

This is the beginning of a much larger novella *Detonating Balloons*.

The Main Dramatic Question (or the theme):

(External) Will Delaney Arrons remain in her hometown or will she relocate to a larger city for a new job opportunity. (Internal or why does her relocation even matter) Delaney is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and she was sexually assaulted in college. Her hometown is her safety net and the city, despite only being a few hours away, is a shot at real autonomy and starting fresh but acts as a double edged sword because one of the key components of healing from that sort of trauma is directly tied to people support systems.

The theme: Most women and men who survive sexual abuse are often victimized again and because of that, and other preconceived notions, multiple stigmas surround survivors. I want to push back.

-Survivors can have fulfilling sex lives and can want strictly sexual relationships as opposed to romantic ones. This decision does not have to be informed by the abuse.

-Consent can be revoked at any time, even during sex. Also, just because someone consents to sex once, does not mean that person consents to sex every time. (I feel like this is one of the most common sense things, but then this seems to be what most people have the hardest time understanding when push comes to shove).

Essentially, I want to circumvent the idea of what a survivor “looks” like or how one is expected to behave.

The tense will change to present tense so that memories can be in past tense without having to gook up fonts and everything can be in scene. The last thing I want is everything turning into a bathtub scene.

The Plot:

Delaney has been working as a remote product namer (nail polish, shampoo, etc.) and is content enough to continue working at that job in Woltan, Ok. However, her boss tells her she is being considered for a promotion starting in July and that if she's interested she should claim it by the end of May. While Delaney thinks on it she joins the party and while she interacts with her safety net, memoires of Drew, her college boyfriend and most recent abuser plagues her. She feels sexual attraction towards the recently divorced Vaughn, someone she's known since childhood.

The work starts when Delaney undergoes her first pap smear since the assault. It does not go well and this drives Delaney into a decision in favor of moving.

The sex with Vaughn happens. In this, consent, the enjoyment of sex and the not wanting a long-term relationship follows. This pattern of behavior continues.

Judith, her grandmother, is supportive of the decision and we go in scene on how Delaney came to live with Judith because of the sexual abuse. Judith chose not to report and they must come to terms with that.

As the end of the month approaches and Delaney gets her goodbyes out of the way, but week into June, her boss tells her that they found a different candidate for the position and that they will be keeping her on as a remote agent. Rather than let that get her down, she decides to still move—this time further away to Florida. She tells Vaughn and Judith and they say she

won't make it. She now has to look at herself truthfully and figure out if she can make it. She does decide to go regardless of "being ready" or not.

Detonating Balloons

Ashton Patton

Antiseptic muted by lavender assaults my nose with every inhalation. My head swims, but I can't complain too much; there are worse places to be at 8 a.m. on a Tuesday in the second week of May.

The nurse-practitioner, Heidi, I think her name is, left me alone to undress and get comfy in the stirrups. As if that were possible. The paper table-lining scrunches as I assume the position and place my feet into the chilled cups, bowing my legs wide like a frog's.

This isn't the first time I've had my legs in the air, had the A/C freezing my labia while I wished I did a better job grooming. These Pap smears are rough for everyone involved. I lie back and put my hands under my head, exposing my breasts. I really have no problem with nudity—I

hate the implication of nudity. Nothing is inherently lewd unless someone slaps sexual urges on it.

The room is set-up like any traditional examination room in a health department. I'm isolated and bare-ish on a bed island while the only pop of color exists on a modesty curtain. The counters' vacant surfaces make me feel like I'm the only patient to ever exist inside these sterile, Chantilly white walls. Even the light navy robe wrapped around me seems to belong in a neutral, uninhabited world. I feel like my only tie to the outside is my phone buried under my clothes on a side table too low to the ground to serve any function. I want to dig it out and play with it, but that would give me an opportunity to reread an email my boss sent me last week. And then I'd reread my reply. Right now I'm postponing. Because Delaney Arrons is a stupid coward who takes promotions but then refuses to do any ground work for that promotion. I'll have to move four hours away but—that'll be good for me right?

Heidi comes back into the room followed by another woman a few decades younger. Heidi introduced herself with a firm handshake that buoyed me; I need sure fingers down there. She also had a cheerful attitude without being annoying, but the woman to the left, her name tag read Molly, radiates a shy eagerness. A teachable moment. I hope Heidi will be the one to maneuver the thingy inside me.

Molly gives me the run-down about the procedure as she stands a little too close to my vag. Her smile is reassuring and I resist the urge to ask her what conditioner she uses to get her inky hair to glow in the florescent lights. I also want to ask what types of gloves she's snapping on her hickory wrists. Anything to stall.

