

ALSO BY REBECCA TRAISTER

All the Single Ladies:

Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation

Big Girls Don't Cry:

The Election That Changed Everything for American Women

GOOD

AND

MAD

**THE REVOLUTIONARY POWER OF
WOMEN'S ANGER**

REBECCA TRAISTER

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CHAPTER THREE

GOLLATERAL DAMAGE

When I thought about my own history of having been harassed, I first recalled the restaurant manager who instructed me to keep my blouse unbuttoned as I served pizzas with fried eggs on top in high school, about the manager at Bruegger's Bagels who'd rub his dick against my ass as he passed me setting out the cream cheeses in the morning. I've never had a job in which there wasn't a resident harasser, but in my postcollege life, I believed I'd stayed out of his crosshairs.

Perhaps, in the story I'd told myself, it was because I was never wowed by powerful men, sensing on some visceral level that they were mostly full of shit. I had gravitated toward female mentors instead. But even given my wariness of Important Men, as a young woman I had had trouble *truly* believing that members of the opposite sex could be as cartoonishly grotesque as they sometimes were, even as I aged and acquired evidence.

I once heard that a choking person reflexively leaves the room, embarrassed for others to see her gasping for breath. I have no idea if that's true, but it's how I've dealt with harassment by men outside the workplace. Once on the subway, the man next to me wound his hand under my thigh and between my legs, and I sat there debating whether or not to stand up or

scream because *I didn't want to embarrass him on a full train*. That's why, when an important writer took me to coffee, offering to help me find a new job, and asked if I'd ever fantasized about fucking a married man, I simply laughed maniacally, as if he'd just made a *joke* about a sixty-five-year-old man who suggests to a twenty-five-year-old woman that she fuck him during a coffee that was supposed to be about professional mentorship.

Once, when I was running down a sidewalk to hail a taxi in the pouring rain, an older, expensively dressed white guy had cut me off and jumped in; as he'd closed the door and just before it drove off, he looked at me through the window of the cab, put two fingers to his mouth and wagged his tongue, the gesture meant to suggest *cunnilingus*, grinning meanly at me as he sped off. I'd just stood there, and then spent the next ten minutes—or maybe it was ten years—imagining all the better ways I could have responded, wishing that I'd given him the finger, or better yet, laughed at him. I thought of that anonymous man frequently during the fall of 2017. Bizarrely, the most gleefully punitive thoughts I entertained were toward him: I actively imagined him having been professionally humiliated and disgraced.

I thought about him again at a party at which a former colleague, *Slate's* book critic Laura Miller, speaking of #metoo, recalled to me how badly men had reacted to the 1991 film *Thelma & Louise*, a gorgeous, flawed paean to women's fury. She remembered them being particularly upset by the scene in which the two heroines-turned-renegades blow up the oil tanker of a truck driver who'd wagged his tongue at them just as my dapper nemesis had at me. The scene was a perfect illustration of the fluid combustibility of women's rage, in the context of the film and the #metoo moment: about how women's fury at having experienced violent rape became murderous but also capacious, spilling over to crap husbands, lecherous truck drivers, all the men who'd ever treated them as objects. I'd been a teenager when I'd seen the film in theaters, but Laura had been an adult, and she recalled to me the scene of their blowing up the truck as one of the most exhilarating and cathartic moments she'd experienced in a movie theater, and how utterly terrified the men she'd known had been by it.

"But my feeling," she told me, smiling and shrugging, "was just, 'hey,

“don’t go like this”—and here she imitated the tongue-wagging—“to women, and you won’t have to worry about us blowing up your oil tanker. It’s really simple!”

At one of my early and formative workplaces, there had been a textbook harasser: a high-on-the-food-chain, late-night direct-messenger who propositioned and sometimes slept with female subordinates, who could be vindictive if turned down, and who’d undertake elaborate, misogynistic pranks, including sending provocative emails under another staffer’s name. One of the preyed-upon women was older than I: talented, glamorous, and definitely not game. She recalled to me in 2017 how she had initially believed that she could ride it out, but instead had been undone by her bewilderment and humiliation at having being played for a fool, for a *girl*. She’d quit after about a year at the company.

