

We, Women  
By Shelby Larsen

## We, Women

**Friday, 11:43pm**

We stumble out of bars, laughing. The bouncers tossing us out glare at us until we stumble down to the streets. We try to gain composure momentarily. Once the doors slam shut, however, we flip off the bars and burst out laughing once again. Tears streaming down our faces, we tell one another not to jump up onto the stages next time.

We careen down the streets, dimly lit by intermittent streetlights.

Pulling at our uncomfortable bras, we stop to check ourselves in dark shop windows: reapply lipstick, wipe away smudged mascara, and run fingers through our disheveled hair. Downtowns are quiet except for loud music and yelling heard only when bar doors open to let in or out more drunken souls. Occasional cars pass, rumbling random loose bricks in the roads.

As we continue walking, solid footsteps can be heard behind us. We hold hands and grip our bags tightly before glancing around. Tall, indistinguishable men trail by half a block down the sidewalks. Our heartbeats pick up with the paces of our footsteps.

Despite the red lights, we dash across streets and into the nearest bars. Flashing our IDs, we watch the men walk casually past, paying us no attention. We shove past countless other beautiful, skinny, drunk women to reach the bars. Strangers quickly offer to buy us drinks.

**Monday, 6:54am**

We grab our running shoes and head out our front doors, sit down on our front porches, and take the time to carefully double knot the laces. The sky is still dark, but by the time we get home, it won't be. The mornings are chilly, and we pull our hoods up before putting one earbud in, tucking the other inside our jackets.

Half a mile from home, we realize our phones are dying and we turn off the music to conserve the last fifteen percent of our batteries. We run on the left side of roads as moms and dads taught us when we were children.

As we dive deeper into sparser residential areas, we notice black sedans with tinted windows slowly trailing us. We can't see the drivers, but judging solely by the cars, they are most definitely middle-aged men. We speed up, even though we were pushing ourselves to begin with. We turn at the next blocks, even though they're not part of our normal routes. They follow.

We push ourselves even harder – up and over the edge. Stopping next to curbs, we dry heave over lawns, having eaten nothing yet. Sweat runs down our faces as we struggle to breathe. The cars continue past and pull in front of houses entire blocks away. Women step out of the cars, approach houses, and ring doorbells.

We turn around and jog home.

**Thursday, 4:17pm**

The music blares out our open car windows at stoplights. Our hair moves slightly in the breeze, tickling our noses. To keep it from embedding into our pink lip gloss, we roll our hair up with one hand and lean back, trapping it against the headrests. We glance to the

vehicles on our right as always: bright red trucks. The drivers smile at us; we smile back politely. The lights turn green, and we continue forward, forgetting the drivers.

We don't see the trucks switch into our lanes, two cars behind us.

We don't see the trucks follow us across town.

We don't see the trucks turn into the store parking lots after us.

Parking our cars, we check our makeup in the rearview mirrors before we look up to find the same trucks in the parking spots next to us. Our hearts pound. The men roll down their windows and give us strange, crooked smiles. We consider locking our doors and immediately leaving, but we need groceries, toiletries, cosmetics. Besides, the men could be harmless.

We try not to shake as we step out of our cars. The men try to speak to us, but we can't hear them over the rumbling of their trucks. We acknowledge them with waves and quickly walk to the doors. When we glance back, they're exactly where we left them.

Attempting not to cry in the middle of stores, we text our male friends, our boyfriends. They call back, worried. They offer to come get us. We tell them not yet. Maybe the men with their trucks will be gone by the time we finish our shopping. We try to shrug off the paranoia.

Eggs, toothpaste, makeup wipes. We forget the rest. We check out and approach the automatic doors cautiously. We can't see our cars from inside, so we walk out. Immediately we turn back in once we see the trucks, still parked in the same spot. Frantically, we call our friends back. They're already on their way. We wait nervously between the Redbox and claw machines.

We watch the trucks drive past, but we don't move. They circle the parking lot three times before our friends show up to walk us to our cars. We grab their hands, clinging to them. They offer to follow us home. The trucks are nowhere to be found.

Over a year later we still dream about it.

### **Always**

We lock our doors. We travel in packs. We take self-defense classes. We don't drink too much. We cover up our bodies. We go home early. We avoid eye contact. We pretend to be on our phones. We continually glance behind us. We take the long way home. We remain quiet.

Clutched in between our fingers, keys. Hidden in our purses, pepper spray. Hanging on our lanyards, whistles. Worn on our fingers, heavy rings. Weighing down our bags, tasers. Tucked into our boots, knives. Resting in the back of our throats, screams.