Each part of my vulva gets a platonic pat from Heidi's gloved fingers. I squirm. Molly flashes her teeth in what might have been a smile meant to ease the distress. I fisted my robe in a locked grip and have to unclench finger by finger. Scheduling this exam was a mistake. Once I simmer down, Molly explains how the breast exam will be performed. I give my assent. But her hands aren't cold like I want them to be. Molly's touches are professional and brief, but my inner walls do that clutch thing. If the medical professionals saw they don't acknowledge it. Lucky me, the examination ends before I slicken down. These exams always fluster me; once, a doctor had to wipe off excess moisture from the bottom of the island bed. Discharge has never been the problem, but as soon as I try to perform the disappearing cane trick or rock a party of one I exhaust within a few thrums. I have that bang, bang but no boom.

When Molly rejoins Heidi at the base of the slab, they ask me to scoot further down. The last time someone wanted me to scoot down it didn't go well for me. One hand clutched my ankle and the other dug into my hips. I was yanked across the fraying quilt; each stitch felt like it was paring every cell it came in contact with. My groin slammed against his abdomen and I felt him breathe as his skin expanded and contacted against my splayed void. Calloused thumbs sunk between our bodies. A cry clamored from between my teeth and there might have been some fight in my limbs.

"Ready?" Heidi sat on her stool and positions the speculum at my entrance. I give a thumb up and try to become boneless. The speculum penetrates—something's wrong.

Each nerve inside burns. Where there should have been a subtle pressure, a cleaving compression roils. I must have verbalized the ache because Heidi stops inching the instrument forward.

“We can wait a moment if you need.” Her voice seems amiable enough, but I want to get a move on. I just need to breathe it out. I’ve been through worse.

“Nah, I’m good—let’s just push through,” I say. “Literally.” I tried to joke, but the strain killed all humor.

She doesn’t continue, rather she motions towards my charts and Molly retrieves them. I attempt to watch, but I don’t have the core muscles to pull that off without jostling the speculum. Some papers rustle and with every sharp sheet jerk, my hoo-haa tries to peel away from the foreign friggin’ object stuck in me.

“And this isn’t your first Pap?” Heidi tucks her tongue into her cheek.

“My third.” I’ve had one every year since turning 20. But this is my first after Drew, my ex, attacked me. My breathing is labored and I have to make myself lighten up on my jaw to give my teeth some relief. She stares at me, then at my snatch, but nods reluctantly as she resumes. The invasion advances in a state of idle suspension; the burning intensifies and the pulsing pressure extends along each wall and fold. When the first click indicates an expansion I snap. I snap inside. The frame of my vision blurs and I demand we stop and retreat. They need to get out of me. The speculum is out before I clamp upright and clap my knees together. Sore surges splatter along my groin, hip, and stomach regions. But I’m not going to cry. Heidi disposes of the speculum and gloves before she approaches my top half. “Honey, have you ever been sexually assaulted?” It wasn’t a question. Not really.

I left the yes and no boxes unchecked on that section of the chart because I didn’t know how to explain. My face itches—my arms itch. I don’t belong in my skin.

Molly offers me some tissues and a sanitary pad while making too much eye contact. I look down at my legs and some blood patterned the parchment dressing and bottom of my plastic

robe. My knuckles tremor as I take the sanitary napkin but ignored the tissues. They're proof. The hair along my arms scratch my eyelashes; I'm an idiot for not using the tissues. I'm not operating on a traditional nervous system that makes sense.

"Maybe—I'm not sure," I say. That was lame. And a lie. All my self-esteem leaks into the atmosphere and I don't know how to inhale it back in. No one knows about Drew, not even Gammy, my grandma—but she knows about the other man. My mom's boyfriend. Or maybe he's her husband now. When I was ten his inflexible palm belted into my sternum and set me stumbling into the mesh of the screen door. I felt hollow. I couldn't regain air and my chest couldn't puff like it should. He lifted my shirt and his tongue swirled glacial designs under my chest and into my bra. But that shouldn't affect me now.

"I can't be here," I say, interrupting Heidi. I guess she was talking about resources. But I don't want to talk about this. I'd pop. I'm a balloon. A balloon is filled with used air someone discarded on a frivolous fucking latex sack. As soon as a balloon pops, all the smog disperses and the pieces scatter everywhere and pollute the world. I can't litter; I can't be litter. Popping isn't an option.