I remembered having watched her treatment, appalled, almost disbelieving that something this outrageous could happen. Yet I also remembered not wanting to get too close to her, as if her status as quarry might be catching. I remembered hearing company honchos say that they were well aware that they had a “walking lawsuit” in our midst. Even then, it struck me that the concern was for the potential tarring of the institution, not for the women who were suffering within it.

That harasser didn’t sexually pursue me, but he did endeavor to undermine me. When I began dating a slightly older colleague, my direct supervisor (a married man on whom I had a fierce and never-required crush, in part because it was safe; he had been a model mentor) pulled me aside to let me know that other people at the office—i.e., the Harasser—had been spreading rumors about how my work ideas were being fed to me by my boyfriend, trying to intimate that I was attempting to sleep my way to the top.

Just a few years ago, I was at another job. A new boss had been installed and wanted to hire the Harasser from my old workplace; I told him I would not work in the same office as that man. I was on maternity leave; he promised that the hire was only temporary, that the Harasser would be gone by the time I returned. And he was. But soon after I got back, the office’s youngest women began recounting to me that in the few months the

Harasser had been in place, he’d crept them out and sent them off-color, middle-of-the-night DMs. I had made a stand on my own behalf—I would not work with that man!—and yet had failed to consider or protect my less powerful associates.

So, no, I had never been serially sexually harassed. But the stink got on me anyway. I was implicated. We all are, our professional contributions weighed on scales of fuckability and willingness to go along, to be good sports, to not be humorless scolds or office gorgons; our achievements chalked up to male affiliation—the boyfriend who supposedly supplies you with ideas or the manager who was presumed to have taken you under his wing because he wanted to get inside your pants. We can rebuff the harasser; we can elect not to fuck the boss; we can be lucky enough to escape being targeted or directly punished. But in a world where men hold inordinate power, we were still in bed with the guy.

When I wrote about my own experiences, I struggled internally about whether to name the Harasser at my former job. I decided not to, largely because I understood something about how things had turned out. In a rare outcome, I—along with some of the women he pestered—had, in that moment, more power than he did. As Caitlin Flanagan would put it, in a piece that expressed anxiety about the perceived excesses and risks of #metoo, the women who were naming names were “temporarily powerful.” She was right, we were. He was, as far as I knew, not in charge of any young women. And so I decided, in consultation with former colleagues, not to identify him.

But here was a crucial reason that he’d behaved so brazenly and badly for so long: He did not consider that the women he had tortured, much less the young woman who’d been mutely and nervously watching his performance and trying to steer clear of him, might one day have greater power than he did, however temporary it might be. He hadn’t considered this because in a basic way, he had not thought of us as his equals.

That made me angry too.

COOL GIRLS OF THE SUNKEN PLACE

My own reckoning got me close to one of the most complicated mind-fucks of them all: the recognition of how women, all of us, really, had participated in, were ourselves implicated in, this system.

After Leon Wieseltier lost his post at a new magazine after the exposure of his decades as a harasser, I heard from many friends and former colleagues who were pained about the situation. "He was, really, my champion," one woman told me. "All these things about him are true, but it is simultaneously true that if you were on his good side, you felt special—protected, cared for, like he believed in you and wanted you to succeed." In a profession where far too few women find that kind of support from powerful men, Wieseltier's mentorship had felt like a prize.

But many of even his most conflicted former admirers admitted that the stories about him—reportedly thanking women for wearing short skirts, kissing colleagues against their will, threatening to tell the rest of the company he was fucking a subordinate if she displeased him—had convinced them that sacking Wieseltier was the correct choice. They were sad for him, for his family, but acknowledged to me that he should not be in charge of women. It had left some of them reexamining how they had excused his conduct, worked around it. "I got so much from him intellectually and emotionally, but I wonder if part of it was because I was game," said one woman, "and what's the cost of that?"

