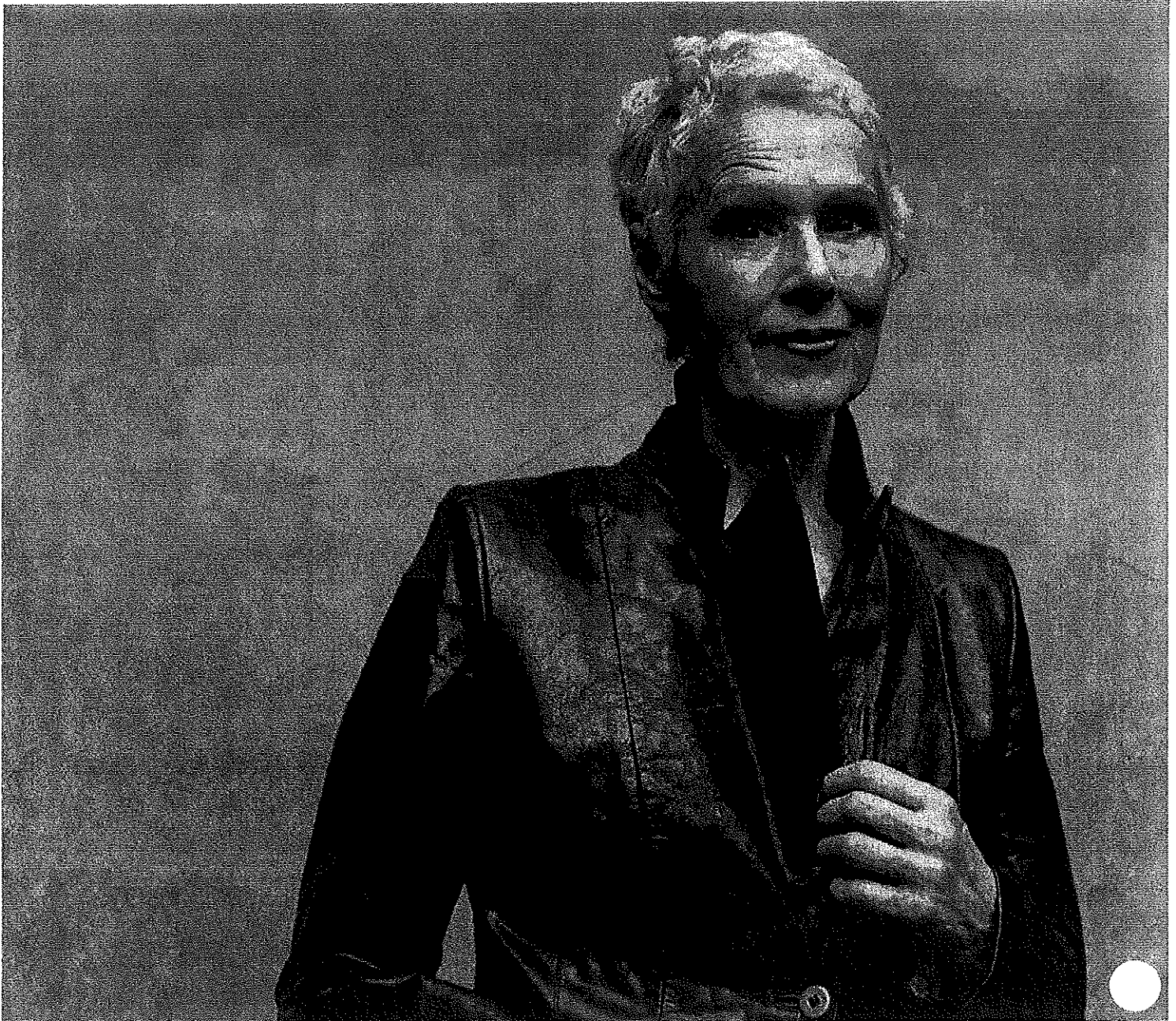


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Donald Trump

Interview

'I accused Donald Trump of sexual assault. Now I sleep with a loaded gun'

Ed Pilkington

Advice columnist E Jean Carroll on what happened after she told her story



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Miss Bingley greets you in the driveway to the house in upstate New York, surrounded by a tangle of knotted woodland. The Toyota Prius, named after the spiteful Caroline Bingley in Jane Austen's *Pride And Prejudice*, is an appropriate place to start – because without the car there would have been no road trip and without the road trip there would have been no reckoning with a list of hideous men, and without that reckoning Miss Bingley's owner would not today find herself at the centre of an almighty storm involving the most powerful person on Earth.

