

## *Sophia Veltfort*

### **Man Accused**

Sully knew her. They'd hooked up sophomore year of college, on and off for a few weeks when the leaves burned deepest orange, and every step on campus shattered a thousand leafy veins. Jaclyn, Jax. She'd had a wonderful softness. Everything about her had been inviting to cup.

"What a boss," someone was saying. "Was she always like that?"

"She wasn't in a society. She kept her head down."

"She did that women's stuff, though. Sued her school."

Sully tried to remember what she'd done on campus and with whom she'd hung around. Maybe the school paper. Had she worked on a play once? Maybe stage-managed? She'd been hard to pin down. He thought of the first time they'd kissed, the way she'd eyed him after, her lips slightly crooked, her eyebrows cocked. She could've had all the experience in the world or none of it, so inscrutable was her look of gentle mockery, as though always she were waiting for him to reveal himself, as though it were entertainment enough just to watch the world unfold.

"What's the guy's deal?"

"Nobody knows. I mean, she does. But it's like the immaculate conception: the immaculate rape."

At this Sully looked up. Jax had been what?

"It's literally the opposite of the immaculate conception."

"It was immaculate: no rape, just attempted rape. And also a conception—not of a human, that we know of—but it spawned this whole movement."

Sully moved to get a clearer view of the laptop on which the interview was playing. He had missed the beginning. He had come over only for a bottle opener, which he spotted, now, among the empty Solo Cups and beer cans surrounding the computer. He picked it up.

"Immaculate,' you know, is more than a litmus test for Did Sex

Happen. It means free from fault, free from error. Is attempted rape either of those?”

“Calling what happened to her ‘attempted rape’ isn’t ‘immaculate,’ I’ll tell you that much,” someone else said. “I mean, Jesus, if that’s what constitutes attempted rape, who here hasn’t been?”

“So you know what happened?”

“Does it matter?” someone asked. “Move on. Think of what she’s doing. It’s bigger than any individual experience.”

Someone pulled up a different interview. In another dress, in another room, again Jax spoke. Sully realized two things: Jaclyn was killing it in her interviews, and she was talking about him.

He’d met Jaclyn at a pregame one Friday night just after fall midterms, sophomore year. Sully had had a good morning. After weeks of trying to get his footing in a seminar, he had launched. He had asked the guest speaker not just a great question, but the greatest question. The whole class had watched it burn bright as a hot coal in the speaker’s palm. Something about identifying the longevity of credit bubbles. Just the keenness of the question might have been enough for Sully, but to be seen and recognized—that was *kleos*. Sully was a little ashamed of how much that recognition buoyed him, but his joy was untouchable. He had it within him to do great things. No more so than before seminar, maybe, but in the eternal contest between the bright, disciplined (funny, kind) version of himself who succeeded, and the slovenly, cowardly version who perpetually fell short—well, evidence had surfaced in favor of the former, and it was a relief.

So when he found himself commanding the interest and prompting the laughter of this pretty girl with grey eyes and an ass that seemed made just for him, it felt like cosmic confirmation that he had switched, however tenuously, to one of those smiled-upon tracks where coin tosses always landed on heads. Not that his previous tracks had been lousy. He’d never lacked for friends or girls, and school, like most things, had come easily enough. But he wanted to rise with momentum. If he could make it unthinking, this unwavering propulsion up, then he might just become that person who did.

A girl watched him narrowly as Jaclyn's interview played. She did not look away when his eyes met hers. Above her fleecy brown hair—the kind Sully's mother always called princess hair, wistfully—two long white strands stood apart.

"I'd ask if I could buy you a drink," Sully told her, "but they're here for the taking. Can I open you a beer?"

"That's your response to this?" In her expression Sully sensed something more intimate than curiosity or repugnance. "Is this how male privilege does denial?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Okay," the girl said. "Could I have that?"

She pointed to his hand, which Sully saw still held the opener, warm and unused.

He got Bottle Opener Girl's name and number later that weekend from a friend. It turned out her name was Rona, and she was getting her PhD at Columbia. Sully called her during his lunch break the next day.

"Oh, it's you," Rona said. "Listen, I wish you hadn't called."

"I was hoping we could get lunch."

"You don't mean you and me?"

"Or coffee."

"Definitely not. Why would either of us want that?"

"It would mean a lot to me, Rona."

"Can you guess what means a lot to me?"

"Come on, Rona. One coffee. I'd really like to talk to you."

Rona sat behind a small round table in the rear corner of the coffee shop, her back to the wall. It was the seat Sully would have chosen, the position from which one was least likely to be taken unawares.

"I like it here," she told him. "Now it will be sullied with Sully."

"You've been waiting to say that."