Not all women who had played along with their bosses expressed shame or guilt; some spoke of it with pride. "Men have their fraternities and golf games to get ahead. Why shouldn't I have used the advantage of my sexuality to my benefit? God, what else was I supposed to do?" said one woman in her early fifties.

And then there were the many women who said nothing at all, or if they did speak, spoke up on behalf of the men who were being called out, criticized, or accused. In the *New York Times*, the writer Daphne Merkin described how her "feminist friends" of all ages had been whispering about women angry at harassment, "Grow up, this is real life" and "What ever

happened to flirting?" Merkin argued that "stripping sex of eros isn't the solution"—again, mistaking the moment as being about objecting to erotic fun, not inequality.

Several of these women seemed to view their critiques of the #metoo movement as transgressive and dangerous; in her dissenting piece, Katie Roiphe claimed to be channeling the terrified whispers of friends afraid that they'd be the victims of violent feminist retribution should they dare to bring nuance to the conversation. Merkin framed the #metoo movement as reliant on a kind of "political correctness" that stifled dissent.

In Merkin's and Roiphe's view, they were the brave outsiders, heretics storming the feminist battlements. They were wrong on a couple of levels, including in their claim the #metoo conversation had been one-dimensional and unnuanced: all of it, including pieces by the most radical feminist critics of harassment, including Shitty Media Men list creator Moira Donegan, had been full of contradiction, self-doubt, ambivalence, anxiety, and worry. #metoo had produced some of the richest and most complex feminist writing I'd ever read. It was also simply a lie that the voices of dissent had been muffled: these women, along with plenty of other #metoo critics (some of whom were also #metoo proponents! Because the conversation was varied and self-interrogating!), had been published in major magazines and newspapers, given the same real estate the #metoo reporters and opinion writers had been given.

But more crucially, the ideas that Roiphe and Merkin were presenting as transgressive and edgy objection were anything but. What they were serving up, in the guise of concerned feminist critique, was in fact a giant helping of white patriarchal justification. They were simply giving voice to the same arguments and defenses that had quelled broad objection to a culture of harassment and denigration up until that moment. And in doing so, as women, they were performing a valuable service on behalf of the system in which they had risen, and specifically on behalf of the powerful men whose power they were protecting.

These women could say things that would, and did, sound defensive coming from men: that the anger of the #metoo-ers was hysterical and vicious, that men's incursions on women's bodies were natural and normal; they could be the women who assured men that they *liked* being treated as

men wanted to treat them. They did men's work of confusing groping for eros, and workplace coercion for flirtation.

Women who are willing to defend white patriarchy and its abuses—usually women with proximity to powerful men and the chance to gain from it, and who are therefore themselves often white—have historically found reward from those powerful men, in the form of sexual or romantic attention, marital alliances, as well as jobs and stature, in exchange for their defense of the very power structure from which they benefit.

Part of the defense they've offered has long been the reassurance that whatever *other* women are angry at the powerful men about isn't quite real, or justified, or rational. Part of it is modeling cheerful and affectionate allegiance to those men, appreciation for their behaviors as natural and even exciting in their unreconstructed adherence to old masculine norms.

Perhaps the most popular iteration of the woman who makes herself more valuable to patriarchy by adhering to its every expectation for femininity, and distancing herself from other kinds of women who challenge it, is the figure of the "cool girl." The Cool Girl is a type of woman, imagined nearly uniformly as young and white, who raises no querulous objection to—and indeed embraces—masculine norms, conforming to a kind of ideal femininity imagined by men to best suit and support male dominance. The best-known literary description of the Cool Girl is from *Gone Girl*, Gillian Flynn's novel about women's rage turned psychopathic. In it, Flynn's narrator describes how being called a Cool Girl is "the defining compliment" from men, and entails being a "hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping." Crucially, she continues, "Cool Girls never get angry . . . and let their men do whatever they want. Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl!"