E Jean Carroll's cabin in the woods is small – 600 sq ft, she keeps reminding me – and engulfed in trees, which the New York media fixture and *Elle* magazine agony aunt has allowed to grow right up to the windowsills. "Welcome to the Mouse House" has been handpainted on the front of the cabin – a reference to the mice frequently dragged in by Carroll's cat, which goes by the name of Vagina T Fireballs.

Inside, the turquoise walls are hung with fading photographs of Carroll, in her prom dress and with her pet goat, Pan, as well as deer skulls and yards of bookshelves – her collection includes six volumes of Jane Austen and a library of PG Wodehouse. The chimney stones are painted in blues, greens and yellows, and above the hearth is another handpainted motto: "Always aroused, never angry – Thackeray."

Carroll meets me with a generous smile. She is as elegant and tidy as her home is dishevelled, with blond hair cut short, 60s-style, and dressed in a pink tweed jacket, riding breeches and boots. She gives me a tour and I'm tempted to stop her every few feet to ask, "Why?" Why is the phrase "Burn, baby, burn" scrawled on the door of the microwave? Why are there six sunhats hanging above the kitchen sink? ("It's a tiny house, 600 sq ft," she replies. "Where else would you put them?") More importantly, why is there a gun on her bedside table?

"It's loaded," Carroll says. She picks up the revolver, which has a fake pearl handle, and waves it around. "I've always had a gun," she says. "When I'm doing Skype calls with my friends, I like to pull it out. But I've never had it loaded. Not until now."

A loaded gun by the bed is one of the prices you pay if you are a woman who has just accused the president of the United States of raping you. Three weeks ago, in an excerpt from her new book *What Do We Need Men For?*, published in *New York* magazine, Carroll added her name to the growing number of women (which now stands at 16) who allege that they have been groped, forcibly kissed or worse by the current occupant of the Oval Office. Carroll went further in her allegations than almost everyone before her. She said she ran into Donald Trump, whom she had met a few years previously, in Bergdorf Goodman, the Manhattan department store; it was late 1995 or early 1996, and she was 52. They got to bantering about what gift Trump should buy a female friend. Lingerie was mentioned. He picked up a see-through bodysuit and told her to put it on. She fired back: "You try it on." Together they entered a dressing room. She was laughing, thinking it all a great hoot. But not for long.



📷 From left: Donald Trump, E Jean Carroll, her then husband, John Johnson, and Ivana Trump, at a party in 1987. Photograph: courtesy of E Jean Carroll

Carroll alleges that Trump lunged at her, slamming her head and pinning her against the wall with his body as he penetrated her against her will. She prefers not to use the word rape, but agrees her description does meet the legal definition of the crime -

something that has only once before been alleged against Trump: by his first wife, Ivana, in a divorce deposition; she later said she did not mean rape “in a literal or criminal sense”.

