ABUSE OF THORITY

In 2004 a man called a McDonald's in the town of Mount Washington, Kentucky. He claimed he was a cop and as part of some official police business he needed the assistant manager to detain and strip search one of her employees. He claimed that a purse or wallet had recently been stolen, and that a young female employee was the primary suspect.

But of course everything he said was a lie. He wasn't a cop, nor was he even in Kentucky. He was a pervert calling from a payphone in Florida who had realized that when you claim you are a cop on the phone people have a tendency to follow your orders and not ask too many questions.

He described the "suspect" as young, white, female, and having dark hair, a description I'm sure he knew was vague enough to reasonably apply to at least one person working at almost any McDonald's in the country, so it shouldn't come as a great shock that an eighteen-year-old employee by the name of Louise fit the bill.



He was a pervert calling from a payphone in Florida

Louise was asked by the assistant manager to come into the office where she was told to strip completely naked or risk getting arrested. She agreed to disrobe and the assistant manager confiscated her clothes and her cellphone.

Apparently the caller wanted a man to carry out the next part of his plan because he then asked the assistant manager to go fetch a male employee. She brought back a cook named Jason, but Jason realized pretty quickly that what was unfolding was, to put it mildly, pretty messed up, so instead of following any of the caller's demands he called out the assistant manager using language court documents describe as "appropriately strong [and] colloquial." He then went back to work making hamburgers.1

One would hope that would have been the end of it, but the caller, undeterred, then asked the assistant manager if she was married. She was

¹ https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/ky-court-ofappeals/1505641.html



the assistant manager confiscated her clothes and her cellphone.

not yet, but she did have a fiancé named Walter. The caller told told her have Walter come to the McDonald's to help with this very serious and official police investigation.

Either not noticing, or ignoring the major red flags, she called her fiancé on the phone and had him come to the McDonald's so he could take over while she went back to work.

The caller then had Walter perform increasingly sexual and humiliating acts on Louise, eventually asking him to rape and assault her. Which he did. The entire ordeal lasted over two hours and didn't end until another McDonald's employee started asking one too many questions about the "cop" on the phone and the whole story started to fall apart.

Louise, for her part, had been crying and begging for the abuse to end throughout the entire process. She kept reiterating that she hadn't done anything wrong, and was quite



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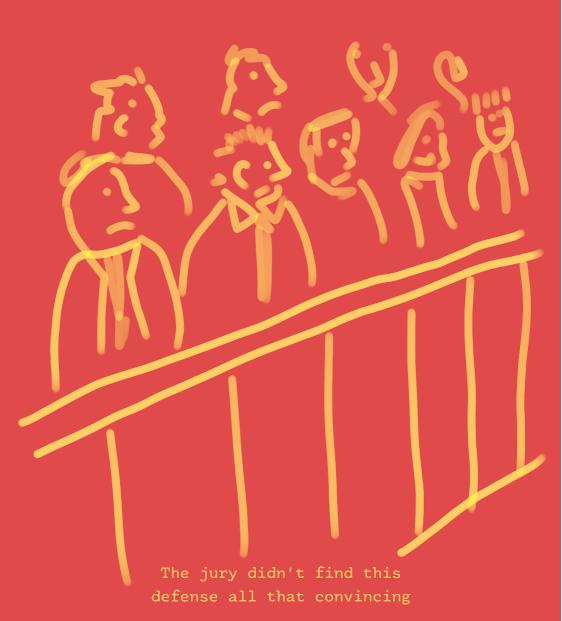
obviously very distressed and painfully uncomfortable.²

The events were traumatizing enough to give Louise PTSD. She sued McDonald's.

During the lawsuit McDonald's argued, among other things, that they couldn't be held accountable for the actions of Walter, as he was not a McDonald's employee. They argued that because there wasn't anything physically restraining her, and because presumably the office door was unlocked, Louise could have walked away at any point. They argued that the assistant manager had never made any verbal or physical threats towards Louise. She hadn't been threatening at all, she had simply asked Louise to strip naked, and Louise had followed those instructions willingly. In McDonald's eyes she could have walked out at any point.

