

a very millennial scandal



PHOTOGRAPHY BY KANYA IWANA

Sex, nudes and social media took down the woman who represented a moderate future for Democrats. Now she's ready to stand up again, freer than ever

BY ANITA LITTLE

In early October, in the quiet commuter town of Santa Clarita, California, I spent a balmy afternoon with then congresswoman Katie Hill. It was exactly two weeks before intimate photos of her began to trickle out of the dark, far-right corners of the internet and about three weeks before she would announce her resignation.

At that time, this story was shaping up to be very different from the one you're about to read. I would shadow Hill, a Democrat, throughout the valley she calls home, giving an inside look at the challenges young women face when they enter the political sphere. I would observe the bright, shiny parts, such as Hill meeting special-education students at a local elementary school, giving a commencement address at a college and attending a charity fund-raiser for children with cancer. I would hear tip-of-the-iceberg hints of her struggles, such as fighting to speak without being interrupted at a Chamber of Commerce meeting and being told to smile more by constituents. I wasn't expecting anything to twist the arc I had already outlined of a millennial woman ascending to the halls of power.

Then, on October 17, I received a call from a staffer who sounded harried, asking that I refrain from mentioning in the piece Hill's ongoing divorce from Kenny Heslep, her partner of nearly 10 years. It was implied he had become increasingly volatile. I felt apprehensive after the call; I sensed something was coming but wasn't sure what it might be.

The next day, the conservative site RedState published a blog post detailing a consensual polyamorous affair the congresswoman and Heslep had had with a campaign staffer. The post also included a nude photo of Hill. It was soon followed by a piece in the British tabloid *Daily Mail*, where more photos were released. They spread across social media like wildfire—just as multiple literal fires were raging across southern California.

"We found out they had 700 more files," Hill would later tell me over the phone. "I just didn't know how long this was going to go on, or what else they were going to have, or how I was going to be able to do the work that mattered to people in my district."

Suddenly, a story that was supposed to be straightforward was radioactive. No one knew how to address this uniquely millennial "sex scandal," and few wanted to touch it. A local assemblyperson who had agreed to be interviewed backed out. A member of Congress whom I'd already spoken to scrambled to retract their statements. On-the-record sources quickly became background or off the record completely. By the time I filed, Hill had given her farewell address from the floor of the House of Representatives, and Heslep, according to his father, had denied leaking the images, claiming he'd been hacked. I watched in real time as

Hill's freshman promise was taken down in a dazzling conflagration that could only exist at the intersection of sex, power and technology.

Hill was part of a great new hope, a wave of young progressives who had been ushered into the 116th Congress in the aftermath of Hillary Clinton's presidential loss in 2016. Her underdog campaign was proof of the resilience and resourcefulness of millennials—proof that when we fight, we can sometimes win.

For Hill's generation in particular, her ousting sparks a special kind of dread; it feels either very familiar or very possible. Millennials are the internet generation, after all. As Republican congressman Matt Gaetz suggested in a tweet amid the scandal, who among us would look good if a vengeful ex-lover shared every intimate photo or text? In this brave new digital world, lapses in judgment and moments of abandon are forever catalogued, waiting to be deployed should someone ever come into power or just happen to be a woman.

"I hate that they won. I hate that I did end up quitting, but the GOP made it clear that they were going to continue this until I quit," Hill says.

By the time this profile hits newsstands, I imagine people will likely have come to their own conclusions. So this isn't just a story about Katie Hill the victim of alleged revenge porn, or Katie Hill the hashtagged



cautionary tale. This is about Katie Hill the congresswoman—the Katie Hill her 700,000 constituents lost when she was driven out by cyber exploitation. And this is about Katie Hill the survivor.

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The first time I formally met Hill was in her Santa Clarita office. The space was sparsely decorated save for a few framed photographs, one of which was of the nearby Vasquez Rocks. Hill occupied offices across the 25th Congressional District, about a half hour north of Los Angeles and comprising the cities of Santa Clarita, Palmdale, Lancaster and Simi Valley.

Hill has a direct manner of speaking that some might describe as brusque. She often wears a severe, unflappable expression that has been referred to as “resting bitch face,” otherwise known as “a face” on men. She walks at a fleet-footed pace, opting to take the stairs whenever she can; as a public official, she never had time to exercise. In a different world these characteristics would be genderless, but during her time as a candidate and then a congresswoman, they took on a weight she often found exasperating.

