

Profile of the Rapist As An Ordinary Man

by Myrna Kostash

"I was hitchhiking from my parents' place to the city and got a ride with a man. When I first got into his car, he looked like a gentle, innocuous guy who wouldn't bother me. He said he was 25 years old and had been out of school for a couple of years. We got to talking and he, seemed okay; but after about an hour he said he wanted to pull over to the side of the road and rest. I told him I was kind of in a hurry to get home. I had begun to get strange vibes from him, everything we talked about ended up in a discussion about sex. He told me all about his sexual experiences and wanted to talk about mine. I was wearing jeans and an old top.

When I hitchhike I dress as asexually as possible. So there was no way I was indicating my availability by the way I was dressed. Then he said we were going to stop whether I liked it or not and he was going to make love to me. I said "I don't particularly want to make love with you." He pulled over to the side of the road and reached over, he put his elbow on the lock of the door and wouldn't let me out. He jumped on me. He ripped my clothes."

And then he raped her. He forced her into this act he called "making love" and made believe that what he was recreating in the cramped space of the car's front seat was a lover's pleasure. She went to the police but never pressed charges. Instead she has spent the last year wrestling with her fears and her anger. She finally put it all out into a tape recorder, partly as therapy and partly so that others would know and understand just what the experience of being raped is like.

He was no weirdo. He didn't prowl around neighborhoods and drool at passing women from behind bushes. He didn't have the kind of grizzled face and unfocussed gaze of the dirty old men you see in the subway car and buses staring at women's thighs.

If you asked him about himself he would tell you he was just an ordinary guy. He had a good job, loved his mum, took girls to the movies and to bars, slept with the ones who let him. Hell, he'd say, most are easy these days. They'd all pretend at first that they were virgins or something and waiting for Mr. Right but in the end, if you put a little pressure on them, and maybe get a little threatening they almost always give in. Women want to be persuaded, roughed up a bit. You certainly don't have to take "no" as their final answer.

And if you asked him for his version or what went on in his car that night, this is what he might say: what do you expect a guy to think when he sees a chick all alone on the highway, hitchhiking? And when she turns out to be real friendly and dressed up like a hippie? I mean, come on, you'd have to be pretty dense not to figure out that she's on the make. So you can imagine how I felt when she suddenly got on her high horse and said "no, no!"

No one, neither psychologists nor the police, rape counselors nor judges, seems to know just what pushes an "ordinary guy" over the line between courtship and rape. There is research available and theories have been formulated which attempt a description of who the rapist is, what his personal history is likely to be, what might go on in his mind during the attack and how he justifies himself.

But precisely what it is that distinguishes a rapist who forces sexual intercourse on a woman without her freely given consent is a mystery. The rapist doesn't understand himself any better than we do. In fact, a rapist may not even be conscious he's doing anything wrong. According to a recent study in Denver, Colorado, "most rapists can neither admit nor express the fact that they are a men-ace to society.

"I couldn't believe it was happening and that I could be so completely trapped. He was so much stronger than I was. When he was finished, I threw up and he got mad at me for messing up the interior of his car. I begged him to let me go. He said he couldn't because I would have to hitchhike home and suppose somebody picked me up and raped me. I thought, 'oh my God, he's insane'."

But, in all probability, he is not clinically insane. According to the Philadelphia criminologist, Menachim Amir, "studies indicate that sex offenders do not constitute a unique or psychopathological type; nor are they as a group invariably more disturbed than the control groups to which they are compared." Most of us share the popular misconception that all rapists are "sexual psychopaths". And the average rapist shares this misconception with us. Since he knows he isn't a Jack the Ripper lurking in dark corners ready to pounce on an unsuspecting female and drag her away, he doesn't think of himself as a rapist. He sees rape committed by others in the same way we do, as the behavior of perverted, sick individuals and not something that he, a normal, virile and assertive male does when he "makes love" to the protesting and revolted body of his victim.

