

Truth be Told

The cruelty of the sun was in its consistency. How it rose every day without fail, without compromise. Uncaring to hearts still lingering in the darkness.

She could have used a longer night.

Kimberly stared at the buzzing phone. The school calling for the third time that day. She let it ring, echoes fizzling into white noise, and sank back into her sheets. She tugged at the hem of her pajama sleeve, holding her arm over her eyes to shake out the sunlight.

The call ended but her phone buzzed again. She swallowed and drew her sleeve from her eyes, adjusting to the leering light. The name jeered across the screen: Makena. A tremor went up her fingers and she held her left arm with her right, trying to steady the shaking. She clenched her fists, letting them tighten and forcing the shaking to grow violently, hoping it'd exhaust her nerves.

Three nights. She'd promised herself to forget in three nights, to blow the nightmare to the breeze. And now, on the other side of those three moonlit days, she swore to dam the memory in her brain and press against it, holding back a tsunami with sheer will.

Yet every action that proved the Earth still spun, indifferent to what she'd lived through, attacked her, driving deep blades into tendons, twisting ligaments. Paralysis. She mouthed the word and tried to shade herself from the oblivious birdsong, the ambivalent sky. Tracked her breath as it ran from her diaphragm to her lips, hoping it'd lead somewhere on the road to forgetting. Healing.

The first week, Kimberly checked three boxes off her calendar and went to school. She tugged her ears down as she entered the grounds, biting her nails to the stinging edges. Had they told? Did everyone know? Questions pulsed through her chest and she fought them down.

If they knew, it didn't show. As a month passed, the usual careless chatter circled. Kimberly began her disappearing act: an erasure, a dimming of all lights still on at home. As she switched the calendar to a black page, she could feel a brief sigh of success, a possibility of forgetting.

“What is justice?” Mr. Holden, her Government teacher, asked, tossing slips of paper onto desks. “I want you to answer this question on the paper. Best you can. And no dictionaries.”

Sighing, students peeled their faces off the desks and began to scrawl across the slips. Kimberly set her pencil against the paper and heard only emptiness. She crumpled the sheet and threw it in her bag.

The other papers collected back in the teacher's basket and he began to pick a few, transcribing them onto the whiteboard in flashy lettering.

“Justice is... ‘an eye for an eye.’ Interesting.”

“‘What the government decides it to be.’ Hmm.”

“‘A clothes store for rich-ass tweens –’” He sighed while the class giggled. “‘Seriously?’”

He hesitated, picking up the next slip carefully. “‘Standing in your own truth.’ Might be my favorite so far.”

He moved to write it on the board but was interrupted by the crackle of the intercom.

“Hello, Mayward High School,” the secretary's voice drawled. “Please send Kimberly May to the front office. Again, Kimberly May to the office.”

A dozen eyes spun to face her, and she slowly rose, eyes on the cement floor.

“Ooh, what a baddie,” Josh Cui said as she passed, punching her lightly. She flinched at the touch and walked faster.

“Hi, I was just called down to the office for something?” She told the drowsy registrar.

“What’s your name?”

“Kimberly. Kimberly May.”

“Oh.” The woman’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Just head into that room right there, there’s a lady waiting for you.”

In the small conference room, a woman sat. Her eyes were pointed, square, and she wore her hair in a low bun.

“You must be Kimberly.” A gravelly voice. “I’m Angela- I’m a lawyer.”

“Oh- hi.”

“Please, sit down. Do you have any idea why you may be here today?”

“No, not particularly.”

“I see.” She shuffled some packets open. “Tell me, what do you know of the name Dylan Schumer?”

Kimberly’s vision stilled. Echoes of waves swarmed her head, threatening to burst a dam open. Her breath shallowed, swelling with iced blood, and she rose.

“Kimberly.”

She turned away.

“Two other girls, Makena Lindley and Joyce Kim, say you were with them on March 3rd, a month ago, when he stopped you and assaulted you. Is this the truth?”

She began to walk, letting her feet take flight.

“Please,” Angela called. “If it’s true, we’re on your side. We’re here to change things.”

“No.” Her lower lip trembled.

“It’s not true?”

“No, I’m afraid I can’t help you.” She shut the door behind her as she left.

So they had told.

The moon kissed her toes kindly as Kimberly sat on her balcony, asking the night sky for quiet. Her temples ached with the incessant ringing that had begun that afternoon, and she held a feeble letter in her hand.

In her mailbox, from Ms. Angela Sharpe, came lines she’d read over ten times now.

Dear Kimberly,

I hope this letter finds you well. Before anything, I want to apologize for yesterday afternoon. I should have been more careful about approaching the subject; I’m incredibly sorry if anything I said hurt you in any way.

That being said, I would still love to speak with you. If you were there, with Makena and Joyce, on the night Dylan Schumer committed his crime, I understand that the memories and trauma are extremely horrifying, even unbearable. But the two other girls are pressing charges for sexual assault, and I am helping their case. Your testimony could be invaluable to assuring Dylan Schumer never does this again.

