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Rape is a Four Letter Word

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Rape is a Four Letter Word
First Place in “A Single Thread in the Grand Design” Contest

Notes from our judge:
From the first jarring sentence, “Rape is a Four Letter Word” grabs its audience and refuses to let go until the end is reached. It is a beautiful, heart-breaking ride that is articulated with an honest clarity that echoes long after the piece is finished. The author’s narration throughout the story, peppered with strong, vivid word choice, makes this story difficult to read yet impossible to put down. That tension is what makes the writing so moving and powerful. I was left inspired by the emotional strength and hope encapsulated by the ending. This piece highlights the kind of honor and healing that all victims deserve.

Rape is a four letter word. Like the word “shit” or “damn” or “f***”. People don’t like to use it. People are scared to use it. I am not afraid to use it anymore.

I had been on a trip to San Diego just one day before. My back and legs were the reddish pink color of a well done tri-tip steak. My body hurt but I was in a great mood. I was going home to see my best friend, a goofy kid named Michael, and my boyfriend.

My boyfriend, Trevor, was a dark haired and ill-tempered person. He was pushy and aggressive at times, but I was young, and I was in love. I was a stupid little girl of sixteen, but, like many girls my age, I was sure I had found The One.

I showed up at Michael’s house, where the three of us were supposed to be hanging out that day, and took in the sights of home around me. His modest house had become a regular hang out spot; I spent many afternoons eating his food, sitting on his couch, and watching his TV. A huge tree loomed over his well-shaded front yard, but spots of sun shone through the leaves like beams from heaven itself. They were warm and welcoming. The grass felt warm and damp on my bare feet and his decrepit RV sat unused in his driveway. He had bought the RV a year ago but it sat like a sad metal skeleton rusting away in the rain. The only time anyone ever went in it was on the rare occasions when we felt like it would be more fun to hang out in the RV as opposed to the house.
At first everything was great, we watched movies and played games and caught up on the events of the past week when I was gone. I lounged on the couch like a fat cat, relaxed, leaning back against my boyfriend, chatting with my friends and enjoying the relaxed atmosphere. It was a nice change.

Trevor and I had been fighting relentlessly the past few weeks. I'd go to bed every night after being called a bitch or a moron and cry myself to sleep, wishing that somehow I could make it better. I was certain that it was me, not him, who was doing something wrong. But now, with his fingers tangled in mine, I was sure that everything was going to be okay.

Suddenly I got this vibe that everything was different. "Let's go hang out in the RV," Michael said cheerfully, exchanging an uncertain look with Trevor, who just nodded and agreed.

So we went to the RV. It was small and hot and smelled like must and dirt. My nose wrinkled as we went in but I didn't protest. In fact, I continued to joke and laugh with my friends like nothing was different; I convinced myself everything was fine, nothing was different.

We chatted innocently for a few more minutes before Michael abruptly got up and said he was going to go inside for a moment to get something. The second the door closed Trevor was on top of me. I took to it at first and eagerly started kissing him too, until he reached into my jeans. I gently pushed him away.

"Not today," I whispered. "Michael is inside and I'm on my period anyways."

"Oh who cares?" Trevor said, forcing himself a little harder. "And Mike won't be back for a while. We talked about it."

Suddenly, it dawned on me what was going on. Trevor and Michael had made a deal. At some point during the day, Michael knew that he was supposed to leave so that Trevor and I could have sex. I had never been informed. My stomach knotted at the idea that I was never consulted about this.

I pushed back on him a little bit more. "I'm on my period, I don't want to do it."

"It's fine Sammie," Trevor murmured, unbuttoning my jeans.

"I don't care. It doesn't bother me."

"I don't want to, Trevor."

He sighed exasperatedly. "It's not that big of a deal, Sammie." I could see him glaring at me and I felt about as helpless as a bug under a boot. On one hand, I could just go with it and be uncomfortable, or I could say no and go through more hurtful fighting.

With a nervous sigh, I leaned back and let him continue what he was doing. After he had stripped my jacket and jeans off of me, he forcefully pulled my tampon out of me. That's when I panicked.