But where the Cool Girl has been presumed to be in it for personal—often sexual or romantic—affirmation from men, there was another version of this figure who emerged during #metoo: the women, many of them older and professionally powerful themselves, who spoke out in defense of the men who were being accused of assault. In France, a group

of women, including the actress Catherine Deneuve, wrote a petition defending men's "right to bother" from the incursions of #metoo and its French sister, #balancetonporc (expose your pig). Deneuve's petition explicitly distanced herself from the kind of woman who would object to sexual harassment: "As women we do not recognize ourselves in this feminism, which beyond denouncing the abuse of power, takes on a hatred of men and sexuality."

Less aggressively antifeminist, but still troubling, was the public performance of support for retired NBC anchor Tom Brokaw after a former NBC reporter, Linda Vester, told reporters that Brokaw had come to her hotel room and tried to kiss her against her will in the 1990s. Vester had corroborated her tale with contemporaneous diary accounts and the word of a friend who said she'd spoken to her on the night of the alleged encounter. Her story was in fact just a small part of a far larger *Washington Post* piece about a male-dominated culture at the news network that had been home to Matt Lauer and Mark Halperin; yet no one was calling for Brokaw to be fired. But the day after the story broke, a letter circulated, signed by sixty-four women, many of them prominent NBC figures including Andrea Mitchell, Mika Brzezinski, and Rachel Maddow, assuring the world that "Tom has treated each of us with fairness and respect. He has given each of us opportunities for advancement and championed our successes throughout our careers."

The letter was mysterious in a couple of ways: the spate of #metoo stories should have put to rest the idea that man's good treatment of some women assures that he has treated all women well. Many of the same men who'd been great mentors to women had also harassed or assaulted women. And while their letter didn't directly defend Brokaw against Vester's claim, it certainly acted as a suppressant to any *more* women who might want to come forward with her own story about Brokaw to corroborate Vester's. Why risk crossing a man that these powerful, admirable women—*Rachel Maddow*?!—had taken such pains to stand alongside in solidarity?

But the letter was clarifying in certain ways. It made explicit what had been implicit in much of the internal feminist criticism of #metoo: that some of the accused men's staunchest female defenders were defending in

part their own ascension within the system that had permitted the men to be abusive. The appreciation of the man in question hinged on women's experiences of having been personally offered opportunities for advancement by him; they owed him. Never mind that this same power—the chance that he might champion her, and that his ability to offer women at the network opportunities for advancement—was exactly what Vester understood, what she said kept her from barring him from her hotel room, or crossing him earlier in her career by telling people what had happened there or filing a complaint.

My friends and I, including Irin Carmon, who had made the “trust no one” reference to *Get Out*, began to describe female defenders of powerful men as Women of the Sunken Place, a reference via that same film to their inability to resist the powerful pull of white patriarchy. It was just a dumb joke, memed in other contexts on social media, but I thought about it a lot. Lots of people talked about Weinstein and some of the other guys as monsters, but the real horror-movie terror wasn't about individual Freddies or Jasons. It was the revelation of systemic menace: that everyone around you was in on the threat.

Plenty of people, including me, initially understood the divides between some feminists on the usefulness and righteousness of #metoo as breaking along generational lines—between the angry young women and a more sanguine older generation. On one side of this divide, I thought for a while, were women who had come of age before Anita Hill's testimony against Clarence Thomas, who had perhaps been raised to assume they'd encounter harassment and had resolved to tough it out, whose own desires and turn-ons had been shaped by assumptions about power and sex, masculinity and femininity, and were very different from what younger women wanted and assumed them to be. To this contingent, younger women's complaints could sound hand-wringingly excessive: What did those girls expect? Wasn't part of the thrill of a heterosexual encounter tied to domination and power differentials?

But here was a sharp irony: as a feminist journalist, I'd for years been interrogated by older women about what was wrong with young women: *Why weren't they angry?* Why didn't they identify with feminism? Why

were they complacent? Why didn't they want to go further toward changing the world?

Well, now those young women had gotten angry. And some older women were rearing back in horror at the force of their rage, and at the fact that a lot of that rage involved interrogating the whole system within which their feminist elders had risen. This moment was asking not just men but the pioneering women who'd succeeded alongside them to reckon with what had *not* been changed by feminism, how much gendered inequity older feminists had decided to live with, to participate in.

