

Mali's Account

I am coming forward with this story to take ownership of an experience that has been plaguing me for months. I am sharing this experience to show solidarity with other survivors and organizers who are consistently being assaulted, undermined, and divided by men. I am sharing it to call out Herve Yves Comeau so that he can no longer use the power he extracts from manipulating organizing spaces and personal relationships to disempower and abuse women. And on a deeper level, I am sharing my experience to name the sexual assault, emotional manipulation, and toxic masculinity I experienced so that women in this community and everywhere can recognize these behaviors in their own lives, recognize the types of people that employ them, and collectively begin to eliminate such toxicity from our communities and relationships. While Herve himself has had to survive amidst institutional and structural systems of racist oppression, we cannot accept that surviving in this racist patriarchy makes a continued cycle of violence inevitable. Anti-racism cannot be achieved without anti-sexism.

Beginning last Fall, my relationship with Herve went from being friendly in communal organizing spaces to a closer personal friendship with him. Herve seemed fun and warm. He and his roommate made their home a welcoming and relaxing space full of humor and laughter, and there was a standing invitation for me to come over after work or on the weekends to hang out, drink, and relax with him and his roommate. The friendship was, in a word, easy. I described our friendship as “bro-y.” I also identify as queer, which both Herve and his roommate knew, and their acknowledgement of my identity gave me additional safety and comfort amidst our friendship. I am now abundantly aware that queerness, however accepted it may seem, is in no way armor against heterosexual violence.

On November 3, 2017, I went to a comedy show with Herve and his roommate. We drank a bit at his house before, went to the comedy show, and met up with another woman who was very intoxicated. Despite plans to go to a bar, we ended up going back to his house after the show. They had said in the car that people were changing and drinking more before going out, but as soon as we got back it became clear that was not going to happen. Herve kept the lights off, turned music on, and began pouring shots.

I said I did not want to take shots or dance, but I was pressured to and I did. Soon, without my realizing, the woman and Herve's roommate had disappeared, and it was just me and Herve in the kitchen - lights still off, music still high, me no longer sober. We danced for a minute while I tried to figure out how to exit. Before I did, Herve pushed me against the wall and kissed me.

I kissed back at first before shaking my head and saying “I don’t want this.” He responded that it seemed like I did and kept kissing me. I again stopped him and said I liked just being friends. He said, “We are still just friends,” and I went to go sit down. He followed me to the chair, kept kissing me there, and then picked me up and held me against the wall to keep kissing me. From there, he carried me into his room and threw me on his bed. He climbed over me, ripped my shirt down and off, and immediately started kissing me everywhere. I again pushed him off and said, “I don’t want to do this.” He said, “Ok, we don’t have to,” stopped for a moment, and then got back on top of me and went back to kissing me. I stopped him and said, “I don’t want to be one of your many conquests,” because I knew from countless conversations how many women he pursued and slept with, our relationship was firmly a friendship, and I was unsure how I had now gotten equated with women he pursued. He said, “You’re not like any other woman. You’ve always been different. We’ve always felt this.” He then named a couple of arbitrary interactions we’d had, including a time we got drinks many months earlier when I barely knew him. He said he felt our connection during all of these times, and insinuated that I led him on and was denying that this “connection” had been building up this whole time. I never wanted any type of romantic or sexual relationship with Herve. In fact, I enjoyed our friendship precisely because I thought I could feel safely non-romantic and not objectified in it. Now, he was painting this new picture of our relationship so clearly and methodically to try to make me doubt myself and believe his alternate version of our relationship over my own reality. The next thing I remember is waking up in just a tank top without my shirt to a kind Uber driver shaking me at my house, saying, “Do you know where you are?” Somehow, I made my way into my own home. Looking back later at my phone, I saw that that night he texted me saying, “Had fun hanging out,” to which I replied, “Me too so drunk please be normal please.” This text has caused me so much shame and humiliation. For months, it haunted me, making me feel pathetic and desperate for his friendship. I realize now it had more to do with fear of confronting reality. It indicates to me so clearly how much I was trying to erase the assault and not acknowledge it for what it was, even less than an hour after it happened.

The next morning I went to a BLM meeting. I was hungover and scared, and I kept getting flashbacks during the meeting. By the end, a BLM organizer approached me and asked me what was wrong. When I asked for a ride to my car, which was outside his house, she pulled the threads together and I told her what had happened. For the following week, she encouraged me to tell our friends and fellow organizers so that at least someone or some group of people could confront him. I could barely hear about this during these moments. I wanted to suppress the whole experience so badly that I couldn’t imagine telling other people what had happened, let alone plan for confronting Herve.

