

# Green

JENNIFER HEATH



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*WRITER'S COMMENT: I wrote the beginning of this essay one month after my sexual assault because I wanted to remember what had happened, or at least, what I could recollect. Deep down, I knew writing down the events of the attack would help me find justice, even if I wasn't sure it would ever happen. And when justice did come a year later, it reopened all my old wounds, shook up the foundation of my relationships, and gave me strength because I made sure he couldn't hurt anyone else. The original piece was much shorter and didn't dive into the aftermath of the assault. It wasn't until I enrolled in Professor Zinzi Clemmon's Creative Writing Nonfiction class that I returned to "Green" as a spoken word piece and turned it into the most personal essay I'll ever write. Vulnerability never gets easy, but its impact ripples outward, touching the lives of women and men I'll never meet. I hope this essay allows survivors to feel less alone. I see you. I hear you. I'm here for you.*

*EDITOR'S COMMENT: Jennifer's essay provides a powerful reflection of a traumatic event. Incredibly relatable and impactful, she not only describes the sexual assault and the details surrounding it, but also includes how her (now ex-) boyfriend, mom, supervisor, and close friends responded. Similarly, she adds details about the assailant's mother and the incarcerated individuals she's worked with, knowing that some of them are serving sentences for the same crime, demonstrating the multifaceted struggle she and many other survivors have endured. All this works to complicate the stereotypical, straight forward narrative that readers may expect from those who have been sexually assaulted, further speaking to Jennifer's bravery in telling her*

*story. Like Jennifer, I hope her essay helps to empower survivors while increasing awareness, empathy, and allyship in others.*

*—Jillian Azevedo, University Writing Program*

**Content Warning:** *This essay includes details regarding sexual assault and its subsequent long-term affects. We ask that you remain aware of any feelings that may arise as you read it and consider contacting UC Davis’s Center for Advocacy, Resources, & Education (CARE) for further resources.*

I was standing in front of my bathroom mirror, wearing a black-and-green striped dress. Green for St. Patrick’s Day. Green for my eyes. Green for my favorite color. I had finished the final touches of my makeup—heavy and dark, night shades for the night ahead. I already drank one tall can of Mike’s Hard Lemonade. I could handle it. It was my pregame.

My friends and I arrived at the bar and drank more in the parking lot. It was St. Patrick’s Day, the day we all drink. When we first entered, it was practically dead, too early for late-night revelry. So, we invaded the upstairs VIP area and talked lively among ourselves. I was happy. I was confident. The world was my oyster—or a five-dollar can of Guinness.

More of my friends arrived, and we went outside for a game of giant Jenga, then a game of giant beer pong with garbage cans and volleyballs. I played, I tossed, I served the ball as if I were back on my eighth-grade volleyball team. I drank more Guinness. We went back inside the bar crowded with bodies. My friend was there waiting for me, and we took shots of Jameson. She told me how much she liked the book I wrote.

The night got fuzzy as people started to leave. My boyfriend, Mike, asked me if I wanted to go to a house party, but I declined. I wanted to stay at the bar a little longer and then get an Uber home. I was almost done with the night. A few friends stayed, and I indulged in one more drink, something sweet and dangerous. I was at the bar, ready to close my tab, contemplating a late-night Taco Bell order, when the man beside me complimented my dress, my hair, my freckles, my smile. Kindly, I smiled in return, asking his name and if he was enjoying the evening. He gave me small talk and a look I recognized as predatory. But I wasn’t worried. I was headed home. I closed out my tab—

I was running, sprinting, gasping for air as I tried to think of something, anything.

*Where am I? Why am I on Greenback? Why is that traffic light staring at me?*

Green. Green like my dress. I was running, fleeing. *From who?*

I tripped and fell, tumbling into the grass next to the sidewalk. My ears rang as a man ran up to me, cursing.

“Oh my god! Baby girl! What the fuck!”

My mind was a swirl of adrenaline and fleeting glimpses of consciousness. Pain and fear. He helped me up, but I fell again, my knees unable to work, and the back of my head smacked against the concrete. He cursed again and left once I screamed at him to go away.

I woke up behind the Beach Hut Deli on the corner of Fair Oaks and Greenback. His bloodshot eyes were before me. His fingers were inside me. I couldn't register what was happening as I lay with my legs spread apart on the rough concrete, ass bare and cold, my throat hoarse, aching. I told him to stop and tried to crawl away. He continued to penetrate me with his fingers, and I realized he wasn't going to stop, so I lay there, uncertain of whether or not I should put up a fight.

“Your pussy's so good, girl. So tight.”

“I don't want this. Stop. It's not turning me on.” He removed his fingers and shoved them in my mouth, smearing my own scent under my nose.

