

## Beautiful, Lifetime Women

The first thing they tell you in recovery is that rape is not about sex. They tell you rape is about power.

That's a lie.

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In 2004 I weighed two-hundred pounds, a solid size twenty with the occasional happy slide back into eighteen. I spent the majority of my teenage years heavy, and perpetually out of breath. When I walked, I tried to hide how short of breath I was by yawning, shielding my mouth, hoping I looked tired instead of strangled by my weight. I was ashamed of the exertion, the effort it took to haul my body around.

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If you go to the *Internet Movie Data Base* and do a key word search for “rape”, you get 3,047 titles. If you refine that search by type, “television” in this case, and read through the titles and production companies you will notice a prevalence of the *Lifetime Television Network* on that list.

*Lifetime's* body of work consists of variation on two themes: Women in Peril, and Triumph Over Adversity.

The *Lifetime* movie heroine is blond, brunette or red-headed, usually white, frequently middle class and always beautiful. She is a teacher, cheer leader and career woman. She is a young mother (abused or bravely single or both). She is a jaded lawyer one week and an optimistic grad student, the next. She is every kind of woman, this *Lifetime* heroine, loyally

reflecting the variation of her target audience, assuming a cornucopia of alternate personas with the utility of a Barbie doll. Her occupation and romantic status are superfluous necessities, secondary minutiae to her primary function: she is there to be a victim and to this end, rape is her trope of choice. The details don't matter; the means of her victimhood are as disposable as her backstory. Whether it's a tense, quick walk across a dark parking lot, a suspicious rattle in a supposedly locked apartment or a coat room at a loud and crowded party, the point is that this "every day woman" suffers and survives beautifully. After a brief struggle and an off-screen scream she reappears, dazed and bruised, but luminous. There are tears of course, and artful tangles of hair, a dramatic bit of red, and a well-placed cut, but nothing that goes beyond propriety, nothing that looks like it can't be mended on this beautiful *Lifetime* woman, her femininity highlighted by the violence endeared, her violation exploited in a soft focus image that borders on reverence.

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There are no broken noses, no blotchy prune-purple bruises squatting between blood shot eyes; no skin mottled with rotten yellows and greens; no thick, doughy necks ringed raw where hands, cords, belts or panties were knotted and pulled tight; no pimples, moles or those funny patches of rosy pink pinpricks some women have on their flabby upper arms; no snot, sweat, seamen or shit; no sour milk thighs or pendulous breasts, or heavy bellies sagging over shadowed mounds and no creases where the skin folds over itself; there are no fat victims on *Lifetime*.

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During a rape kit procedure you are asked to strip over a large square of paper. It's the same paper they pull across examination tables at dentist appointments and at the OBGYN, so it crinkles loudly, and feels weirdly tacky under foot. Every time I moved, I was afraid it would rip.

My assault nurse was a petite woman, shorter than me; she came up to my shoulder, dainty as a doll. I didn't want to look at her. And I didn't want her to look at me. She was kind and she was patient, gentle as she could possibly be, but I did not want to be naked in front of this skinny woman. I cried when she asked me –softly, and with compassion - to take my clothes off one article at a time. If you consent to a rape kit this is a necessary cruelty, something that has to be done and there is no robe or blanket to protect you from it.

Later, I learned that some women float through the entire thing, gawkily following directions while another part watches, blandly observing the initial strip, specimen comb, and swab sample – a numb, unobstructed view only post traumatic dissonance can provide. A former sex-worker who was in my support group told me she couldn't move during hers at all. She was paralyzed, the glint of the speculum made her stiff and stupid. Eventually, she had to have another nurse - swaddled in a sterile paper gown and latex gloves - remove her clothes for her and manipulate her limbs.

I did not float. I was anchored to the paper, weighed down by how much I hated it and how afraid I was of ruining it, nervously fidgeting as my nurse took pictures. This is standard procedure in a rape kit. All lacerations are photographed in triplicate, every dark crevice documented, my body reduced to pillaged terrain, the gummy earth of a mangled battle field,

mapped and measured by rulers and swabs. There are no secrets in a rape kit, nothing that the bruised and battered body can keep to itself.

I looked at my picture.

It was pale, fat and ugly, spoiled rotten through and through.

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I've always been heavy. I've always weighed more than books, movies, and magazines told me I should, and consequently, I've always been on diets - on pills, fads and Pilates. I had a brief and passionate love affair with amphetamines in my sophomore year, culminating in a trip to the ER. I raised the white flag after that. I knew this body had reached its capacity for pain in the pursuit of visual pleasure and by pure necessity I decided I was happy with my weight. Naysayers were instructed to go fuck themselves. This improved my social life dramatically, and I fancied that it gave me a certain sex appeal, that I had generated an attractive mystique out of pure stubbornness. That made me feel strong. I was fat but I had confidence.