Eventually Heidi and Molly compile all the materials into a brown paper bag and leave the room so I can get dressed. I clean up a little in the bathroom and fasten the napkin to my Cinderella panties—my favorite pair. Thank God I wore them today. I slip out of the bathroom and snag the bag with whatever they crammed inside and snuck out the door. I managed to slither down some hallways before Molly tracks me down with a few more forms to sign. I don't read them or even ensure that my signature was a signature, I'm so desperate to get out. Molly lets me.

I blow out of the Health Department front doors into the parking lot. Vaughn parked in the back row, rolled down the windows and said he'd wait in the sun with a Kresley Cole novel. I grew up with Vaughn—sort of. He was a few years older than me, but was always under foot because Gammy liked paying him to tend the lawn or help with garage sales. While I've been gone, he's been giving her rides around town since her license has been revoked for repeatedly chasing down "hooligans" with gardening rakes jousting style. Totu, Gammy's 2001 Toyota Tundra, rests under the lone tree in a median between the street and lot. I crave inactivity under a tree.

Vaughn seems to be sleeping with a Gena Showalter novel bridged across his leg—he must have finished the other book. I crawl into the passenger side and attempt to close the door gently but can't; the wind gives me too much of an assist. It takes a few minutes for him to join me in the present.

He was always tall, but the delish build I can see through his dark denims and light gray jacket is new. Vaughn's hair looks a little too full on the sides and the underside tendrils along his head need a haircut. The color reminds me of asphalt in the sun. Too bad he isn't a blonde: I don't fool around with blondes—too incestuous. Those ovular hickory colored eyes though, those I could stare into for a solid minute. The cords along his abdomen stand prominent against his shirt and a funky feeling strikes downstairs. Tufts of sable hair trail from his navel to the hem of his worn jeans. His well-worn, well-fitting jeans. His hair probably goes further down.

Several trees blow past us. Other than those, the world is flat and honey hued. It feels isolated and from a foreign time. The scent seeping in through the semi-cranked windows can't be identified, but if I were to guess it would be what I imagine fire meeting musk smelled like.

Little houses start to pop up along the horizon until we passed them and little houses became small-city office buildings until we were submerged in Woltan, OK, population 60,000. In one of the neighborhoods we cut through, several houses are still adorned with Christmas decorations.

My mom and I had an annual tradition of touring the rich neighborhoods' lights every Christmas. I'd been bundled up with several layers of Mom's winter clothes. I'd sweat in the snow. Adversely, Mom only wore her warmest pair of jeans, a ratty turtleneck and a jacket with all the lining torn out. She styled her buttermilk blonde hair into Princess Leia buns; she said it was for style, but knew her hair was being used for warmth. Cindy Arrons preferred the bottle over necessities like earmuffs or electricity. Sometimes one of the boyfriends she screwed around with when she wasn't with The Boyfriend would pay for utilities, but usually we'd move in with Tom, Dick or Harley. The last year we went light seeing together I was fourteen. Something set Cindy—we were on a first name basis when she'd drink or inject—into a fight or flight situation. She bundled me into her borrowed 1998 burgundy Buick Sedan, sobbing and singing Dolly Parton's "Hard Candy Christmas" while swerving down some backroads to Gammy's. I think that was the last time I saw her.

.As we accelerate my mood improves and every blown through stop sign reminds me of the distance between who I was and who I am. I relax down into the seat, enjoying the steady thrumming of the car floor boards. Once we reach the leaning two-story cottage home, rather than pull up in front we swing around back to Gammy's garden—her necrotic garden.

Gammy has a skeletal thumb; all manner of plant life falls victim to her fatal cultivation. Rows of tulips, daisies, sunflowers and, I believe, violets lie dead in one six by twelve planter box. A pumpkin bush's corpse decomposes on the other end and several unidentifiable bushes

wilt behind the back porch. Judith doesn't believe in planting seasons or learning about basic horticulture. Maybe that's why she keeps her head dyed green.

Further back droops what might be a redbud tree languishing in the spring breeze. The limbs are rotting and insects are probably eating the tree from the inside out. She's magnificent. The strange tang emitting from her roots are a balm despite the initial flinch caused by the smell. Vaughn rounds round her trunk and motions for me to climb out. I do without hesitation. I barely register Vaughn's "Be back in 10."

My knees sink into the muddy earth. On impulse, I lie on my stomach and my cheek take the brunt of the mud. I don't care. Heat flows through me from the ground. The ache blistering between my thighs seems to cool and the pulse in my wrists and ankles synchronize to the rustling of my elbows against the grass. I've never been one to admire nature, but where else can I seep away from the material into oblivion. In a non-weirdo, average way though.