“You instantly have criticism about every single bit of your attire, your face, your makeup, your hair,” she said, gesturing toward the tightly secured bun sitting atop her head.

When the now 32-year-old Hill unseated Republican incumbent Steve Knight in November 2018 in a hotly contested race, the win made national headlines. Someone who never thought she would be a politician was thrust into a spotlight that felt all the more blinding because she was a woman and even more so because she was openly bisexual and the first LGBTQ congresswoman from California. This was no small feat in a district where Proposition 8, the same-sex-marriage ban, had passed overwhelmingly just a decade earlier.

Hill recalled other LGBTQ representatives advising her to pass as straight. “They said, ‘You’re married to a man. Why would you come out as bi?’”

In the year following her election, the former nonprofit director spent her days shuttling back and forth across her district and the country. Spending more than half her time in Washington, D.C., Hill turned into a nomad in her hometown—the place where she learned to ride a horse, experienced young love and suffered through the requisite ill-advised bob cut of late girlhood. The confusion that accompanies such a lifestyle shift became evident when she mistakenly referred to Washington

as her home before catching herself. “I’m literally on a plane, on an average week, for 12 hours,” she told me.

A closer look at the district she represents reveals communities that are so disparate, it’s astounding she engaged enough voters to pull off a win. There’s upper-middle-class Santa Clarita with its beloved Six Flags Magic Mountain theme park; the high-desert cities of Palmdale and Lancaster with their growing Latino populations; and traditionally conservative Simi Valley, a bedroom community for Los Angeles County police. Hill mentions the 1992 trial there of the LAPD officers charged with use of excessive force during their arrest of Rodney King—and the L.A. riots following their acquittal.

The demographics of the district are difficult to thumbnail, but so is Hill. She’s a gun owner, an outspoken member of the LGBTQ community, a goat farmer, a sexual-assault survivor, a proud community college graduate and the daughter of a cop who cast his first vote for a Democrat when she ran.

As I trailed Hill through an average day in the district, attending speaking engagements and meetings at places that ranged from a virtually all-white country club to the diverse California Institute of the Arts campus to a majority minority trade school, I witnessed her seamlessly navigate the different enclaves. For the college visit she sported a T-shirt and jeans. Upon arriving at Valencia Country Club for a Chamber of Commerce town hall and spotting a DRESS CODE ENFORCED stencil on a window, she grabbed a suit from a staffer’s car kept on hand for just such an occasion.

Besides the code-switching required of any politician who represents a district as mixed as the 25th, Hill’s biggest challenge was translating to her constituents the work she does on Capitol Hill—namely, her push for affordable housing and health care reform. In an age of fringe politics, she often comes across as a kitchen-table moderate.

“When the two most commonly known names are Donald Trump and AOC, and people tend to associate an entire group with one or the other, I don’t think that’s necessarily healthy,” she said. “A lot of what’s happening in the middle, which is the majority of the country, is not amplified.”

I asked Hill if the ascent of Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as the most recognizable face of the Democratic Party had led to misperceptions. She replied that some people have the responsibility to “push us as far as we can go,” but it’s not usually a reflection of where the party currently leans.

“Her policies are the extreme of our party,” she added of Ocasio-Cortez. “People have associated that the Democrats want to have the Green New

Deal, right? But they don’t know that we also have all these other, more immediately achievable solutions to addressing climate change.”

Hill’s pragmatic progressivism was what made her stand out in a divided Congress and what our political landscape will sorely miss with her resignation. Following her win in 2018, she quickly built a reputation as a bridge, with D.C. outlets touting her unusual ability to cross the aisle. She represented something Capitol Hill has lacked since Republicans won back the House during Barack Obama’s first term.

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On the afternoon of our first interview in October, Hill asked if she could hitch a ride with me back home. I assumed she meant the three-acre Agua Dulce ranch she once shared with her former partner. Instead she directed us to a quiet residential street in Santa Clarita lined with craftsman houses. As we pulled into the driveway, a German shepherd named Thaddeus bounded up to greet Hill, followed by her mother.

In the midst of her divorce from Heslep, the politician whose campaign Vice News termed “the most millennial ever” was doing a very millennial thing: moving back in with her parents.

Unlike most citizens, Hill didn’t have the luxury of riding out the tough moments of divorce in private. As soon as she was elected one of the 435 representatives in the House, her life became openly dissected and derided for all who disagreed with her political affiliations.