He wouldn't, then, recognize himself in most of the psychological accounts of a rapist's motivations: incestuous desires, - "symbolic matricide," "latent homosexuality," "castration anxieties." etc. Even if he did, the information would not be very useful to him or to us: rape is an act, not a state of mind. The rapist has imposed his sexuality and his fantasies on someone who doesn't want to participate. He has violated another human being's right to self determination and he has terrorized her through a show of power. For him to see this as lovemaking is the real sickness. And yet the rapist does operate within the spectrum of normal masculinity and male sexuality. Within that spectrum he is the extremist.

Amir's study (the only comprehensive one to date in North America) showed that the majority of rapists are between 15 and 24 years of age- the period of a man's life when he is most anxiously flexing his muscles in the new role of adult masculinity. Since the social messages he receives about manhood celebrate the mystique of aggressiveness and toughness, a young man who rapes may be covering up for his feelings of weakness, sexual inadequacy and dependence-feelings which he, as a man, is not supposed to have- and taking them out on a handy victim.

Almost half of the rapists Amir studied had a previous criminal record and more than half were either unskilled laborers or unemployed. Debra Lewis, University of Toronto criminology student, points out that if you are angry, frustrated, humiliated and a man. You can often deflect your misery safely onto a woman. She's less likely to fight back than a man.

Other rapists Amir studied were employed or middle-class. The only theory that seems to explain their behavior is the psychological one --"shaky defenses??. As one psychologist put it, "rapists show strong elements of misogyny and distrust toward women they place in the position of sexual objects."

In 82% of the rapes studied, the victim and the rapist came from the same neighborhood and half the rapes originated in a meeting at the victim's or the rapist's house or at a party or a bar. Chances are the rapist knows his victim and moves in the same social circle. Chances are the rape will take place at the end of a social encounter. This makes it easier for him to see his behavior as "seduction" or "making love". That 71% of the rapes were planned demolishes the myth that rape is the impulsive act of a loony who can't help himself. Eighty-five percent involved the use of force and the most excessive degrees of violence occurred in group rapes, suggesting that group rapists perform for each other to prove how "manly" they really are.

It seems that the overpowering and humiliation of another person is as important as having sexual intercourse with her, that the event promises more than physical gratification for the rapist. Debra Lewis sees it in power terms. "If you're a person who doesn't feel very powerful or important, you're going to have the same attitude towards your body. The more degraded you can make your victim feel; the more you feed your own need. There is a large frequency of the rapist demanding the woman tell him she likes it, that she loves him, that she will go out with him after. It's a situation in which he has perfect control at last."

So, when a man rapes woman, a lot more is going on than just non-consensual intercourse, more even than a power struggle", although that is certainly at the heart of it, as far as the victim is concerned. In the course of my research, it was pointed out time and again that rape is about violence and power. It is a measure of our social malaise that we group these things with sex.

'He said, "Give me one good reason why you should live because I want to kill you". I was terrified, I didn't want to die. I gave him what I considered to be a pretty good reason, that I was a human being and had as much right to live as anybody else. He said that wasn't good enough. He laughed and told me to come up with something else. He told me I had no right to be alive.'

On the one hand, men are taught that women, being supposedly the softer and weaker sex, are in need of their gentle, manly protection; on the other hand, there are pervasive social messages in films, literature, music, television, that women are, in fact, venal, lascivious and masochistic. The rapist as a product of this generalized hostility toward femaleness and the sentimentality around femininity often makes what can be called the compromise of singling out certain kinds of women as rape victims. His mother and sister he'd defend to the death, but, the "broad down the street" in the tight sweater who went to bed with his buddy is fair game. Better still if she's non-white, unmarried, living on her own and working class. Amir writes that rapists are more apt to view certain females as appropriate victims and certain situations as suggestive of, even opportune for, rape. This is not only because these women have low social status and therefore aren't considered "worth" so much, 'but also because forcible intercourse with them isn't even perceived as rape.

'I thought about my parents and what a drag it was going to be for them when my body was found, I got really angry about hurting them. I said, "Look, if you don't get off me, I'm going to kill you." He looked at me and said, "You're crazy, aren't you?" I was playing his game, and it worked. He drove me back to the city. As we were driving, he said he thought we could become good friends and he told me his address three or four times. I think he was probably as scared as I was.'