The jury didn't find this defense all that convincing, and McDonald's ended

² https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/weird-news/compliancenew-movie-tells-true-1779908



up paying Louise over a million dollars. I agree very strongly with the court's decision, and I'm not going to argue that Louise is anything but a victim, but I do think it's worth asking something: if Louise didn't like what was happening to her, which she made very clear she did not, and if nothing was physically restraining her, which security footage confirms there was not, why did she stay in the room? Why did she strip naked when asked?

The answer, which I think is quite obvious, is that the people making these demands of her were, at least in her mind, authority figures. Police hold power over us, our bosses at our job hold power over us. If you're a boss or a cop you don't need to make threats out loud because we all already know the bad things that can happen to us if we talk back. People get killed for not complying with police. People loose their job for not complying with their bosses. The threat is baked into the system.



security footage confirms there was not

Of course the notable thing is that Walter, the man who carried out the most horrific of the abuse, was neither a cop nor a boss. If he had just walked into the McDonald's unannounced and demanded that Louise do humiliating sexual acts there's no way she would have complied. The power and authority Walter had in this situation was granted to him by others, and it was granted in a very spur-of-the-moment unofficial kind of way.

There's something about what happened at the McDonald's that feels really important to me. It's not just that people will abuse their power to sexually assault others. I've known that for a long time. It's that so many people were involved. So many people were either witnesses or participants and could have stopped the abuse much earlier and yet they went back to work cooking burgers.

I would like to believe in my heart that I would have acted differently if I were at that McDonald's. I wish I



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could say that I'm the kind of guy to intervene in a situation when something abusive is happening. In my fantasy I burst into the office and demand an end be put to this situation immediately. I offer clothes off my own back to Louise, and give her whatever else she needs. But I know I'm not that person in real life. I have witnessed abusive situations, and in real-life things go very differently than they do in my head.

One of the things that's difficult to understand when reading about the horrible things that happen in the world, is just how confusing and disorienting being in that kind of situation is while it's unfolding. I'm not a genius for reading about what happened to Louise and with the benefit of hindsight and the comfort of being in my own house coming to the conclusion that it was kind of messed up. I don't have to experience any of the emotions I would if I were actually in the room, I don't know any of these people personally, and I can call my mom on the phone and feel



I burst into the office and demand an end be put to this situation immediately secure in my judgments when she agrees with me. Being in the room affords us none of those luxuries.

Back in 2023 while I was still living in the Netherlands, I popped into my local grocery store to buy some coconut oil. It was in the evening, and I really just wanted to be at home relaxing, but my skin was dried out and itchy and it was bothering me enough that I thought it was worth leaving my apartment over.

As I made my way to the self-checkout kiosk I realized that a man was lying on the floor and seemed to be shouting out in pain. There were a couple of store employees around him, and I assumed he had slipped and fallen and hurt himself. No body else seemed to notice or to be reacting at all, and my first instinct was to ignore the situation also because I really just wanted to be home right now.

I felt an incredibly strong urge to not look at the man, not think about



I popped into my local grocery store to buy some coconut oil.

it too hard, just mind my own business and leave as quickly as possible.

But I did look at the man and the reality of the situation was much more horrifying than I had initially ascertained. He had not slipped on a wet floor and fallen and was now writhing in pain because he had twisted his ankle. He had been tackled to the ground by a store employee who was now SITTING ON HIS NECK, I guess to prevent him from running away?

The man was black and the imagery was sickeningly reminiscent of photos I'd seen of George Floyd being murdered on the street by police holding him to the ground in a similar manner. How could I possibly have mistaken this for a man who had slipped and fallen?

I don't think I really did. I think my subconscious recognized what was going on and realized the truth would be devastating, traumatizing, and more than I could really deal with at the moment so it gave me an alternative explanation for the situation and



He had not slipped on a wet floor

desperately tried to steer me out of the Albert Heijn.