In other words, what the feminists who'd long yearned for a wave of youthful fury had not expected was that some of that fury might be directed toward them, or at least toward the men who had become their friends, lovers, husbands, and colleagues; that a fresh generation of enraged activists would be looking straight at them, their feminist foremothers—the generation from which younger women had run for decades, imagining them to have been wicked old man-hating hysterics—and pretty much accusing them of not having been angry enough.

But the generational explanation for division over harassment wasn't quite right: for one thing, there were plenty of older women cheering the movement on with joy and satisfaction, and plenty of young women who were wary and put off by its intensity. Polling would confirm that there *wasn't* much of a difference of opinion on #metoo dependent on age.

What was true was that the skeptical intrafeminist voices that had been in a position to get blared by cable TV networks and in newspapers and magazines, the women who were prominent enough to serve as useful critics of the movement, were women who had achieved a certain notoriety; accrued a degree of power themselves, had benefited from the system they were now prepared to defend against #metoo's wrathful censure. That system had been run by the men whose honor they were now upholding; their defenses were inherently defenses of the institutions in which they themselves had flourished. And some number of those women were older, simply because by definition the most successful had been at it longer.

And to be fair, for many of those women, women who'd spent years breaking ground in their industry, there'd been plenty of evidence that

there were certain behaviors, certain realities of male-dominated culture and institutions, about which they simply had not ever been *allowed* to be angry.

I'd felt that, as a young woman, wide-eyed at the realization that this kind of thing—coercion, harassment, assault—happened to lots of people, regularly, and that no one else around me in the adult world seemed to treat it like it was worth objecting to, making a big deal about. In the *New York Times*, film critic Manohla Dargis had written about how, since reading about the women who claimed that Harvey Weinstein had raped them, she'd been thinking about her own experiences, including a time that a film director had lurched at her during an interview and she'd simply kept talking, calmly. "In the moment . . . he was just another man trying to wield power over a woman. It wasn't traumatic—it was *ordinary*." Dargis continued, observing that it is "the perverse, insistent, matter-of-factness of male sexual predation and assault—of men's power over women" and "this banality of abuse" that she understood, now "haunts the movie industry"; the revelation of which had given way to her realization that now was the "time for rage."²⁴

Irin Carmon, who reported two *Washington Post* pieces about Charlie Rose's harassment of more than thirty young female employees, said that she had been thinking a lot about how when she'd arrived at Harvard as a young feminist undergraduate, she had been aghast at the elite all-male final clubs there. She had refused to attend events at the clubs for her first two years of college. But with time, after years of watching those around her behave as though the existence and exclusions of the clubs were normal, *ordinary*, just part of college life, she had surmised that she was the crazy one and acquiesced to their presence, eventually giving in and going to parties there.

When, in the years after her graduation, students began protesting the clubs in earnest, leading Harvard's then president, Drew Faust, to announce a plan to impose penalties on those who joined them in 2017, Irin's reaction had been to think, "Wow, I didn't know I'd been allowed to be angry about that."

Irin's perplexity, as a teenager, about why more women weren't angry

about things that it seemed they had every right and reason to be angry about, is discernible in a question she asked as a freshman journalist at the *Harvard Crimson*, while interviewing visiting speaker Andrea Dworkin three years before Dworkin's death.

"How do you save people who don't think very much is wrong?" Irin had inquired of Dworkin.

Dworkin's response had been prophetic. "That's where first-person testimony of women has been so important," she'd said. "Because the mainstream will say 'Oh, that doesn't happen,' and then a group of women will say, 'Well, it happened to me!'"²⁵

Yeah. Me too.

That is what the movement had done. It had offered women the chance to hear from others that it had happened to them too, and that they too were angry, and that they too could say it aloud.