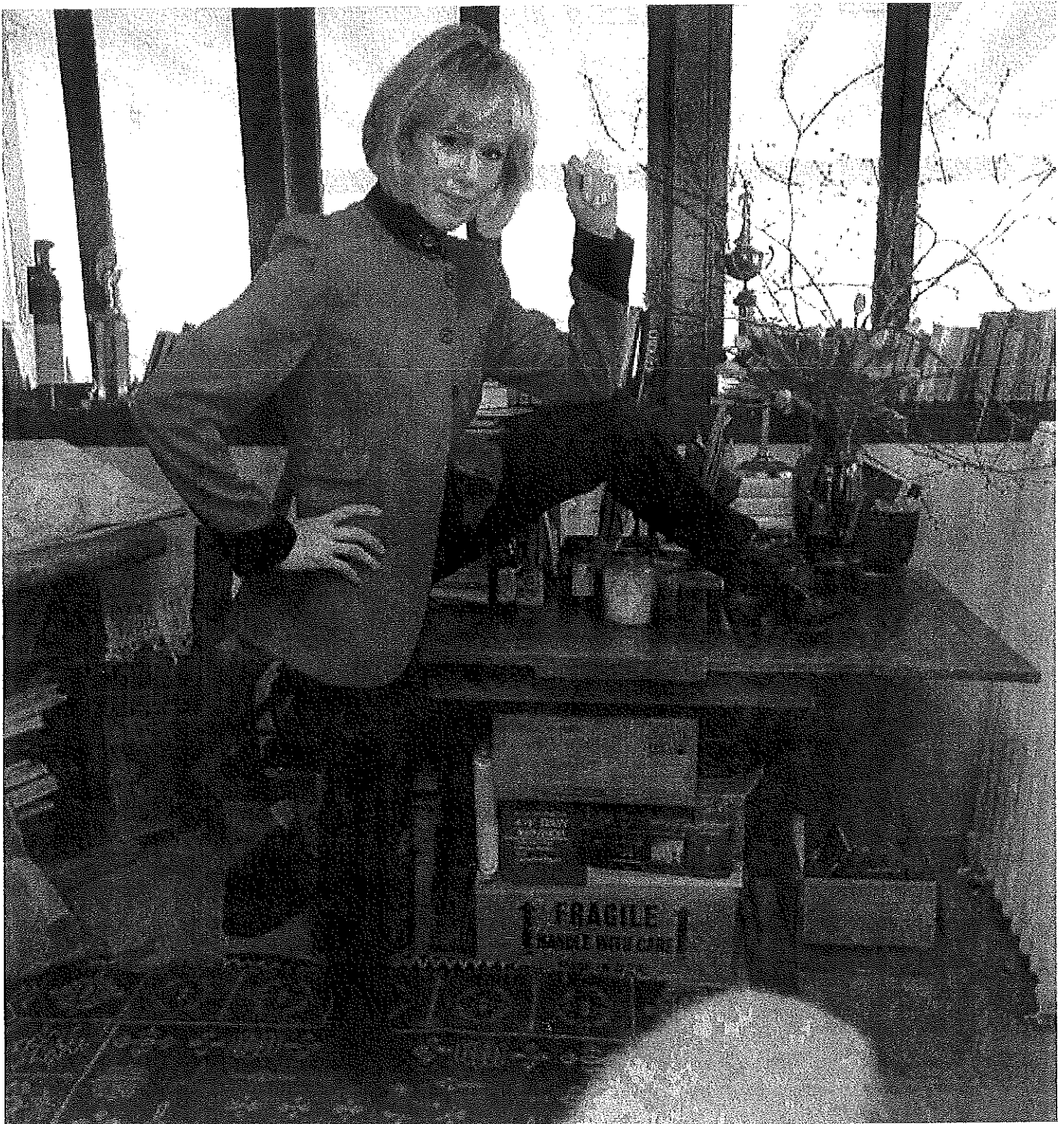
In *What Do We Need Men For?*, Carroll writes that she always knew Trump would deny it - and this is precisely what he has done, repeatedly and in his Trumpian way. He doesn't know Carroll and never has, he told reporters, despite a photograph of the two of them and their then spouses talking happily at an NBC party, in about 1987. Trump also said Carroll was “not my type”. “It was so dumb,” she says. “It just laid it out in black and white: ‘When I rape a woman, I don’t rape a 52-year-old in Bergdorf. I rape a blond 28-year-old.’ That’s basically what he said.”

But if she fully anticipated the president’s denials, she was less prepared for the commotion that followed, and other people’s reactions. Since her story broke, she has received several death threats on social media and now stays offline to avoid the bile. Meanwhile, the mainstream media has been muted in its response. The initial reaction from the major US newspaper and television outlets was close to a shrug, as though this were just another item to add to the slush pile of Trump allegations. The New York Times relegated the story to its book pages. When I went to buy a copy of the book on its launch day, in a flagship New York branch of Barnes & Noble, it had been placed in a corner of the fourth floor in the women’s studies section. Shouldn’t a book containing fresh allegations about a serious sex attack by a sitting US president be near the entrance, for everyone to read?