It's very possible to suppress the truth when it's too difficult or complicated or painful to deal with. It's very easy to believe something false when the truth would force us to reevaluate our lives in ways we aren't ready for.

When I was in middle-school I got sexually assaulted. A group of boys who were all friends and more popular than me surrounded me in the gym after school. They started off by making sexual comments about me, but then it escalated to the point of groping my penis through my pants. They were crowded around me in a way that would have made it hard to get away from them, but they were acting quite jovial, and it felt hard to tell if they were making fun of me or if I was in on the joke.

I didn't have the tools to understand it at the time. I thought sexual assault happened to girls, not boys. I



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thought the people who did sexual assault were mean and scary, not people I respected or wanted respect from. I thought it would happen in the dark behind closed doors, not in public. Not in front of a crowd of people. I thought it would be easy to understand, but in actuality it's a very confusing experience.

I wasn't ready to unpack what had happened to me, but I was still left feeling intense shame, intense guilt. I felt embarrassed and regretful, and maybe also slightly proud or impressed with myself.

My subconscious suppressed the memory immediately. It was like my life was a movie and an editor had gone in with big scissors and *snip* relegated the assault to the deleted scenes section of the DVD extras.

I walked out of the gym, memory erased, but feelings in tact and the first thing I did was go into the bathroom and make a joke about it



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being "ass-fucking Friday" to another kid.

In middle-school I never said swear-words, especially not the f-word. And so for four years I told myself the guilt and shame and embarrassment and regret I felt on that day was guilt and shame and regret I felt for saying the word "fuck" in front of a single middle-school boy who really didn't take issue with that kind of language at all.

It's not a totally logical thing to feel so mixed up about for years, but it doesn't have to be logical, so long as it's a more convenient thing to believe than the truth.

In the Percy Jackson book series there's this thing called the "mist" which is a magical force that takes over when a normal, non-magical person sees something magic. Regular people like you or me can't comprehend gods or titans or the fact that a twelve-year-old boy would have a sword, and so the "mist" makes us see two eyes



the fact that a twelve-yearold boy would have a sword when we look at a cyclopes, or a gun when we see Percy's sword, which is much more understandable.

I have a "mist" of my own that prevents me from seeing things I'm not ready to understand. When I was five or six I accidentally saw a pornographic photo. It was of a woman giving a man a blowjob, but sex wasn't something I was ready to understand yet and so to me the picture looked like a woman kissing a snake.

The "mist" makes me mistake blood and guts for raspberry jam, a penis for a snake, a homeless woman trying to sell me sex for \$20 as a kind of weird joke I don't have the context for. My friend gets sexually assaulted but the perpetrator is someone I love and trust and so the "mist" tells me there must have been some misunderstanding. I keep going after my partner has already said "no" but I'm one of the good ones, I'm a safe person, the "mist" makes me deaf in the ears, makes the "no" a "not yet" because I cannot bear to believe that I would



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ever cross a clear line with someone I love. I cannot bear to believe that the evils of the world live within me too and that on my worst days I am more of a problem than I am a problem solver.

I moved to the Netherlands because I needed to escape the violence and the cruelty of the United States. I cannot bear to live in a world that treats another human's life as disposable. I will never feel safe in a world where police will kill a black man for the crime of needing to feed himself or the people he loves. For years I told myself the Netherlands was different than the U.S. That I didn't have to worry when I go to the grocery store that I might witness a man being murdered. I told myself when I attended Black Lives Matter protests in Amsterdam with thousands of other people living in the Netherlands that these were people who would step in and help if the kind of thing that happens in the U.S. ever happened here.



I attended Black Lives Matter protests in Amsterdam with thousands of other people

I felt safe living in the Netherlands, and that safety gave me the freedom to unpack and process traumas I had been carrying with me for years. I got to cry for the boy I was in middle-school for the first time in my life and I wasn't ready to give that up.

So the "mist" made me see a man who had slipped and fallen on the freshly mopped ground. I saw employees that were helping to comfort him while waiting for an ambulance to arrive. I didn't notice that they were on his neck.