The photograph in my rape kit completely destroyed it.

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In 2007, director Wes Craven decided to do a remake of his own 1972 movie, *The Last House on the Left*, in which a teenage girl, Mari, is beaten, raped and left for dead, only to miraculously return to her family, who in turn go on a vengeful rampage against her attackers.

In an interview, Carven said he didn't want superficially sexy casting for Mari's character, nothing that would "titillate" viewers during "hardcore scenes". He selected Sara Paxton for her wholesome, innocent face and "American physique", which presumably, lacked titillation.

That year, Paxton was photographed nude to promote her role as a successful super model in a series called *The Beautiful Life*.

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I used to walk around holding the front of my shirts away from my stomach, a fold of fabric pinched between my thumb and index finger. I did this so people wouldn't see the way my belly lugged over the top of my jeans.

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Marty had been a sex worker for four years when I met her. She was older than me, hollow-cheeked, insect-thin and beginning to sag under the combined weight of her drug addiction and wilting health. She was raped in drug rehab by her roommate.

She attended the same support group I did, but did so with a hostile silence I sometimes admired - her ropey arms crossed, knobby knees stubbornly open, eyes like two flat pennies as she watched the other women stutter and cry through their stories.

At eighteen Deborah was tall, and gangly, long armed and large handed with wide pointed ears. She had a narrow nose and dark, heavy eyebrows that weighed her face down. She

liked to sit next to me and hold my hand, squeezing it with her cool spidery fingers whenever she thought I was upset, which was often.

One session, a woman told us her mother laughed when she told her that her father had been raping her. Deborah let go of my hand.

Quietly. “Mine said it’s not rape if you’re ugly.”

Marty uncrossed her arms, and her voice, when she spoke was clipped, angry. “If you’re not pretty, it’s only rape if they don’t fucking *pay* you.”

I threw up.

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There were a lot of things I hated about rape recovery – the food, the nurses, the fact I was there, the constant assurances that we were safe. But *this* was the worst, this thing we couldn’t bring ourselves to talk about until our stay was nearly over. And even then, even after someone finally gave in and said it, it was spoken of only in halting fragments, bitten out with a shame so thick our confessions were accented, heavy and foreign in our mouths. The center took great pains to impress upon us certain truths; it’s not your fault, you are not dirty, you are loveable. These were professionals, old hands at the whole aching business of shepherding traumatized women, and not a few men, through the aftermath of rape, the havoc of fear it raises and the sickness it leaves behind. There was little they hadn’t seen before. Some women crawled deep inside themselves, others grew furious, and some refused to eat. Treating variations of self-

disgust was their lot, but what Deborah said - *that* was a thing we spoke of with bitterness so acidic and ugly that not even our counselors quite knew what to do with it.

What do you tell women who believe they aren't beautiful enough to have been raped?

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It happened. Not every time, but some of the time. Enough. The Look. That incredulous, raised eye-brow, that disbelieving stare or coyly indulgent, wry smile that people still sometimes give me when I tell them I'm a rape survivor.

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*Rape is about power.*

This statement is correct, but it's not true.

For the predator rape is absolutely about power. The concept of "attraction" in this context is defined by oppression, the satisfaction of inflicting a more powerful body (his) on another (mine) in the most base and violating way possible. Aesthetic is not a factor here.

But for a rape survivor - for me, for every woman *like* me - who was either too big, too flat or too homely, who was always a little too dark or too pale, freckled, or hairy in the wrong places, trafficking in an excess of flesh, toting a wide nose, too thin lips or a broad, square chin; for any woman with a deficit of symmetry, a surplus of crooked teeth or heavy, stooping brows; for women whose bodies would *never* be played in a movie by some sleek pretty thing, that statement is a lie.

If you look a certain way, rape is about sex and how you are not desirable enough for it to happen to you.

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I try to look at my body as an “is”, rather than an “in progress”, to live in and love it without the hateful distraction of imagined improvements. It’s harder than it should be. They make it harder, those beautiful *Lifetime* women. All those perfect figures and faces never spoiled beyond recognition by violence, the sickness of self-hate or the poison that comes from doubt and dismissal. It’s difficult to understand how an image as light as air can fill the body with a rot so deep we can hardly bear to speak of it, even among ourselves. This much is true: we were taught to feel that way about ourselves, and each other.

There’s no more room in the body, the already taxed and overburdened body, for that kind of shame. It’s unbearable, unpalatable – it takes up the space where *we* should be instead.

It’s far too much to carry, but it is so, so difficult to put down.