I tell Carroll and she is livid. “Oh! That says more than anything I’ve heard. The fourth floor women’s studies section. You want to know how to bury a book? That’s how you do it.” There are no plans to publish the book in the UK.

But after a lukewarm start, several TV channels and print outlets are pursuing her allegations. In hindsight, Carroll says, she didn’t fully anticipate the impact of a rape allegation against the president, compared with the accusations that preceded hers. “We didn’t weigh them or see it coming. I just wrote 11 pages about Trump. We don’t even mention him on the cover of the book. I thought there might be a little brouhaha, but that was it. I didn’t think it through.”

She has thought it through now, though. “I’m not stupid,” she says. “You saw what’s beside my bed.”



📷 In New York in 1997, a year after the alleged assault. Photograph: G Paul Burnett/The New York Times/Redux/Eyevine

We move outside to a table that looks like something from Miss Havisham's garden, gently rotting under a lush covering of moss that resembles a velvet tablecloth. She serves tea in cups without saucers ("Don't tell the Queen!") and a plate of sliced tomatoes and cheese, chunks of which she periodically dispenses to her newly adopted rescue dog, Guffington von Fluke.

Carroll tells me What Do We Need Men For? had been brewing in her mind for 26 years – ever since she began her Ask E Jean advice column in Elle magazine, at the age of 50. The column has a devoted fanbase of women drawn to her tart, funny, to-the-point writing. Sample advice to a correspondent who complains that her husband refuses to wash: “Soak him down with the garden hose, tie him to the shower rod with Hermès scarves.”

The column sent her on a particular path. “Very early on, I realised that men were causing almost every problem sent in: the financial problems, the love-affair problems, the problems at work. I also noticed that I was repeatedly telling my correspondents to ‘get rid of him’.”

She decided to take a road trip that would allow her to test her hypothesis that men are more trouble than they are worth. As she writes in her new prologue: “The whole female sex seems to agree that men are becoming a nuisance with their lying, cheating, robbing, perjuring, assaulting, murdering.” She has been twice married and twice divorced herself, first to Stephen Byers, with whom she lived in Montana before her journalism career took off; then, in the 80s, to former TV anchor John Johnson. She now lives in the Mouse House alone, but is close to her neighbours, with deep ties to New York medialand, and a life seemingly overflowing with friends.

Her plan in 2017 was to drive through the heartlands of America, stopping only at towns named after women – Elnora, Indiana; Bonnieville, Kentucky; Pearl, Mississippi – and asking local women what, if anything, they needed men for. She was attracted to the idea of subverting a testosterone-fuelled literary genre (think Jack Kerouac’s On The Road, or Tom Wolfe’s The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test) and turning it into a treatise on the dispensability of men.

What he did to me is what he’s doing to the country. And nobody is stopping him

Carroll has a track record in subversion that dates back to her childhood in Fort Wayne, Indiana. She inherited her eccentricity from her father, an inventor whose proudest creations were disposable galoshes and goggles to protect the eyes from TV rays. “I spent my childhood watching TV through Dad’s goggles,” she says. Her mother was a local politician and Republican campaigner. It was magazines, not books, that satisfied her young lust for reading – Austen and Wodehouse would have to wait. She got the itch to write, working freelance for years with scant success, until she got a piece accepted by Esquire at the age of 36. From there, she quickly developed a reputation, working for Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair and other heavyweight

glossies. She moved to New York in the early 80s, a time when being a magazine writer was the pinnacle of cool.

“Those were the days!” she says. “It was everything: you’re running through the avenues at 4am, having a ball. I had no money, didn’t know anybody, two outfits and a pair of cowgirl boots, and I just loved it. Living!”

