

The Power of Naming

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When I was a sophomore at Yale, I was strangled and raped. But it is not until now, forty-six years later, that I am able to admit that in public – even though I coined the term “date rape” and have spent 30 years representing people who have been sexually harassed and assaulted. I have learned in this work that there is power in naming. If you name something, you own it; you take responsibility for it.

I was 19, a good Catholic girl. I had been taught to always give people the benefit of the doubt. I had been taught that a woman should be a nurturer, like Mary. That our strength lay in our power to give and to be kind.

So when an acquaintance told me, that Saturday evening in the fall of 1974, that he was deeply depressed and full of despair, and asked could he please, *please* stay with me, he desperately needed company, he needed me to be his friend, just to lie next to him... I said yes, he could sleep over.

We had met the summer before while we were both taking classes at Harvard. We talked literature and movies, philosophy and science. I was living with my first boyfriend, Marc; Marc and I would meet for dinner occasionally with him and his roommate, Steve.

His brown hair, already thinning, was flat on his head. He had sunken, icy eyes; a square jaw; and a tight-lipped smile. He appeared pleased with himself.

Aside from my one boyfriend, Marc, I had never let a male friend stay overnight. But I said yes, he could sleep over. I had two roommates in an adjacent room. Nothing could happen.

Still, I was nervous. I went to bed abundantly clothed. I wished him goodnight and told him I was sorry for the pain he was in. I turned my back to him, my face to the wall. I did not touch him; we did not hug or snuggle. There had been no drinking, no drugs, no kissing. We lay apart, even in a single bed.

He woke me at dawn that morning, on top of me, his hands clawed around my throat. I tried to fight him off. His hands squeezed my neck so I could not make noise and could hardly breathe. He was drooling in my face. He loosened his grip for a moment so he could force my clothes off; I kicked, he slapped and my lip bled; I gasped for him to stop. Then his hands tightened on my neck again as he thrust himself inside me. It hurt. My vagina felt like it was being ripped apart. Three plunges and he was done. He rolled off, still not saying a word, falling soon into sleep. I lay next to him, bleeding from my lip, feeling the wet between my legs, my fingers sticky with his saliva and snot. The smell of sex overwhelmed me. Tears quietly flooded down my face, my

mind not wanting to believe what I had just experienced. I had been so stupid. So naïve. So disastrously trusting.

He got up early and left, not saying a word to me although he could feel me upset next to him and see my shaking and tears when he got out of bed. And what about the blood on the pillow and on his own body? Did he not see that? I dug up a turtleneck to cover the bruises his fist and nails had left and called the Yale Police to report my attack.

The police refused to name this assault “rape.” “He’s a student and you let him stay the night?” the officer responded. “That’s not rape.”

I was dumbfounded. “Could you send someone to talk to me?”, I asked. “Should I go to the hospital?”

No and no, the policeman said. It wasn’t rape. Rape for the New Haven police officer was only at knifepoint and certainly not by well-educated white boys.

He refused to call this what it clearly was: a brutal, non-consensual, life-changing assault.

Things don’t exist if you can’t give them a name. And so my rape, my strangulation, was not real. What happened to me was, in that policeman’s eyes, rendered into something beyond redress, a misunderstanding at best, perhaps something I had “asked for” – in any event, something to be dismissed. It was a win for the junior who resided in Morse College at Yale, a free event with no consequences for him.

My assault, like those of so many others, met with no justice. I did what I could to move forward, to fold my trauma into normal routines. But there was no real “normal” anymore. I could not finish all my classes that fall, nor the ones I enrolled in the next term. I was drowning with 11 course extensions and a brain and emotions that felt overwhelmed in ways I did not understand.

I saw Dr. Phillip and Lorna Sarrel, sex counselors at Yale. I was not the first woman to present them with this story. They told me recently in their New York apartment that they were overwhelmed those years with other Yalies who told stories similar to mine.

I asked my mother to come and visit me. She never travelled on her own to see me before, and never did again. But she came from New Jersey to Connecticut and I told her what had happened and that I was having a hard time keeping it all together. She told me to shut up, to never discuss the rape with anyone because it was my own fault, I didn’t respect myself or my family. I was dirt. If I didn’t keep the rape a secret, she warned that no man would marry me; my father would take his wrath out on me and certainly abandon me. She forbade me from telling my four sisters because this news would corrupt them and ruin our family. I cried; she cried – but not too much. She did not hold me or seek to comfort me. I had made it to Yale from slim beginnings, and for her, I was now out of the game before I had long been in it. We became estranged after these hours together; I never felt her love again, for the 24 years until she died. I do not remember her

ever hugging me or praising me again. Like my rapist, she also preferred to forget we had ever had this conversation. We never spoke of it again.

Around this time, I broke up with my long-term and first boyfriend, Marc. I avoided men who were interested in me. I would not take any more chances. But whatever had happened to me, by whatever name, would not leave me alone.

Within a few weeks, I had sex with my attacker again. Just a few more times. If I subsequently went out with him and it turned out well, I thought that perhaps I could rewrite my rape. It would simply be a courtship that got off to a rough start. My revisionist history might not be the “meet cute boy with chocolates and mood music” of romantic comedies, but would be better than having to admit to being brutally assaulted and robbed of important parts of my dignity and soul.