"It just came to me. It's true, though." She closed the book she'd been reading and put it on her lap. It was an old library hardcover

with no dust jacket, the exposed canvas a deep, blank blue. “You know that line, Oh that this too, too something flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew?”

“I’ve read *Hamlet*, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“There’s a debate about whether that word’s ‘solid’ or ‘sullied.’ The Quarto and Folio each have it different.”

“Huh.”

“What do you think?”

“About what Shakespeare wrote, or what Hamlet would be thinking?”

“Both, if those are your questions.”

Sully shrugged. “Couldn’t say.”

“Why differentiate the questions?”

“I like to know what I’ve been asked.” He looked around the coffee shop. “Why did you ask?”

“It seemed appropriate.”

“In terms of my *sully*ing Jaclyn?”

“I hate the word ‘sully’ in the context of sex. You should get a coffee, by the way, or a pastry, if we’re going to sit here.” She sipped from a porcelain mug.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked her.

“Thanks, no.”

There was a line at the counter, or a hold up, as a guy in hiking boots and a moth-eaten sweater deliberated between the Napoleon and the cream puff. The nun behind him watched with frank appreciation as he bent to look at the desserts. Rona, too, was bent forward, a slender mechanical pencil between her fingers as she read. There was tenderness in her bearing toward the library book. Sully thought of a Raphael virgin and child. That she should think ill of him unjustly—that to her he was all villain, thanks to Jax’s construction—brought an unexpected pang.

A tap on his shoulder called his attention back to the counter. He ordered a coffee and strudel. Rona did not immediately look up from her book.

“I didn’t do it, you know,” he said.

“Do what?”

“Anything. Jesus. I sure as hell didn’t force myself on her, or try to. I didn’t lay an unwelcome finger on her.”

“Ah. That’s what this is.”

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to think. I can’t—”

A waitress brought his coffee and strudel. Sully smiled his thanks and waited for her to leave, but she took her time with the silverware and napkins.

“Strudel’s good,” the waitress confided. She laid out two forks. “You two enjoy.”

Sully collected his thoughts as the waitress left. “What I can’t work out is whether Jaclyn believes this bullshit story. Because if she does—if, despite the nothing that happened, she feels injured, somehow—I would be sorry for that. More than sorry.” Sully felt moved by his own feeling, or Jaclyn’s. He tried to read Rona’s face; it gave him nothing. “But if she doesn’t—if this is somehow, for some reason, fabricated—I don’t get it. I can’t work it out.”

It occurred to Sully that he faced a stacked deck with Rona. Off course she was on Team Jax. But he had not come for a hearing.

“Please,” he said, gesturing to the strudel and the extra fork. Rona ignored him.

“Are you asking me?”

Sully nodded.

“Whether she’s got it wrong by accident or on purpose, is what you’re asking? In effect—crybaby or cunt?”

“Whether she’s acting in good faith.”

“What kind of agenda would bad faith look like?”

“I’m asking.”

“Why ask me?”

“You knew me, at the party. I thought she must have said something to you.”

In fact Sully had other reasons to suspect Rona might know. In reading up on Jaclyn, he had quickly come across Rona, whose

name appeared beside Jaclyn's in the byline of a number of opinion pieces they'd published together. They were both at Columbia, Rona a grad student, Jaclyn studying law. For all Sully could tell, Rona was Jaclyn's silent counterpart, the unseen depth of Jaclyn's bright, publicized moon. She wrote sharp, crisp sentences. Surely she could be reasoned with; surely she would hear him. He hoped so. He did not like this woman thinking he was what Jax claimed.

Sully was not, Sully happened to know, a bad guy. He'd been right, that day he met Jaclyn: he had it in him to do good things. He'd continued to show that. He might not have gotten the fellowships he'd wanted, but still he'd gotten to England, full ride. He'd gotten distinction on his master's. The article into which he'd turned his dissertation had been accepted for publication. His star was inarguably on the rise.

He hadn't sold out, as he could have, to consulting or investment banking. He'd gone to the Fed. At first he'd worried about having only a master's, that the PhDs would out-quant him. For months he arrived first in the office and was the last one to leave. He worked hard. When his boss saw he could turn a good sentence, she noted it, and when a family emergency pulled her speechwriter out of commission, it fell to Sully to step up. It turned out he had a knack for anticipating how Wall Street would react to the Fed's moves.

This thing with Jaclyn had no place in his life. She hadn't named him publicly, but she could. Clearly she'd said something to Rona, at a minimum. Even if she hadn't, and Rona had put things together on her own, so too could others. This was not a misunderstanding to be left undisturbed.