Torridity radiates off everything and everyone while the breeze skims the worst of the burn off. I imagine the wind peeling my skin off and exposing every nerve ending to the scald. There's no smell anymore, it's so hot—any scent would be cremated.

I sing my favorite song—Rupert Holmes's "Escape." Granddaddy blared it every time a storm rolled through, or when he purchased new batteries, or after he'd lose a shoe, or something upset him—it was essentially playing on repeat 365 days of the year. It was the first song I could sing beginning to end. We were content. I didn't think we could be, that first night I moved in with my grandparents 12 years ago. I shivered in the back seat of the Buick. My lips were cracking and I needed water. My throat flaked to dust. The muscles in my back felt like they'd been stretched and I felt the indent of a footprint in the middle of my shoulder blades.

“How long,” Gammy said, her roar broke on the *nn* sound. Cindy babbled because her tongue was coated with whiskey. Gammy nearly put his foot through the rear window. My eyelids pressed together and my eyelashes were too stout to lift again. Granddaddy helped me into the house while Gammy and Cindy had it out.

Vaughn’s turbulent, soot hair blots out the sun. In each hand he holds perspiring ice-cream cones; the tops slide over his nails. Before I can clamor up, he stoops down to sit by me. He looks ridiculous in his now dirt-stained cargo shorts and his disheveled currant polyester t-shirt that bunches tight around unusually swoll triceps. Trying to salvage Gammy’s garden must be working wonders. The cone’s bottom crumples in my hand. The vanilla drips make it seem like my fingers are melting into the soil.

We remain on the ground until the sun sinks behind the tree line; the apricot sky dispels each cloud I stalked. Vaughn’s calf touches the top of my foot. The lust from earlier is hidden somewhere—but this is nice on its own. I might even use the word perfect if pain weren’t rampaging through my core.

The need to pee is the rousing force guilty of ending my peace moment. The back porch door has stunning glass work reminiscent of a hallmark card: old world meets grandma’s house. But the door doesn’t compare to the actual porch wood work itself. Granddaddy made the intricate patterns carved into the stepping boards over a number of years. The carvings closer to the steps are mine and lacked an artistic eye, while the ones closer to the house and along the flanks were crafted with a delicacy even my adult hands can’t duplicate. Sail boats and kittens and hummers and tumbleweeds and trees.

Vaughn’s hand wraps around my elbow to presumably steer me towards the car. Tension surges through my arm and I whip around to face him. I hate when people grab my arms—I hate

it more when they pull me. *“Look at me when I’m talking to you bitch.”* Cindy’s boyfriend would seethe through gritted teeth as he pulled me across the room and slammed me against the wooden frame at the foot of his bed.

Throat tight, I demand, “Remove your hand—I initiate, you don’t.”

I haven’t thought about that in a long time. It was a mantra I adopted after my mother realized what was really happening when left for her nightshifts. It’s a mantra that I need to be enforced because Drew was the only one to not to adhere to it. And look what happened. My balloon can’t take much more pressure today.

Vaugh jerks away from me, palms up and stepping back. His eyes look perplexed. My heart roils around my chest then bounds up into my head while my stomach swan dives into the uterus, leaving me hollow. He stands far out of the way so I can go in without our bubbles touching.

Gammy leans against the kitchen counter, waving around four lit cigarettes. She doesn’t smoke but Granddaddy burned squares like curtains caught in a grease fire. I suspect she keeps the house in a perpetual nicotine grasp because she hopes to see her husband’s ghost take shape in the exhaust from the smokes. She even keeps a place open for him at the table; his seat sits adorned with the finest china and silverware from their wedding and Gammy dusts the setting daily. Even when she eats cupped noodles, his place stands. My mother doesn’t have a place. She isn’t welcome at our table. And that never really bothered me before.

Gammy can’t weight more than 90 pounds, but she knows how to manipulate the air around her. If I wrap my hands around her wrists or ankles, they would overlap and double around; all her mass rests in her slumping skin. She’s a gorgeous 77. The wisps of hair that

remain are dyed a deep green, the skin along the top of her head looks like the surface of a crocodile's back. Judith is a woman who dares the world to strike.

For some reason I feel hollowed out from my vagina to my throat and I don't want to fill the hole with food. Also, the main topic of conversation would be my impending move to Dallas. And that's not something I want to go into right now. I decide to go to bed without dinner. Vaughn tries to say something, but Gammy cuts him off by asking him to wash up and set the rest of the table. Vaughn and Gammy say goodnight without extra comment. Vaughn still seems thrown. Grammy's smile is genuine, but her lower lids are glistening.