It was not to be. No matter how much gusto I tried to bring to his bed, I could not make it work. The three times I had sex with him were desperately unpleasant. The sex was painful, joyless, and upsetting. There was always tobacco smoke in the air from his pipe. The first time, his bruising of me was still evident. He touched the marks but said nothing.

Each time it was about him. Not once did he solicit my feelings about the experience or ask if he could pleasure me. I kept reliving the feeling of his hands around my throat and his weight pinning me down that October morning. I found that, as much as I wanted to, I simply could not be complicit in normalizing his behavior. I broke things off.

Ever since then I have always felt nauseous at the smell of pipe tobacco. I cannot enter a room where there is tobacco smoke without seeing a flash of him.

Although I had flickering, excruciating images of him over the years, even so, I wanted, needed, to be polite. I sent him holiday cards for years afterwards. It sounds absurd. It is. But I now know I am not alone in trying to paper over this type of trauma. As a lawyer, I have had many clients who have acted similarly, trying to find healing with the person who hurt them – particularly if they have kept publicly silent about it, as I have for over four decades.

It was not until I found the right term for what had happened to me that I could begin to heal. That name was “date rape.” It happened in a room with Gloria Steinem present. Women were talking about sexual assaults by people they knew, without using the “r word” because it hurt too much. I said that what happened to them was still rape even if it was not at the hands of a stranger, but from a friend, an acquaintance; it was “date rape.”

The moment was electric. I asked how many had been date raped; scores of women shot up their hands, including Gloria.

“Date rape” cut to the chase. I later developed the term in a seminar with feminist and legal theorist Catherine MacKinnon and then gave many speeches around Yale, before the Yale

Corporation and at conferences calling experiences like mine “date rape.” The term was soon published by Susan Brownmiller. But I never declared that I had been date raped myself.

At first I did not go public because of my mother and my sisters. Then, as I became a lawyer and worked for clients who had suffered sexual transgressions, I knew my professional obligation was to keep focused on them, their stories, not mine.

I had also fallen quite passionately in love with the person I have now lived with for over four decades. The passion I have with him remains vibrant; I did not want to detract from that or complicate raising my family to focus on my rapist.

My rapist upended the way I looked at life. He destroyed the values I grew up with, my faith in people. I decided that having been raped, what was I saving myself for? In fact it was a form of freedom. Over time I had sex with more people than I would have without having my sexual-moral system upended. I learned from those experiences. I enjoyed them. I grew from them. Sex and intimacy became a central part of my adult life.

I am sure that my attacker had only good memories of our times together, which is why he seemed eager to get back in touch the two times I reached out to him over the last 40 years.

Ten years after his attack we met in San Francisco for dinner. I had hoped to speak to him that night about the strangulation and rape, but he quickly launched into another sad story about his life, focusing on the mean qualities of his first wife, whom he had recently divorced. He told me he got his kicks from BDSM, that he was attracted to his ex-wife because of the sadomasochistic play between them, and with others. He said he had suffered greatly in his first marriage and that he deserved much more. He said he hated her and had chosen a second-rate medical career because of her. Again, it was all about him, a dinner of monologue. I felt sorry for him and relieved, somehow, that closure was in sight; he was such a damaged, incomplete, ineffective person, probably no longer a danger to anyone. My sympathies for him trumped what he had done to me. I left the table feeling that I could put him behind me. But in the parking lot, he moved with the same sudden swiftness I had experienced in that Yale single bed. He pinned me against the car so he could have sexual contact with me. I ducked from his lunge, begged off his attempted kiss goodbye, disconcerted that he could still insist on and feel entitled to his desires, that violence still lurked beneath the smooth exterior. He hadn’t changed.

Twenty-five years later, still unreconciled to the memories that would not leave me alone, I reached out to him again. By then I wanted an apology for the rape. I gave him the benefit of the doubt again and hoped he would not disappoint. I am a lawyer who represents people who have been hurt. I believe in forgiveness; I wanted to forgive my rapist.

He did not allow me to forgive him. He denied the rape, the strangulation, the violence; he said he could not remember anything like that. He did recall the consensual sex, which was clearly a good memory for him. He participated in the email dialogue as if he were my superior. He was

arrogant and cruel when I challenged his memory. He seemed determined to revel in memories of our time together at Yale, of his fond youth, and maybe hoped an affair was in the air.

I run an international law firm with headquarters near London. I was pivotal to putting revenge porn law on the books in the UK and have advised everyone from presidents, to activists, to celebrities, to the poverty-stricken. I am not shy, but it has taken me nearly six years after this last correspondence with my rapist to come to terms with it.

All these years of pursuing justice for others was also a way to reclaim my own wholeness. But one part was missing. I need to do what I have asked so many other women (and men) to do in coming forward. That young woman, strangled, battered, and raped in a dorm room at Yale, silent for so many years except on behalf of others, will always be a part of me. I am now joining the ranks of women who claim their rape as part of their story. I am named.

And so, that brings me to my last act of naming.

Dr. Calvin Hirsch, I name you. I name you as the young man who, in that dorm room in 1974, strangled, ripped, and raped my body. My innocence. My trust. I am no longer your hidden victim, your accomplice in normalcy. I am no longer your protector allowing you to seem a respectable doctor when you are not. I am no longer silent. You are no longer anonymous. You are a Professor of Clinical Internal Medicine at the University of California, Davis, Health System. I name you to the Medical Board of California.