But I know too much to fall for those kinds of lies. I can see what's happening in front of my face if I really try. Months earlier an older man pushed me forward at that same grocery store because he didn't like how much social distance I was giving the person in front of me, and I resented the look of confusion the cashier gave me while I was checking out. I said nothing, and she said nothing, and I saw the "mist" in her eyes and I wished she would say "that



Months earlier an older man pushed me forward at that same grocery store

was wrong" instead of just looking at me stupidly and handing me my receipt.

I looked at the black man being sat on and I saw it for what it was and the "mist" told me he deserved it. Maybe he had tried to stab someone with a knife and this was the only way to prevent him from stabbing. I had only just gotten to the self-checkout area, I had missed the context where he tried to stab someone. The customers who were here first knew more than me. They saw the knife. That's why they weren't yelling at the employee to get off his neck. That's why no one was outraged.

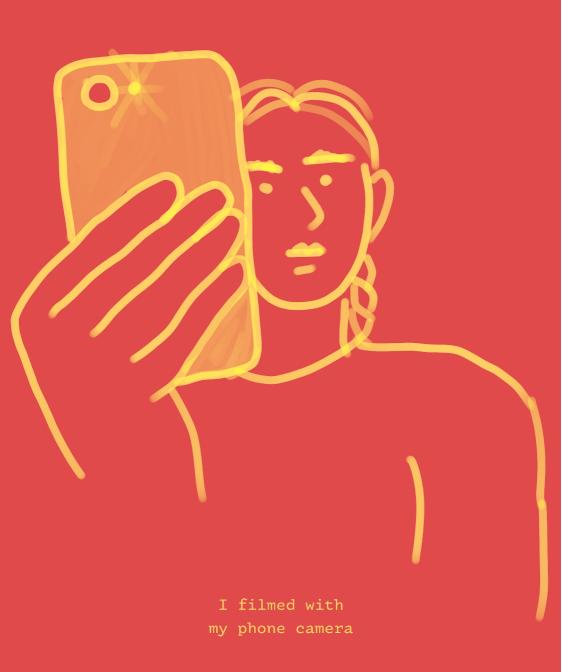
I didn't want to intervene and push the employee off and let a stabber loose on the streets. I didn't want to intervene because I was an immigrant and I was worried that if I caused too much trouble they'd send me back to my home country. I didn't want to intervene because if I did, it would mean I thought something was wrong. I didn't want to intervene because my legs were itchy.



looking at me stupidly and handing me my receipt

I filmed with my phone camera because as much as I wanted to believe everything was fine I couldn't shake a sense of doubt. I hoped no one would notice. I hoped after I filmed quickly I could go home.

But the store employees did notice me filming. They asked why I was filming and I asked why they were sitting on the man. They told me he was trying to steal. They asked me to stop filming and then when I did they asked me to delete the video. At that point I didn't know what to say at all and I just stood there silently like a deer in headlights. A customer told me to "just leave" and so I did. Shortly after, the police arrived, and instead of reprimanding the store employees for jeopardizing a man's life over food, they dragged the man on the floor out of the store by his hands and feet like a criminal. Nothing came of the video footage I captured. I tried sending it to Dutch civil rights organizations but the only one who ever got back to me did so to chastise



me for violating the privacy of the store employee I had filmed.

Are my actions that of a hero who steps in to prevent wrong, harm, and injustice from happening? No. My actions did nothing to help this man in anyway. And to be honest with you, if it weren't for the fact that I had myself been assaulted at that very store, and if it weren't for the fact that the Black Lives Matter movement was still fresh in my memory, I wouldn't have even stopped and filmed. I would have just gone about my day like everyone else in the store.