Carroll began to frequent the writers’ table at Elaine’s restaurant, the now defunct Upper East Side media hangout. This was a man’s world and she was the only woman at the table. She became close to the gonzo journalist Hunter S Thompson, going on to write his biography. The Elle column led to a TV show, and a stint writing for Saturday Night Live in 1986. Carroll says she was a historically bad SNL writer, which fails to explain her Emmy nomination. “I shone for one brief moment,” she concedes. “I wrote a sketch for [comedian] Sam Kinison about him getting dressed for a date and falling in love with himself in the mirror.”

There it was, even then: a forensic ability to precision-bomb men at their most abject. She further mined that theme with a book, *The Loves Of My Life*, in which she tracked down former boyfriends and moved in with them and their wives. “Oh God, I got on the wives’ nerves,” she recalls.

The road trip that became *What Do We Need Men For?* began on 6 October 2017, nine months into Trump’s presidency. By chance, hours earlier, one of the triggers of the #MeToo movement was pulled: the New York Times published the first major allegations of sexual misconduct against film producer Harvey Weinstein.

It was a moment that changed her life, Carroll says. “I had barely come out of the driveway and it hit. I kept pulling over to read Twitter - I couldn’t believe it.” In the days that followed, the tone of the letters sent to her advice column changed. “I got way more questions about, ‘Should I turn my husband in to the police?’ Or, ‘Shall I report my boss?’ I started advising women: keep a log, get him on tape, go to the state.”

As #MeToo gathered pace, Carroll says it became clear that she could no longer sit on the sidelines, dishing out advice while failing to confront her own demons. She sat down to write what she calls “the most hideous men of my life list”. She was stunned by what gushed up from her past. “It hadn’t occurred to me that I had this unusual life. Any woman who starts making a list like this is going to think, ‘What the hell!’ Particularly women of my age, who were working in the 60s and 70s. There were so many! I was horrified.”

She whittled the list down to 21 men, not all of whom directly hurt her. Roger Ailes, the late disgraced chairman of Fox News, was a dear friend but is included because of what he did to other women.

(As an aside, Carroll follows UK politics and says that were she ever to meet Boris Johnson, Britain's likely next prime minister, she would make him hideous man #22, given his track record of cheating on his wives.)



📷 'I have a crystal clear memory. It is etched into my brain.' Photograph: Chris Buck/The Guardian

Carroll says her own experience of abuse started very young. She thinks she must have been three when the babysitter's boyfriend pulled off her pyjama bottoms at bedtime and "fondled my guinea". In her freshman year at university in Indiana, aged 17, she was held down at knifepoint by another student but managed to escape. In later life, she alleges that Les Moonves, the disgraced former head of CBS news, went at her in an elevator "like an octopus" after she interviewed him for Esquire. His representative "emphatically denied" the incident to New York magazine. Number 20 on that list is Donald Trump. It took considerable guts for her to include him. In 2016, when the Access Hollywood tape emerged of the Republican nominee bragging about grabbing women "by the pussy", she bided her time. Several other women came forward to allege sexual misconduct. "I watched the women closely. I noticed they were flanked by attorneys and that they were sober and sad. Many of them cried, for very good reasons."

She decided not to join their ranks. "Why would I put my reputation on the line? I saw them dragged through the mud."

But after the floodgates of #MeToo opened, she felt increasingly uncomfortable. "I started to think I was the biggest fraud that walks - I'm telling my correspondents what to do but haven't opened my own lips about anything, ever."

She decided to include the president, but told almost no one. When New York magazine published her story three weeks ago, her family and most of her friends were stunned. She had confided in only two close friends, fellow New Yorkers both of whom are anonymous in her book but have since outed themselves, TV anchor Carol Martin and writer Lisa Birnbach. They have corroborated parts of Carroll's story, confirming that she called them soon after Trump's alleged assault and gave a fevered account of what had happened. The duo gave Carroll conflicting advice. Birnbach thought that what Carroll had described was clearly rape, and that she should go straight to the police. Martin said: "Tell no one. Forget it! He has 200 lawyers. He'll bury you." We know whose counsel she followed.

■ ■ We seem to crave powerful male leaders who grab what they desire without asking

After so many years, how does that day replay in her mind; how clear is her memory? Carroll says her experience conforms closely to that of Christine Blasey Ford, who last year testified that the now supreme court justice Brett Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her. Some of the details were blurry, but the key facts were seared into her memory in perpetuity, the psychology professor told Congress.