Kristen Meinzer, the radio producer who'd leveled allegations at WNYC's John Hockenberry, said in a conversation conducted by the *Cut*, that she felt "fortunate" for the women who'd first broken their silence on Weinstein, who'd helped create a world "where we're allowed to be angry finally." She went on, "I feel that for the longest time, we weren't allowed to be furious. And my god, shouldn't we *all* be enraged? And I don't just mean the women in this room. But shouldn't everybody be?"

Yes, everyone should be. But it wasn't that simple. It had mattered that the women whose experiences had finally stirred a nation to feminist fury, the women who had given other women—white women—*permission* to finally recognize and express their anger had themselves been wealthy, white, famous, beautiful actresses who'd first gone on the record against Weinstein. It mattered, structurally, that they had had the social, professional, and economic ability to risk crossing their powerful tormentor; that they had had access to the media and platforms and that their power—derived from a combination of their beauty, fame, and in most cases, whiteness—ensured that they had a hold on public sympathy.

The fact that *they* of all people had figured out that they were allowed to be angry and had voiced that anger had been critical in helping other

women recognize their own fury. For years, women—and again, especially white women, *especially* economically privileged white women—had been assured that there was no reason for them to be legitimately furious about anything having to do with gender inequity: not about social clubs, not about sexual harassment, not about lack of representation in politics.

But as with Hillary Clinton's defeat at the hands of Donald Trump, there was something about the recognition that even these powerful women—women who had “won” at white patriarchy—still sustained harm, that laid bare the truth of it. If *they* had been discriminated against, had been assaulted, had lost jobs because of the bad behavior of men more powerful than they, if *they* had something to be pissed about, then perhaps other women—toiling in cubicles and restaurants and on factory floors, working multiple jobs without equal pay or a humane minimum wage or paid leave or affordable health care—weren't in fact delusional in their suspicions that they had something to be mad about too.

These sleek, beautiful movie stars and the powerful establishment presidential candidate had given ordinary women the permission to explode with the rage they'd been pressured to keep inside for so long. From some angles, the original Harvey accusers were benevolent emissaries, sent to set loose the rage of the masses.

Except, of course, the fact that it took these privileged white women's stories to get anyone to take sexual power abuse seriously also made them emblematic of the stark, maddening inequalities in place when it came to which kinds of women's stories were of interest, and which kinds of women were readily believed.

“You're a farmworker? A lady who cleans offices? You're a prostitute or an immigrant? You're not going to tell your story,” said one Democratic lawmaker to me in exasperation in the fall of 2017. Lin Farley, the woman who'd coined the term “sexual harassment” to begin with, had agreed. “If it's Angelina Jolie, it makes headlines,” she told the *Washington Post*. “If it's a woman on the assembly line at Grayson Heat Control, she doesn't make headlines and it goes unnoticed and unseen.”²⁶

These omissions were particularly galling given that it had been black women's willingness to get mad and press for change that had created

sexual harassment law to begin with, starting with the cases brought by Carmita Wood and Mechelle Vinson and Paulette Barnes and Diane Williams. These women had been first to engage a legal fight in part because they had applied the logic of race-based discrimination law to sex discrimination. “Racism may well provide the clarity to see that sexual harassment is neither a flattering gesture nor a misguided social overture but an act of intentional discrimination that is insulting, threatening, and debilitating,” Kimberle Crenshaw has written.²⁷

It had been Anita Hill who had made the term sexual harassment a familiar one, and other black women—Angela Wright, Rose Jourdain, Sukari Hardnett—who had been willing to corroborate her story, not that the Senate Judiciary Committee ever asked. It had been Tarana Burke, a lifelong advocate for the rights and health of women of color, who had first coined the term “me too” *precisely because* she wanted to let women, “particularly young women of color, know that they are not alone.”²⁸

And yet, the earliest iterations of the contemporary #metoo wave were about exposing abusers of predominantly white women, men in white-dominated industries—movies, television, art, restaurants, politics—while too little attention was paid to factory workers, tipped employees, women in the service industries, and low-wage employees, among the most economically precarious, therefore the most vulnerable to harassment, and also far more likely to be nonwhite.