It's easy to say in retrospect that what I witnessed was an act of racist violence against a desperate man who was just trying to eat, because I'm in the comfort of my own home and I know all the facts and I can ask my mom. But when I was standing there in the grocery store I could not tell you with any confidence that what was happening before me was wrong.



a hero who steps in to prevent wrong, harm, and injustice from happening I think about what happened at the Kentucky McDonald's and I really doubt I'd be able to make heads or tails of it if I was there while it was ongoing. I already had a very specific image of what racist violence could look like when I witnessed it at the grocery store, and part of why I started to put two and two together was because it looked exactly like what I'd seen in the news. I really think if I hadn't already had an idea of what to look out for that the "mist" would have succeeded in taking over and I might still think nothing of my trip to the grocery store that day. Up until recently, I'd never even heard of the McDonald's strip search phone scam, and it's such a bizarre situation that it really doesn't conform to my ideas of how sexual violence is supposed to look.

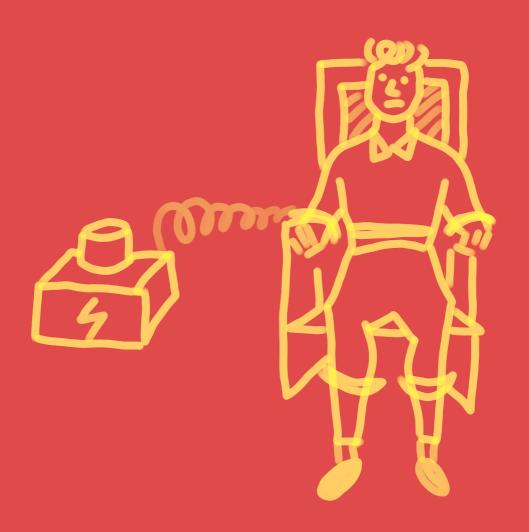
But recognizing abuse when it happens is only the first obstacle when it comes to calling out and preventing abusive behavior. Addressing what was happening at the McDonald's would require challenging authority, and it



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is just a brute fact that human psychology is very susceptible to authority. We are very averse to causing a ruckus, to challenging those in power, sticking our neck out.

In the 1960s, the psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted a series of experiments that have since become rather infamous. He claimed that he was testing how punishment affected people's ability to memorize stuff, and he asked participants in the study to press a button that would send an electric shock to a guy strapped to a chair every time he forgot something. In actuality, he was testing how far people are willing to go if a guy in a lab-coat tells them to, and it turns out most people will shock a stranger to death because it's hard to say "no" to someone in a lab-coat who paid you four dollars to do what he says. To be clear the guy strapped to the chair was an actor who was only pretending to be shocked to death, but the test subjects didn't know that at the time.



he asked participants in the study to pressa button that would send an electric shock to a guy strapped to a chair I genuinely think we'd shock ourselves into a state of unconsciousness if a person in a lab-coat told us to because standing up to authority is actually quite difficult.

What happened to Louise at the Kentucky McDonald's in 2004 was not a fluke. It wasn't just a single group of fast-food workers who were uniquely susceptible to the authority of a man who claimed to be a cop. This had been going on for ten years at this point. For ten years a man would call up a Pizza Hut, Burger King, Taco Bell, or other fast food restaurant and claim that someone's purse had been stolen, and for ten years employees at those stores would bring their young female subordinates into a backroom and strip them naked and sexually assault them because it's hard to say "no" to a cop. Over 70 times similar phone calls were made, all over the country, over 30 to McDonald's restaurants alone. What happened in Kentucky is not a fluke. If you are the boss of someone or otherwise hold authority over them and you take them into a backroom and



ask them to strip naked, chances are they will do as they're told. That's not a flaw or weakness on the part of your subordinate, it's the responsibility that comes with holding power over a fellow human being.

When it comes to sex I'm quite suspicious of the idea that a person in a position of power can ever really get consent from someone who is subordinate to them. McDonald's might argue in court that Louise stripped naked of her own volition, but I think we all kind of know she didn't really have a choice. I think if a cop pulled me over and said "do you mind stripping naked?" that I would most likely say "no problem officer" and start stripping, not because I actually want to get naked on the side of the road, but because cops have guns and the power to arrest me.