“You seem to like it, girl.”

“No, I don't! I have a boyfriend!”

“He ain't here! Why ain't he here?”

I was sobbing. “Stop, please! PLEASE! FUCKING STOP!”

I slapped him.

He hit me back, slapping me across the face. Once. Twice. I tried to scream, but he wrapped his hand around my throat and held me until I was quiet and lying still. I was scared. I realized I could die. He could kill me if he wanted to.

I lost consciousness and gained it again as a sharp rock embedded itself in the sole of my foot. I was barefoot, and my panties were missing. He was walking me across sharp rocks alongside a street I grew up on.

“You raped me,” I said to him.

“Are you kidding me? I didn't rape you.”

“You put your fingers in me when I didn't want them. You slapped me.”

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry I hit you, and I’m sorry I ripped your panties off, okay, but I got kids, so you need to shut the fuck up.”

I woke up on a couch I had never been on before. It was quiet, the gray sky bleeding through the overhead window. I sat up, the images and feelings from the night before rushing back to me. I tasted blood and ran my tongue over my swollen lip. My knee looked like roadkill and felt like it. I noticed my phone connected to a charger beside the pillow—the only miracle of the night. All my belongings were safe, save for my shoes and my panties.

I limped to the bathroom, the feeling of his fingers inside me as real as they were a few hours before. I knew nothing else had happened. Peeing in a stranger’s bathroom would have hurt ten times worse if it had. I left the bathroom, collected my things, and called an Uber.

The Uber arrived, and the driver was a woman—thank God! Once we pulled out of the apartment complex, I realized where I truly was—less than a mile from my childhood home. My parents were just down the street, probably enjoying their morning coffee. I wished I was there instead, eating Eggos with peanut butter, watching the new episode of *Inuyasha* my dad had recorded for me on a VHS tape the night before. Those mornings before high school were long gone, but I hadn’t realized how special they were.

We drove in silence until we were a few miles from my apartment. She asked, “Rough night?”

“I think someone hurt me?” I said to her quietly, my voice faint and uncertain. I wasn’t entirely sure yet. The haze of the alcohol and the shock from my injuries left my mind spinning, trying to grasp the collection of memories from the night before. She gave me as much comfort as a stranger could and dropped me off. I stumbled inside my apartment and took a shower, shaking and stunned. Speechless.

I tried calling my boyfriend, but he wasn’t answering. I noticed a missed call from my mom and put off calling her back. I needed to compose myself. My boyfriend only lived a mile away in another apartment complex. With my car still parked at the bar, I decided to walk to his place and tell him what had happened, desperate for someone to comfort and care for me.

I don’t know how I walked a mile with a swollen knee and road rash covering half my legs. My shoulders, arms, and butt were darkly bruised as well. I limped to Mike’s place, but he wasn’t there. No one was, not even his roommates. I called him again and walked around the building

to knock on his window. I then called a friend who lived at the apartment where the house party was, and he picked up. I asked if Mike was there, and he handed the phone to him. Mike had been sleeping and was angry he'd been woken up.

"Something bad happened last night," I said.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his voice more alert. I tried to explain everything I could remember without giving him all the gory details. I told him someone assaulted me last night, and I woke up at his place. I had to get an Uber home.

"Well, babe, you just drink too much!" he barked, as though I had hooked up with some random guy while I was drunk. As if I had hurt him.

My mouth fell open, and I yelled at him for blaming me and not the man who had hurt me. He didn't want to talk about it and hung up the phone. My mom called me shortly after, and I picked up, hoping she would comfort me better than my boyfriend had.

My younger brother was taken to the hospital for emergency surgery to remove his appendix the night of my attack. That's why she had called me so many times. She could tell something was wrong, and, after pressing me to tell her what was going on, I spilled it all, just as I had done with Mike over the phone.

"Well, honey, don't you think this is a sign to stop drinking so much? You could have been seriously hurt!"

I was floored. The two people I trusted most blamed my assault on my drinking. I had never felt so low. I couldn't yell back at her, so I clammed up and told her everything would be okay—that I was fine and just needed to rest. We hung up, and I cried as I limped back home. I texted my best friend, Marie, and told her what had happened. She called me right away and asked if I was okay. I retold the story I had so naively given my mom and Mike, but Marie cried with me on the phone instead of getting mad.

I spent the rest of that day laying on my couch, injured and hungover, watching reruns of *How I Met Your Mother* with his voice in my head, his eyes in front of my face, and the smell of my own scent stuck in my nose. My other best friend, Jackie, who was in town at the time, dropped all her plans and came to my apartment to spend time with me. She fed me and let me talk about what had happened, allowing me to work through what I could remember and what I couldn't.

