the living room. Lucille Ball's voice trailed the hallway. His roommate slept on the couch, tucked under a dirty sheet with a tall boy parked next to him on the coffee table. She glanced at the clock: it was nearly ten. He wouldn't wake for another hour or so.

Bag in hand, she fled the house. Her car waited for her and she tripped over a rock getting to it. Cursing under her breath, she turned the keys in the ignition, eyes squeezed shut. Put the car into

reverse. Pull out of the driveway. Onto the main road.

Free.

As she sped down the highway, she called her best friend and told her, in between crying heaves, to meet her in the parking lot of the PetsMart. Hanging up, she realized that she was not running from the man who had abused her, controlled her. He would certainly have been upset once he woke to find her leaving, but he would have let her leave—after a fight. She was not running from him. She was running for her soul.

He had threatened to leave her before, and on her knees she had begged him to stay, pressing tear-soaked cheeks into his stomach. She did not love him, though; she did not know if she could live without a master. Her head was stronger than her feet.

But her feet were with her again. She had her legs, her torso, her arms and hands. Her hands were cold and clammy, and they scrambled to hold onto the loud little thing inside of her. The voice, she knew, must be hers. It was loud now, praising. It was intertwined with her heartbeat, which thudded in her ears.

There now, woman. Do you see what life looks like?

And as she watched the sky laced with trees from over the dashboard, she knew that this was her confident, shattered yes—her life was still yes—dispersing over the world around her. This would not be over, surely. But she was starting. And so she drove on.



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