We can see how power dynamics might make it hard for someone in the position of Louise to say "no" to the assistant manager, but I think power and authority also plays a role in the



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cook Jason returning to work after learning about what was going on. He certainly could have done more to stop the abuse, but that would have required really challenging the assistant manager's authority in a way that's hard to do.

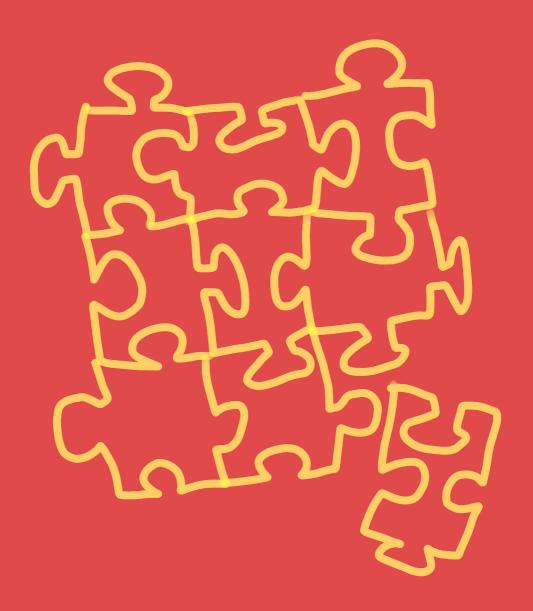
I think of the employees at the grocery store as authority figures because if they ask to see my receipt I show it to them, and if they tell me "you can't go back here" I don't go back there. The position of authority made me really super not want to question what they were up to because I was worried it could somehow lead to me getting deported. I really believe sitting on someone's neck can kill them. I really think murdering someone is not okay unless it's in selfdefense, but once the store employee said out-lout to me "he was stealing" I knew it wasn't a justifiable act of potential murder. Morally I should have shoved the store employee off of the man at that point. I think we probably all have a duty to prevent unjustified murder if we can.



But I didn't.

I was worried that if I did, it would be considered assault, and I would get in legal trouble and I would be forced to leave a country I had made my home, and I'm also not the kind of guy to refuse to show grocery store employee's my receipt. My default instinct is to listen to grocery store employees and in chaotic, stressful, and confusing situations it becomes even harder to go off script.

As humans, we have this beautiful instinct to seek out coherence. We desire knowledge and rationality and the truth. One of the ugliest things about abuse is it often renders the victim illogical, irrational, incoherent. If I, the victim of assault, explained to you that I felt tremendous shame and guilt over saying a single swear word once, you'd probably rightfully conclude I'd gone mad. If you asked me too many questions about why I felt the way I did I'd probably end up agreeing with you. I've lost my mind at some point



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and now I'm feeling irrational and silly feelings over little nothings. This explanation is a logically coherent one, but it would also be false. Our desire for coherence led us astray in this case.

I think there's a special kind of evil to what McDonald's lawyers did by pointing out that Louise could have said no to stripping naked or walked away at any point. They're pointing out a flaw in the logic of her behavior. She wanted to leave, she could have left, she didn't, that makes no sense. But of course she's going to act in ways that make no sense, she was experiencing abuse and more often than not abuse makes us act in weird and illogical ways.

Victims of abuse want logic and rationality too. The more that you point out how illogical and irrational someone who's experienced abuse has acted, the more you question the holes in their stories, the more they're going to want to agree that they've just gone crazy because at least that



explanation satisfies the need for things to add up.

But if we're going to have a culture that is more loving and safe for abuse victims, we're going to have to embrace sometimes things not making any sense. We're going to have to embrace the fact that sometimes we see a snake when what we're looking at is a penis. We have to sometimes suspend our desire to understand everything to allow for the reality that some things are deeply confusing.

We owe it to the people around us who might be in abusive situations, but we also owe it to ourselves. The world is a scary and messed up place sometimes. No matter who you are you might find yourself in an abusive situation and if we don't give ourselves some grace we're ultimately going to make it harder to see through the "mist," to get to the truth, and to start to process and heal.



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