Mike distanced himself from what had happened to me. I don't even think he believed me. Meanwhile, my mom had tried to convince me that I'd just made a mistake and went home with the guy because I was drunk. It felt like I was all on my own and, though I didn't realize it at the time, I was broken. Not only was my body injured, my mind and soul had ruptured. The very core of my being had changed, and I wouldn't realize it for another eighteen months.

At first, I was desperate to deny the assault had even happened, but it was nearly impossible to forget since my entire body was bruised, my legs rubbed raw from falling on asphalt, and my knee was the size of a softball. My eyes were swollen from sobbing during my attack, my bottom lip busted, my vagina raw and irritated. Was I being overdramatic? Maybe I was just drunk and fell hard. Was I actually trying to hook up with him? Had I really been raped? He hadn't penetrated me with his penis, but he had penetrated me—removed my clothing and forced me to do things I wasn't conscious enough to consent to. And when I screamed, he hit me, choked me.

I didn't want to report it because I knew I'd been too drunk that night to give a complete statement. I worried that the police would blame me as well, just like the people I trusted most had blamed me. But two days after the assault, I found a strange business card in my wallet. I realized it was his business card. I could now name my attacker. I knew where he worked and where he lived.

I told Marie about the business card, and she convinced me to go to the police.

She said, "It could have been me. It could have happened to any one of our friends. We all go to that bar."

I called my boss that night and explained what had happened. She told me about her sister's attack outside of a Chili's in the 1980s and how she understood the kind of pain I was in. She told me to take as much time as I needed. Due to my injured knee, I had to take the entire week off. I worked for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, and we had a big event coming up that week at San Quentin. It wasn't my first time inside a male prison. It wasn't even the second, but I'd had good experiences working with the men who were graduating from our coding program, the first of its kind ever to be taught behind bars. These were the kind of men who wanted a second chance. I felt safe knowing they wouldn't repeat their former offenses

because they had their minds set on the future. But there was no way in hell I'd be able to look felons in the eye, not after what I'd been through. Not that soon, at least.

The following day, Marie picked me up and took me to the police station, where I filed a report. An officer interviewed me, and I tried to give him as many details as possible, fiddling with the paper Dixie cup they'd given me. The tap water left me feeling thirsty. Since I had been drunk and couldn't remember when or how I left the bar, I was embarrassed and worried they wouldn't believe my story. But I had his business card—I wasn't making this up. The officer looked up his name in their system. He already had a record. They printed out a lineup of faces, and I picked him out immediately. I couldn't forget those bloodshot eyes.

After the officer took pictures of my numerous injuries, Marie and I left the police station to relax at her place. Later, we saw the live-action *Beauty and the Beast*. It was the first time I'd felt happy in nearly seventy-two hours. I cried in the movie theater.

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It was exactly one year before I heard back from the police.

I stayed with Mike and didn't talk to my mom about the assault ever again. I was very good at denying the emotional damage I'd endured.

One day, Mike told me a detective knocked on my door while I was at work. He said maybe it was a fluke, but I knew exactly why a detective was looking for me. A private number called me, and I answered it while on break at work. The man asked if he could talk with me in an hour. I told him to come on my lunch break.

I dodged raindrops as I jogged to his unmarked Charger parked in the visitor spot of my building. He greeted me and asked me to repeat the statement I made to the police nearly a year prior. I explained the worst night of my life the best I could and apologized for not remembering everything. He looked into my eyes and said, "You should be able to go out and drink with your friends and get home safe. This isn't your fault."

He showed me another lineup of faces, and I pointed him out again. Seeing his face after a year was jarring, but I was used to burying those emotions by then.

The officer left, and I told my supervisor I'd taken a long break to speak to a detective about my assault case. She was sympathetic. I didn't even tell Mike what had happened at work; I knew he wouldn't care.

By June, I got a call from one of the California Assistant Attorney

Generals. I took time off work to drive downtown and met with him in his windowed office to describe the event of my assault again. He said that there were two other victims, and they had physical evidence related to my case. I asked what kind of evidence, but that was undisclosed information needed for the court proceedings. Was it the black cotton panties he tore from me? Was it the security cameras the first officer said he'd check after I gave my statement?

I imagined how it looked—me screaming and fighting my attacker while I lay on the concrete, drunk and terrified. I wondered how my dad would react if he ever saw footage like that. What if he had killed me, and they had searched for my body like those forensic crime dramas? There was a creek a few yards away from where the attack had happened. He could have easily dumped me there. I knew I'd have been bloated and unrecognizable when they found me. My mom would have come to the coroner and identified me from the tattoos she hated. Mike probably would have missed the call.