It's a tough battle we're fighting. Right now, Dylan is arguing that the acts were consensual. It's already incredible our case against him has made it this far. We're going to need as much help as we can get.

Some may call me naïve, but I still believe in justice. Kimberly, you can help us and we can help you. It's up to you, but I hope you'll consider sharing your story.

*Sincerely,
Angela*

A month. She'd spent four weeks fortifying the wall against memory in her mind, adding sandbags of weight and bricks of rebirth. Under one word, one sound of his name, it threatened to give way, crumbling.

But she'd bruise and blood her hands if that's what it took to stop the memories from crashing over. She'd promised herself. Sitting in the bathtub, letting all the clean water dance off her shaking skin, tears and rain and shower droplets condensing a fine fog. Feeling her heart shatter into the ends of her limbs. She'd sworn to overcome, to choose silence. She folded the letter and left it outside, hoping it'd float away in the wind.

A week later, the doorbell rang and Kimberly stared, stunned, at the smiling face of Makena Lindley.

“Kimmy.” Makena laughed softly. “Can I come in?”

“Yeah, of course.” The girls sat in silence, watching each other.

“How are you?” Makena asked, almost a whisper. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Yeah, I mean, I’ve been doing all right.” Makena stared at her, the familiar honey eyes holding nostalgic laughter and picnic parties, the understanding of old friends.

“Really?”

“Mhm.” Kimberly picked at a wayward string in her jeans. “You know, I know why you’re here.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. That Angela woman, she talked to me.”

“And what’d you say?”

“Nothing.” She swallowed. “...Makena, I can’t.”

“That’s okay.”

“I mean, you get it right? I just don’t want to talk about it, don’t want to think about it, don’t want to say h-his name –” A knot on her tongue.

“Kimmy, I get it.” Makena’s hand reached for hers. “I really do.”

Her thumb circled over the knob of Kimberly's wrist, drawing a cycle of comfort. Kimberly could feel the slow pulse of her friend's brave heart, the steady beat syncopating with her own. And for the first time, as deep tremors ran through her fingers, she had a hand to steady it, and she felt the stillness rumble into her bloodstream. Letting her buzzing mind rest, witnessing the tsunami of memories crash against the shore, allowing the tears to fall gracelessly, and feeling Makena's warm arms surround her shaking body.

"M-Makena, I can't look at his face again," she murmured. "He makes me want to die – I want him to die – I want to forget – why can't I forget? Why?"

"It's okay, I know."

"Why couldn't we stop him? I know I should've fought harder –"

"No," Makena tightened her embrace. "We did the best we could. It's not your fault, Kimmy. It's not anyone's but his. You hear me? You're enough."

Kimberly heard. The words wrapped around her like sprouting roots, and later, when the tears dried, she let them harden on her cheeks like war paint.

"Your Honor," Ms. Angela Sharpe began. "I'd like to now present the personal testimony of Kimberly May, seventeen, who was one of the three women sexually assaulted by Dylan Schumer on Friday, March 3rd. Though she cannot be here in person, she has offered this letter to read aloud to the court."

"Your Honor, my name is Kimberly May, a student at Mayward High School. Before the night of March 3rd, I was just a normal girl. I loved books, running track, and spending time with my family. I was still in the process of figuring myself out, as many young girls are.

On March 3rd, I stayed at school for a track meet. I remember the sky was especially clear that day. Two of my friends, Makena Lindley and Joyce Kim, had come to watch the meet and after it was over, had joined the team party at the park right behind the school grounds. I came out of the locker room after cleaning up and passed the party on the way to the parking lot, where Dylan was standing near his car.

He approached me, and kept making conversation, asking me where I was coming from and if I'd gone to the party, and I answered with curt replies.

When I began to walk away he grabbed my hand and began to kiss me forcefully, and I pushed him away but his body pinned me to the side of his car. I could barely breathe. He kept tugging at the hem of my shirt and I kicked his legs away, to which he openly began to grope me. He only stopped when I broke my right arm out of his grip and tried to claw at his eyes.

I ran away, faster than I have ever run in my life, trying to brush my growing sobs away to the wind. When I reached my car, I saw Makena and Joyce carrying each other. I could hear their cries, and I found out Dylan had attacked them at the party a few hours before. I offered to drive them home, but we just sat in my car and didn't move for hours, trying to swallow unstoppable grief. I remember the cruel expanse of the night sky, fixating on a single star.

I know Dylan Schumer claims our mental states were too loose to say no, but I was painfully sober. I remember every moment of terror, every suffocated breath. No matter what he may say, there was no consent from myself. Every ounce of my body was against his actions.

After that night, I have become somebody else. Everything I feel and sense and know stems from the assault. I don't know if that will ever change. But I have decided it is important to speak, because despite all his stories, this is what really happened.

One of my classmates said that seeking justice is standing in your truth.

This is my truth.

Sincerely,

Kimberly May.””