Following the assault, he texted me a few times asking, “What’s up?” or inviting me over; once, he told me how much my friendship and wellbeing meant to him. I did not reply to these messages. But after a week and a half had passed, I knew he needed to be confronted so that other women would

be safe. I still felt incapable of telling anyone else, so I texted him asking him to talk. He asked me to come to his house. We met outside, and he asked if I would go to Price Chopper with him so he could run an errand.

I didn't want to talk on the way over, so he parked in the middle of the Price Chopper parking lot, at night, and that's where I confronted him. Being in the middle of a dark parking lot in his car was intimidating and vulnerable, especially considering what I was about to tell him. Looking back, I think this was intentional on his part, and it worked to portray how nonchalant he felt about the whole experience. I told him what happened was not consensual and not ok. As I explained the things that happened that were wrong, including the multiple examples of my saying no and his ignoring me, he began to slowly and patronizingly talk through each example from his perspective, changing details from my narrative and explaining how, for example, he was only trying to reassure me because I had said I felt like I didn't mean anything to him. I explained to him that nickel-and-diming specifics was traumatic. I explained that if a man ever needs to "reassure" someone into sex, the sex is not consensual, and neither is sex that takes place under the influence of that much alcohol. I explained that if the lines feel blurry, it is not consensual. Consensual sex is never blurry. It doesn't involve convincing, persuasion, reassurance, or blacking out.

I told him I was coming to him with this because I believed he hadn't understood any of it before, because I believed he was a good guy who respected women, because I believed he just didn't yet understand that when people say, "Yes means yes," THIS is what they are talking about. I told him I was telling him this directly instead of telling other people, because I genuinely believed that if I pointed this out to him, he would understand and never do this to anyone else again. He said he wouldn't, and thanked me for believing in him, and asked if I still wanted to be friends. I said that I would like that, that his friendship was important to me. He said it was important to him too. I felt very relieved, and our conversation transitioned to how he was doing and my concern for his downward spiral of drinking and mental health. We discussed his mental health and how to address it until we got back to his house. When I left, he again said that he and his roommate had missed me, and texted me shortly thereafter saying, "Thanks for the talk. I haven't talked to anyone about that really. I've been going kind of crazy," clearly referring to the conversation about his own wellbeing.

The next day, I texted him saying that I hoped he had processed more than just the conversation about his mental health but also the conversation about sexual assault and consent, and in that text conversation he assured me he had. He wrote several times that he heard me, that he understood now that his size was a factor of intimidation for women, that his assumptions were messed up, that he had mistakenly thought we were talking about having real feelings for each other, and that he even had a plan for how to assure that this would never happen again. I pointed out that his size, while I had mentioned it as a factor the night before, was hugely less relevant than his power as a

man, and he agreed. I felt so much better after this conversation, convinced that he really did understand, and that this really would never happen again (and certainly hadn't happened before). I was genuinely no longer concerned for the safety of other women. I would never have predicted what has now revealed itself to be a long string of women he has harmed, assaulted, and manipulated. I realize, though, that he undoubtedly helped me to cultivate that reassurance precisely so that I could not predict it.

Herve and I really weren't friends after that. We hung out three times in the 9 months following the assault, only one of which was alone. The main reason I wanted to see him was to ask what he had told his roommate in regards to that night, because I felt that his roommate had been acting strangely around me since then. Herve "assured" me that he had only told his roommate that I "felt weird about that night." The horror, disgust, and sadness of hearing him characterize that night in such a way was confirmation to me that he did not actually understand or validate that horrendous night for what it was. His gross and manipulative move to imply that the assault was just my perception was enough to make me not want to have anything else to do with him. I felt compelled to tell local organizers and friends about it. If he did not know it was wrong, I could not be sure it wouldn't happen again.

Only days before an initial meeting with friends and organizers, I connected with Herve's partner at the time, another survivor coming forward, who shared what she had been going through, including countless lies Herve had been telling her about my being "crazy" and mentally ill, about other local organizers, and about the Syracuse BLM chapter. Herve had talked about this woman to me as problematic, racist, and clingy, but it was now obvious that he had been controlling the situation the whole time so that she and I never got close, never shared stories, and never trusted each other.

The extent to which I felt my situation was a fluke, a mere misstep in Herve's growing to be a more understanding and sensitive man in a patriarchal society, speaks to his skill at deceit and also at carefully choosing women to prey upon. But my situation was not a fluke. In coming forward, I hope to encourage others to find the strength to fight against abusive, predatory, coercive behavior and people in their personal and communal relationships. We must demand consent and accountability with no exceptions.