The Girl and The Judge

The night before was actually lovely as hell. We strolled around Tribeca and the financial district, taking in the evening. We ate the best hand pulled noodles around on my favorite tiny bricked street in Chinatown with plastic tables and chairs and then I steamed the clothes I'd deemed court worthy two days before and settled in for a weird, restless hotel sleep.

The next morning I could feel my own blood pulsing. I awoke too early and grabbed a quick workout, trying to quell my clammy hands and racing heart, the sickness in my stomach churning and '*You're fine. You're ok. You're fine*' running on loop in my head. Frankly, I was annoying myself. Pull it together.

I took a shower, pieced my grown up court outfit together and tried to shake the inappropriate first day of school feeling I had on a day I'd be telling twelve strangers and a judge the most demoralizing thing that ever happened to me. Same as fifth grade, really.

He walked me up the intimidating set of marble stairs at the court house and handed me to my ride or die. She'd be taking me the rest of the way. *Girlclub* when we're taking down a predator. We smiled our way into the building, thanked the guards for going through our purses like good little girls and made our way to a room I was shocked we all fit in. I'd been warned by my superhero lawyer about how tight the room was, but this felt downright insulting. I'd have to look the sixty year old man sitting on my lap right in the face and tell him about the other sixty year old man who assaulted me. I'd have to tell him all the things he did. And how he demolished the already delicate sense of self respect my post teenage brain had all those years ago. I'd have to look him in the face and hope he believed me. Please believe me, old white guy.

"They stick the whores in the back rooms," he said as he climbed into my lap. Makes sense.

I searched the room for other *Girlclub* members and managed to find a few in the jury I thought might be on my side, sent them *fuck this guy* vibes and hoped for the best.

And then we sat.

And we listened.

And we clawed the arm rests and gritted our teeth and turned to each other inhaling, flaring our nostrils and muttering '*piece of shit*' under our breath. And we held hands. For six hours.

Then it was my turn.

I approached the bench and raised my right hand and swore to a room full of strangers I'd tell them the truth. Then I looked over at the giant picture they'd propped up on a sandwich board of

who I was in October of 2008 and my mouth went completely dry. What an absolute child. Oh my god. Look at her. She was gorgeous and free. I was gorgeous and free.

And then I started crying, and I couldn't stop. It was like a volcano. I cried for her like she'd died and I'd just realized it at that exact moment. I cried for that girl who thought she had everything under control. I cried for her self esteem, I cried for her confidence, I cried for how many times she stared in the mirror and truly hated every inch of herself. I cried for the things she thought she knew and everything she didn't. And then I cried for the me in the room. I could see myself begging the twelve strangers sitting on my lap to understand how this all could've happened. I could see how desperate I was for them to believe me and stop judging me and I was so ashamed. I can feel you judging me. It's literally your job.

It had been almost twenty years at this point. I'd processed it over and over with my therapist, I'd written about it, I'd *put it behind me*, as they say. I truly thought I'd walk through the story I wrote in my journal years ago, the abuse, the mind fucking, the tearing down of what I thought I knew, the paralyzing of my inner compass… and go on with my life. Believe me, don't believe me, whatever. I'm good in my book, I know what happened.

But instead… I erupted. I cried and cried and begged them to deem me worthy again, to understand and to relieve me of it all. Please take this away. It was the most desperate and ashamed and disgusting I'd ever felt in my life and I couldn't believe it was coming out of me so violently. I screamed and wailed and begged myself for forgiveness through their pathetic looking eyes and gasped for breath and felt the steaming tears pour over my face… and then it was over.

Thank you Adrienne, you can step down.

Oh. Okay. Thank you. I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry.

I wish I could say I felt a huge surge of relief. I wish I could say I exhaled for the first time in twenty years, but I didn't. I just stood up shell shocked, shaking, looking for someone, anyone to nod in validation. To reassure me that we weren't all going to die from what I just did for thirty minutes. Surely, this would kill us all.

We didn't die though. We were all still there, shaken but alive. Uncomfortable, but alive. Soft, but very alive…breathing and stunned. And when the judge said "I think we all need a break for a minute", I thought for just a second that we all might be in *Girlclub* now. Even me, maybe for the first time. I headed back to my seat, eyes swollen, avoiding their shocked gaze, praying I could will this entire day to go away. They all sat motionless for a second, for eternity.

Then they took a deep breath, looked right at me and said 'Guess it doesn't really heal all wounds, does it?' as they climbed out of my lap and into another woman's.