He had to see Jaclyn. He'd told Rona that, thinking she'd resist, but she hadn't. Both she and Jaclyn would be at a campus protest in a few days. The Sexual Misconduct Panel had pronounced a not-guilty verdict on a recent case, and the college dean had, inexplicably, accepted it. (So those were the rape trials Sully had read about, conducted in the same New England towns that had once hunted witches.) Jaclyn would be speaking. Sully was welcome to come early and help set up.

Sully's next few days were busy. He had to give two presentations and finish a speech. His best intern was out sick with campylobacter, and his second best was not doing great with the extra work. But Sully was understanding. He didn't yell. He didn't make the kid feel dumb. He made sure to be at ease, competent, and bighearted. If there happened to be any grand cosmic ledgers up there, he hoped they saw him as he was and could be.

At the quad, Sully spotted Rona easily. She carried a big white poster-board to the raised stage. To keep the poster from dragging, she held it aloft like a shield. Sully moved to help her, but two undergrads reached her before he did. They nodded vigorously as Rona spoke. The boy took quick notes on his phone.

If Rona's involvement had not struck Sully before, it did now that he saw her here in command. What had she to do with this world of outrage and protest? Did she help out as a favor to Jaclyn? Had something happened to her? He could not see Rona using this as a means to a personal end.

"Hello, Sully."

Whether through stripping down or polishing up, the effect was apparent in her voice and her being: Jaclyn's softness had gone. She had sharpened into something steely and bright. She had coalesced. She had grown up, he supposed.

For a moment he moved to kiss her cheek, as he would have until a week ago. Her smile spread like curtains on a bright new day.

"Jaclyn." He held out his hand, and she shook it.

What threw Sully was that he couldn't gauge who he was in her eyes. Of course one was always jostling with the versions of oneself at play in the imaginations of others, always contending with the projections of whatever fantasies others imposed. One was more of a bro, one less of one; more intellectual; goofier; more or less forgiving of others' weaknesses and faults. But usually Sully could guess his standing, and usually the discrepancy was small enough to be either corrected or enjoyed. With Jaclyn he came up blank. No more could he grasp her

vision of him than could he solidify his sense of her. There was no common footing, not even their shared history, which seemed to have separated into a fray of contrary strands.

They walked away from the quad. Sully found his heart skittering, as though Jaclyn might try to make him something he wasn't, and it was on him to withstand the assault.

Unless, said a quiet, internal voice not unlike Rona's, with a twinge like missing a step on the stairs, unless Jaclyn was not unequivocally wrong. That somewhere he had crossed the slightest of lines. It would not be a big line—of that Sully was certain—but that a faded, dotted line had not been traversed, he could not, in full conscience, be absolutely sure. But that was the thing with sex, with relationships. They were less like calculus than like some quantum tumult. Not all points could be pinned. There were murky borderlands where people fumbled for each other and misplaced themselves, and where the unspoken understanding was that things stood at risk. There was nothing unadulterated in love.

"I saw your interview," Sully said.

"Which one?"

"All of them, now. Just so we're clear—the guy you talk about is me?"

"Don't play stupid with me. You know I don't say anything that's not true."

"Jaclyn. You say I tried to rape you."

"So Rona had it right. You want to know if I'm a whiny little bitch who feels gratuitously traumatized, or if I'm a big nasty bitch, telling stories for some sort of personal gain. You can conceive of no possible alternative."

Rona, Sully could not help but speculate, might here have told him that there were more things in heaven and earth than were dreamt of in his philosophy. But Jaclyn was not Rona, and, anyway, that was not the point.

"Jax." Sully spoke slowly. "Certainly I tried, on a number of occasions, to have sex with you. You tried to have sex with me, too, now

and then. That's how it works, in relationships. That's how it works, period. Trying to have sex with someone is not the same as trying to rape them. Surely you see that. Who are you to tell me how far I would have pushed? And then to condemn me?"

"Tell me—I'm genuinely curious—did it seem like I wanted you after your housemate's play that night? No? Did that not matter?"

Sully saw Jax as she'd lain beside him on those navy blue sheets he'd had sophomore year. He saw her as he'd seen her then: inaccessible and unbending, remote and cold. He felt again the impulse to press harder to reach her. Never had he tried to pull one over her, to sneak something from her she had been unwilling to give. He had just wanted to wake her to him.

She had been awake, though.

Below them, in the quad, Rona knelt on the platform, securing the microphone to its stand. Her hands finished, but she stayed crouched. For a moment, a small frown deepened into something more pained. She shook her head and rose. Sully's heart surged for Rona, of whose private grief he could know nothing, and for himself, that he might be exactly who she thought he was. His eyes filled with tears. Sully moved to touch Jaclyn's hand, but she would have none of it, so he gripped the flat plank of the bench.