“It’s a weird thing, that you have to navigate being public, because it is public, right? He filed, and it was immediately picked up in the media,” she told me at the time.

Hill is unsure if she’ll ever consider marriage again. In light of everything that has unfolded, it would be short-sighted to assume her career didn’t factor into the end of her relationship.

“If I want to be good in this role, I will not be in a position of ever putting someone else’s needs first,” she said. “In the pyramid of things, it’s going to be my constituents, then myself, to be able to live. And then your partner comes after that.”

I didn’t ask about Heslep again.

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Three days after her resignation, I call Hill as she prepares to leave Washington, vowing to take her battle “outside the halls of Congress” in a heartfelt video posted on Twitter. The crisis is still fresh, the hurt still raw, and she hasn’t had time to reflect. She hasn’t spoken to other reporters yet, and she preemptively apologizes if she sounds “mildly incoherent.”

Hill tells me a few freshmen members of Congress are planning something for her that

“

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evening. Her voice cracks as she struggles to find the words to describe it, perhaps wanting to avoid “good-bye party” or anything that feels final. Sighing, she settles on “little get-together.”

She has been actively steering clear of Capitol Hill, lying low for security reasons, to dodge reporters and because “emotionally, it’s been pretty tough.”

She worries about other young women and girls who may decide not to run for public office after witnessing what she went through. Regardless of the relationship with her campaign staffer, her fate was decided by the photographs—not because of a consensual polyamorous relationship. If not for the proliferation of these images, it’s likely Hill would still be in office.

“That’s the thing I’m most concerned about,” she says. “There’s a whole generation of us who have pictures that could be compromising. It’s normal, right? It’s not even, ‘Oh, it’s so salacious.’ Everybody does it.”

In Hill’s case, the photos were published without her consent or knowledge, but the average millennial would barely bat an eyelash at the willing exchange of such images—emphasis on *willing*. A 2017 study from the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative found that roughly one in eight participants had been either victims of or threatened with “non-consensual pornography.” Our nation’s laws are fighting to keep up: Forty-six states, Washington, D.C. and the U.S. territory of Guam have passed legislation that criminalizes the publication of revenge porn.

Hill, who worked in the nonprofit sector before running for Congress, plans to partner with an advocacy organization to raise awareness of the havoc revenge porn can wreak. “The emotional trauma that it causes people is pretty much untold. This is a true threat. This is its own form of assault,” she says.

Hill wasn’t the only one who faced harassment with the release of the photos; staffers in her congressional and district offices had to field an onslaught of offensive phone calls.

“They’ll talk to the staff and be like, ‘Will you tell Katie Hill I want in on one of the threesomes she’s having, but also she should get a boob job?’”

Ultimately, it wasn’t sensational headlines or harassment on social media that prompted her decision to resign. It was her mother’s advice.

“She said to me, ‘You’ve done a ton, and you’re going to be able to do more, but at the end of the day, you don’t have to put yourself through this. You’re young.’ She always sees me as her daughter first, and she saw how awful it was.”

Hill says her mom frequently sends her inspirational memes, the saccharine kind many of our boomer-age mothers exchange on the social media graveyard of Facebook. After our call, she forwards me one her mother shared with her when she was considering resignation.

“When something goes wrong in your life, just yell ‘plot twist’ and move on,” shouts the digital pep talk in a funky font.

Hill, who admits that she could be more appreciative of her parents, seems comforted by these words.

“This is a big plot twist, so let’s see what the character makes of it,” she says. “That’s my job.”

Before we end the call, I ask whether, despite everything that has happened to her, she might consider running for political office again. I brace for a measured no—an echo of what we’ve heard from other female politicians cheated out of an elected position, such as Stacey Abrams and even Hillary Clinton. She replies, “Obviously, I’m going to need some time away, but

it’s almost something I want to do on principle.”

She suggests there might be some freedom in having her private life tossed out into the world. With no skeletons left to uncover, she could become unassailable.

“Every single bit of my dirty laundry will be out there—the most private things I didn’t ever think would come out. I’ll be quite literally fully exposed to the voters,” she says with a laugh. “So judge me for what I’ve got.”

She finishes the thought: “This was a chapter that was important and that meant something. I think I have a legacy that is going to matter. This is just the beginning.” And with that, her very millennial political scandal ends with an ageless political message: hope. 