Before breaking up with Mike, I had cheated on him with Alex, a mutual friend I'd met on Facebook. It felt like I had reached another shamefully low point in my life—like I couldn't get my shit together. I started to believe I was the type of girl who cheats, the kind of girl who gets too drunk and winds up on her back in a parking lot. Despite the guilt and self-loathing, something wouldn't let me walk away from the affair. There was something about the way Alex treated me that lifted the veil I'd been living under, and I realized my infidelity wasn't unfounded. Mike had betrayed my trust by blaming the assault on my drinking and ignoring it entirely after the fact. I realized I could never trust him again. He'd dropped the fragile egg I'd become, and he never apologized for it, even when I explained to him how hurt I was.

I guess I can't blame him entirely because I hid how broken I was. In the end, he was wrong, but I never really showed him how wrong he was. But how could I show someone the pain inflicted by an assault? Even when I felt okay enough to have sex, Mike thought I was just frigid; he didn't understand the element of the assault, how brutal it was. I never explained the details of it, but was I supposed to?

How do you explain the fear of dying to someone who thinks you brought it upon yourself? All he cared about was working, working out, and drinking. Everything in between was inconsequential. When I broke up with him, some friends told me how often he cheated on me. How



was I with him for another eighteen months after the assault? I don't know. Stupidity? Denial? Naiveté? Was I as green as the dress I wore that night?

His sentencing hearing was scheduled for December 2018, and I just had upended my life by breaking up with Mike. I knew there was no point in asking Mike or my family to attend the hearing with me. I called Jackie and asked if she could be there for me, and she and her sister picked me up at seven o'clock that morning. We sang to BTS on the way there, and when we walked inside the courthouse, I noticed his mother sitting on the bench across from us.

I walked into the courtroom and saw him sitting at the table before the judge in a blue denim jumpsuit. He was tall, and his hair was cut short, his face thin as his head hung forward, long dark hands clasped together in front of him. I had worked with men like him. They weren't so bad, but now I'd experienced firsthand what it took to go to prison. My sympathy had worn thin.

There were two other victims. One hadn't shown up to the hearing, but the other did, and she brought her father with her. She was younger than me. He had assaulted her in her own home. The Assistant Attorney General read a letter she wrote for the court to hear. In it, she explained the loss she felt and how he had robbed her peace of mind. She explained how she tried to get it back by installing an expensive security system in her home after the assault; even then, she still couldn't sleep at night. I don't know why I didn't say anything to her after the hearing was over.

He was sentenced to nine years in prison for varying degrees of sexual assault; his probation would last another eight. He was also mandated to register as a sex offender. A part of me felt guilty. He'd become another Black man tossed behind bars. I couldn't deny the facts, though. I remembered his face before mine while he assaulted me with his fingers. I remembered his voice. He'd given me his business card. He lived down the street from my parents' house, and I later found out he was the brother of my current boyfriend's godfather. I met him—Alex's godfather—in April of 2019. He looks identical to the brother I helped send to prison, although the look-alike brother is a stand-up gentleman. Allegedly, the man who assaulted me had molested his nieces. I learned that no one in his family liked him. They were happy he was in prison.

I still wondered if I deserved it. I didn't go home when I should have, didn't listen to my friend when she asked if I was okay in his company.

In the ether of my happiness and confidence, I didn't see him as a bad man. He reminded me of the inmates whose hands I shook on stage after giving them their diplomas. I didn't want to see anyone in a bad light that night, not Mike nor my friends who had left me drunk and alone in a bar. Little did I know that blind trust could land you flat on your back in the middle of a parking lot with your panties torn off and another man's fingers inside you—or around your throat.

I haven't celebrated St. Patrick's Day since. Green isn't my favorite color anymore.

I sit here writing about the worst experience of my life, rubbing my temples and listening to Alice In Chains. No one will understand what I went through exactly. Some will empathize—women are assaulted in outstanding numbers, reported and unreported—and many more will sympathize. Still, no one will understand the terror I felt running down a street I vaguely recognized, only to trip and fall, injuring my knee to the point of scarring. I still can't feel the small patch of skin on my kneecap. Whenever an ocean wave hits it, it feels like the skin is being taken away by the tide. It's permanently numb.

I didn't tell my therapist about the assault until six months later—that's how in denial I was, although I did get an STD test one month after the assault. I was due for another Pap smear, and I needed to explain to my doctor what had happened. Fortunately, she was understanding and told me no one should experience what I'd been through. But I went through it. I went through the whole damn thing, blacked out or not. I went through Mike and my mom blaming me for what had happened, emotionally scarring me.

*You just drink too much.*

*Well, honey, don't you think this is a sign to stop drinking so much?*

I'm drunk now. Alcohol eases my anxiety. I don't take medicine. I drink.

I just don't go to bars alone anymore. I'm not green anymore.