That chimes with Carroll. “I have a crystal clear memory of most of it. A lot of it is etched into my brain.”

Could there have been any doubt, any confusion, that it was Trump? She looks at me with an expression that is part bafflement, part disgust, accompanied by a sound like the snort of a horse. “No. Donald Trump was the one and only. He knew everybody. He greeted everybody in the streets. He was charming. Recognising him was a big deal for me.” So zero doubt? “Zero. ZERO.”

I ask Carroll whether she remembers particular physical sensations. In the book, she captures the brief minutes of the alleged attack in vivid detail, writing about becoming “aware of how large he is”.

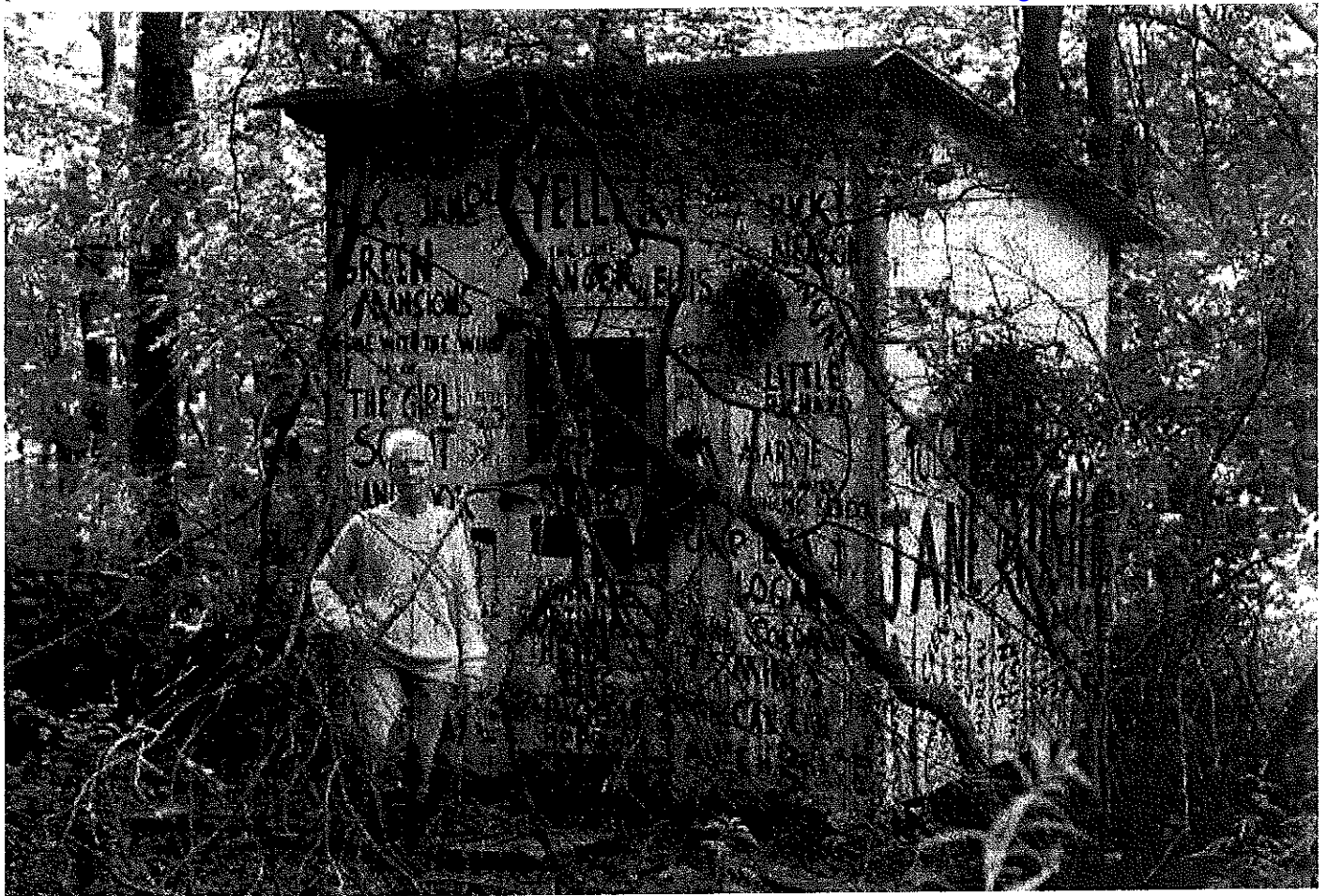
“I felt his shoulder against me,” she says now. “That was the weight I felt. He was big, and he had one of his topcoats on, so he had that against me, too. I remember the feeling of being pressed by his shoulder, my head bouncing against the wall. That is clear. It was so surprising.”