Although the police advise women not to resist an attack for fear of provoking even more violence, the Denver study shows that a women can stop a rape (at the hands of a stranger) at stage one by refusing to be intimidated. "Above all, the rapist needs ordered and controlled behavior from his victim." As women become more self-confident and aware of their own strength, the incidence of rape may begin to decrease: the Denver study pointed out that "resisters (of rape attempts) scored higher on measures of dominance and sociability... were more self-accepting and had a greater sense of well being (than those who did not resist)."

And maybe fighting back is the only real deterrent there is. It is pretty obvious to everyone that our legal system is not a deterrent at all. It is estimated that only one third to one tenth of all rapes committed are reported to the police. Many women who do report attacks never get into a courtroom. They find the interrogation by the police to be such a brutal process that they don't press charges.

The first thing the police detective said to me was: "What's the matter, didn't he pay you enough money?" I couldn't believe it.

He asked me if I had enjoyed it, he said I must have enjoyed it; look at the way I dress. I must be promiscuous. Then he told me that if I couldn't take this kind of questioning now, I wouldn't be able to take it later in court. Did I really want to press charges?

So the percentage of cases actually brought to court is small and only a few of them actually result in conviction. In many cases the conviction that is finally obtained may not be for rape, but for a reduced charge of indecent assault. It is important to note that the charge of rape (which can be punished by a life sentence) applies only to forcible penetration of the vagina (less than 50% of the cases examined in the Denver study involved vaginal rape).

For the victim, any kind of assault and sexual humiliation is horrible and destructive. But it seems that to jurists and legislators, to police and to the, community at large, it is an attack on the vagina, the sacred highroad to marriage and maternity that is the profoundest affront. Ontario Crown Attorney John Kerr says he has been involved in cases in which the girl had been assaulted in a horrible manner but because no actual vaginal intercourse took place the accused was liable only to a charge of indecent assault. Even though vaginal rape is obviously considered, in the eyes of the law, to be a most serious crime, Sergeant Robert Lynn of the Toronto police says he hasn't heard of a rapist in the last two years who's been sentenced even to 10 years. "The average is four to five. If he had never been in trouble before, and if he's going to be getting psychiatric help, sometimes he'll only get two to three. Sometimes it makes you wonder."

Kerr isn't encouraged by this trend to leniency among judges and juries.

While no one is suggesting that we should go back to the old days, and in a fury of vengeance castrate a rapist, even whip him, Kerr worries that "with our changing standards of morality, maybe juries aren't treating rape so seriously anymore."

We know that rape statistics are rising drastically throughout North America. In part, this is because greater numbers of women are actually willing to press charges. But there are more pervasive reasons. The so called Sexual Revolution of the Sixties "liberated" both men and women from the inhibiting restraints of a more puritanical sexual ethic. Then, with the women's movement for independent status, many of the protective, Victorian devices surrounding women were withdrawn. A woman who insists on taking care of herself can no longer be an object of male solicitude. It was only when a woman was seen as fluffy, delicate, and helpless that male protective "instincts" toward her seemed sensible. A woman on her own is fair game.

What, then, is to be done? How do we make our legal system a real deterrent to rapists? How do we make it capable of protecting the civil rights of women without resorting to extreme "law and order" measures? The prosecution of rape charges might be made easier by legislating different degrees of rape, -carrying different maximum sentences. Police departments should establish units such as New York's Sex Crimes Analysis Unit. Besides receiving and processing all cases of rape and attempted rape, it also tries to reeducate male officers in their attitudes to sex crimes. As of this writing, no police department in Canada has tried to set up anything like it

The legal profession has to realize that whatever the psychosexual transactions between a man and a woman during a rape, the physical intimidation involved in the crime is a serious matter. Barbara Botcherman of Toronto's Rape Crisis Centre thinks that the way rape cases are handled now, particularly because of Section 142 of the Criminal Code (which requires a judge to instruct a jury that it is not safe to believe a woman on her word alone), they are ipso facto prejudicial.

Obviously there is no single remedy that is going to eradicate sexual assaults on women. Legislative changes are required, so are "rape squads" in police departments. So are rape crisis centres and rape groups and pamphlets. But these kinds of changes only deal with the aftermath of a rape. If we want to stop rape, we have to figure out how to grow up as human beings.