"No, no, no, no, no, no..." I repeated over and over, my face burning with shame, kicking myself up into a seated position while he grabbed at my legs and tried to get me back onto my back.

"Sammie! Just knock it off!" He growled, rolling me over onto my side and digging his fingers into my hips.

I struggled a bit more but eventually gave up. I thought about the must in the air. I thought about the blood running down my thighs and onto the sheets like maroon, violent tears. I thought about how bad my sunburns hurt with him moving against them. How humiliated I was. I curled into a ball and sobbed while he finished. No condom. No dignity. No love. Just sex.

Finally, he finished and looked at me. I was sobbing like a child and completely still. My thighs, legs, belly and breasts were smeared with menstrual blood. I had fingernail indents in my hips and sides where he grabbed me. The more I noticed these things, the more I sobbed. I felt broken in two.

Now that he was finished, he cared. Or at least he acted like he did. He held me while I sobbed and whispered that he was sorry. My skin crawled like a thousand burning insects. My sunburns ached from the friction of the wool blankets we were lying on. My eyes burned from tears. He kissed my tears away and my stomach churned.

Finally, I mopped myself up and put my clothes back on. I sweated underneath the jacket I was wearing but my shirt had his bloodied handprints on my breasts so I dared not take it off.

I was dazed the rest of the day, convinced that it wasn't rape.
He had just missed me. Truly missed me, that's all it was. He had just wanted to be with me like a man and woman should be. I told myself this for another year. And I held his hand and kissed his lips and tried to please him for another year. Meanwhile, I could still see blood stains on certain articles of clothing. It wasn't until I was seventeen that I finally grew up enough to see what that relationship really was. I got tired of being called stupid and ugly. I got tired of being forced into sex. I was just tired. I felt like a wounded hound following an abusive master, always hurt but always loyal. Weeks later, I began to heal. I was becoming strong again. I was becoming me again. So I confronted him about the RV experience. "It was not rape!" he yelled. "You're twisting what happened to make me into a bad guy! You're f***ing sick! You're a sick bitch!" He had knocked me down again. Once more, I started to deny that it was rape. I began to protect him again. I made excuses for the few people who knew. "He really isn't a bad guy..." and "I wasn't forceful enough..." were some of my favorites. It wasn't until I met Gary that I really started to grow again. He rarely corrected my protectiveness but the gentle hurt in his eyes reminded me that what happened wasn't right. It wasn't okay. It was then that I started to search. How many women has this happened to? I asked five women, all of which had been my closest friends since I was very young, if they had ever experienced any form of sexual abuse. All five of them had a story to tell. None of them had ever pressed charges. I became aware of what an epidemic this was. Most of them don't even know they've been raped. Most of them are raped by someone they trust. But they are strong. They rise above it. I rose above it, but it will never be okay. Rape is a four letter word, rape is a dirty word, but I learned to use it. I learned to accept it. I will not protect my rapist.

What Now?
Second Place in "A Single Thread in the Grand Design" Contest

"Dad, I'm here. Can you hear me?" The sound of the heater running on high and the hospice nurse humming to herself helped Jack understand how his father could sleep so peacefully. There was no need to invest in a sound machine when the sounds in the old house were so soothing. "I'll let you rest."

Jack was relieved that he was able to delay the inevitable, painful conversation he knew he had to have with his father. This was, in part, due to the fact that he had a large breakfast before he got on the plane and couldn't stand the pressure growing in his lower body any longer. Fifteen minutes of relaxing on the heated toilet seat would be enough time to prepare mentally for the day or days ahead.

Harold was lost in his dreams. Before he fell asleep, the nurse reminded him that Jack was coming to stay with him. He knew he only had a day or two left, and he smiled when he thought of seeing his son one last time. He was able to relax enough to drift back into the flashback dreams. "Flashbacks" seemed to be the best way Harold could think of these dreams. They were his life. He was reliving moments in his life through his own eyes. Before Jack's voice lifted him out of this dream state, Harold was in the backseat of his father's car in the garage of his childhood home with Mary. This would have been his first sexual experience had he been able to avoid vomiting due to the two beers and cigarette he'd shared with her earlier in the evening.

"Hey, Dad, you want to try to eat something? The nurse says you haven't been eating anything."