Has she resisted calling it rape because she has conflicting feelings about the alleged attack? “The flirtation is great, I’ll always do that,” she says. “But going in the room - that was where I screwed up.”

She blames herself for that? “Oh yeah. If I hadn’t gone into the dressing room, it wouldn’t have happened. You and I wouldn’t be here having this conversation.”

I want to be sure of what she’s saying to me. A woman can go into a dressing room with a man and then walk out at will, I say. “No. No. I don’t think a woman will ever be able to walk into a small enclosure with a man like that. Ever, ever, ever. I don’t care if they infused every man’s brain with #MeToo, you won’t be safe. It’s like you won’t be safe shooting up heroin, you won’t be safe driving at 120 miles per hour with the lights out.”

But rape is the man’s responsibility. “No. It’s the responsibility of the woman, too. It’s equal. Men can’t control themselves.”



Carroll's shed, inscribed with 'books, movies and dogs that inspired me'. Photograph: Chris Buck/The Guardian

Carroll knows that what she is saying is contentious, and that a younger generation hold little truck with the idea of female complicity in sexual assault. But she is unapologetic, as she is about her choice to avoid the word “rape” when it comes to Trump. She is convinced that rape is seen by many people – men and women – as “sexy”, and that by using it we are playing Trump’s game. “It’s a fantasy. ‘Rape’ is very sexual and I just hate it. If a woman is raped and wants to report it to police, they should be free to use the word, that’s their choice. But I’ve always feared that Trump can be helped by these stories.”

How so? She points out that, unlike Weinstein, who is awaiting trial, or Les Moonves, who resigned from CBS, or Bill Cosby, who is behind bars, Trump has emerged from a plethora of allegations apparently unscathed. “I can’t explain that,” she says. “Except that we seem to want it in our leaders. We wanted it in Kennedy, in Clinton. We crave powerful male leaders who grab what they desire without asking.”

For Carroll, the most upsetting part of the alleged assault is political: it is a metaphor for what Trump is doing to America. “What he did to me is what he’s doing to the country. He’s taking what he wants. And nobody is stopping him. Not his party, not the

Democrats. Nobody is impeaching him, nobody is doing anything. Aren't you amazed?"

I tell her I am. But I also wonder whether there's an element of denial in the way that Carroll pushes any trauma away from herself and on to history. There's one line in the book that is stark and startling, and comes just after she describes kneeling Trump away from her and fleeing. She writes: "I've never had sex with anybody ever again."

I read that sentence to her. Again, she demurs. "It's just a fact. I think it's because of my age, and that I haven't been lucky enough to meet somebody."

But she wrote that line clearly implying that her celibacy was connected to Trump. She stops and thinks. "You make your own luck, it's true. I wasn't bold enough to say, yes, it was because of him." So will she say it now, in this wooded idyll where she is safe? "I think it's half-and-half. I haven't met the guy, but meeting the guy is about being open to it."

She is in reflective mode now, and I wonder if I have stirred up too many painful contradictions. But you can't get E Jean Carroll down for long. She starts to tell me about the enormous sackloads of correspondence she has received. "The mail bag is huge. Women are telling their stories again. That tells me we are not going to shut up. We will not be silenced by hideous men. We are going to tell our stories until change comes.."

What Do We Need Men For? A Modest Proposal, by E Jean Carroll, is published in the US by St Martin's Press.

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