

# Intertext

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## When It Happened

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*Content warning: indirect and direct mention of sexual assault.*

It was about four months before I started my freshman year at Syracuse University when I said to my therapist, “I know this sounds fucked up, but I really feel like it’s more a matter of ‘when’ rather than ‘if’ I get raped in college.” There was a moment of dead silence. As she processed what I had just said, her eyes softened with a sadness caused by her inability to assure me otherwise. According to the *Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Misconduct*, 26.4% of undergraduate women experience rape or sexual assault (Cantor et al.). While we hear the statistic “1-in-5 women” all the time, digesting the harsh reality was its own pill to swallow. There was a part of me that

believed if I made peace with the idea that it *would* happen, it would not be as traumatizing when it *did* happen.

I saw myself as a strong feminist who had no tolerance for the bullshit that surrounded rape culture; if I was ever raped, I would not spare the monster I knew my rapist to be. I would squeeze out any morsel of justice I could from our unjust-justice system. I would not be one of the women who didn’t fight back. I would not quiver in embarrassment and self-doubt as I shared my story. No one would dare to tell me it wasn’t rape.

In my cynical fantasy, I imagined myself to be this idealized, clear-headed, strong-willed, and confident version of myself who

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never wavered in my pursuit of justice; not just for myself, but for all victims. My assault would not be one of the many unreported cases that dominate our projected statistics. I always defended the victims who never filed a report, while never intending to be one myself.

Something I rarely imagined—in the recurring nightmare of my hypothetical rape and the related chain of events—was my sisters being main characters. More unforeseen than their significant involvement was that it would be a negative addition, rather than a positive one. Yet here I am—three months and four days post-rape—constantly fighting the urge to blame myself. I cannot fathom

being the strong woman I've always intended to be, while simultaneously being the victim of such a cliché rape vignette (Hockett et al.). With that said, I cannot change the past, nor am I willing to discount any of my strength to justify my actions—or, really, lack thereof. This leaves me forced to face my internalized victim-blaming misogyny that made me believe the two are mutually exclusive.

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I opened my eyes slowly and started to sense my surroundings. The blank white wall returned my stare as my brain tried to piece together the puzzle that was the drunken night before. I looked down to realize I was completely naked. Confused by my

nude state, considering I never slept naked, I looked around for my clothes, but the bed was bare besides the white sheet that clung to the corners of the mattress. The gray duvet cover had fallen to the floor, entangled with the top sheet. A wave of dizziness rushed over me as I stood up. I closed my eyes and waited a moment for the world to stop spinning. I bent down and picked up my clothes from the night before, bunched up and inside out. I had no clue that the uneasiness and confusion I felt in that moment was only the beginning of the trauma.

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It took me three days of intense contemplation to admit that it was rape and another few days for my mother to believe it. And my sisters? I told them I had been raped exactly seven days after it happened, but instead of listening, they dismissed me. Their harsh words planted a seed that grew into a voice of doubt, eventually the roots became so entangled in my mind that I no longer saw the

lent, technical detail that did not dictate the bounds of our love.

I struggled to understand how they saw things so differently from everyone else I told. My therapist knew it was a result of their own trauma response and the generational differences of our decade-long age-gap. Jericho Hockett and his colleagues' article "Rape Myths, Rape Scripts, and Common Rape Experiences of College Women: Differences in Perceptions of Women Who Have Been Raped" perfectly explains why: "if women believe that a rape did not truly occur or that the blame for rape lays with victims due to some easily identifiable and avoidable variable that appears to justify the sexual violence the victims experienced, women may cognitively distance themselves from the possibility of their own potential rape victimization." My sisters validating my experience and defining it as "rape" would force a reexamination of past experiences that they didn't want to engage in, so the re-

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voice as just an extension of my sisters' opinions. Rather, I believed them as my own.

For weeks after, it was radio silence from both sisters. I could not understand why they—my "ride or dies" and survivors themselves—were not offering an ounce of support. The longer I waited to hear from them, the less I felt they loved me and the louder the echo of "half" became in "half-sisters," something I had always thought of as a si-

sult was a drastic decline of communication. With each day, the wedge grew, distancing us until they felt like strangers.

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In the weeks following the rape, I was in survival mode. I tried to disconnect myself from anything that reminded me of him or the assault, but I could not run away from myself. I was drowning in psychological exhaustion and torturous symptoms of post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I searched for ways to numb the pain of my trauma. I started to be constantly dissociative, protecting myself from the intense and overwhelming emotions I would otherwise feel.

The idea of reporting the incident did not cross my mind until someone asked me whether I planned to. I had been so focused on trying to hold myself together; I hadn't even considered possible next steps. The power I held of potentially ruining his life, and knowing he was now at the mercy of *my* will, felt like a bigger responsibility than I wanted to carry. Fucking up someone else's life as retribution for fucking up mine didn't feel like justice; it felt cruel. Even though he raped me, I couldn't bear the burden of being the variable that ruined his life. Not because I worried about his feelings, but because I feared for the potential harm he would cause if I limited his opportunities. Maybe pressing charges would've been worth it if I felt it could have given me a sense of peace or healing, but all I could envision was a sledgehammer leaving a wake of sorrow and trauma—the ending never being worth the means it took to achieve it. So, I didn't, and I don't regret it; the additional tribulations and obstacles that are certain to arise with pressing charges was more than I was willing to suffer. Despite the confidence I have in my choice, I still feel shame for not being strong enough to convict my rapist.

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My eldest sister chose to act as if it never happened. When I was struggling with schoolwork caused by the PTSD I was experiencing, she said my lack of focus was due to being out of practice after my gap year, not even acknowledging that my recent trauma could be in any way responsible. 94% of

women who are raped experience symptoms of PTSD in the two weeks after the assault, yet my sister refused to admit anything I was experiencing to be a symptom of PTSD related to my rape (Riggs et al.).

Three months later, and I'm still plagued by the trauma daily. There are triggers all around me. I shudder when someone mentions rape or sex. I stiffen with anticipatory anxiety of potential run-ins with my rapist on the regular because he lives three floors above me. I am haunted. The air around me is heavier than it used to be. I lost a part of myself, the confidence of knowing oneself. The brilliance of life, in all respects, lost a touch of its sparkle. I've plateaued in chronic apathy. I do not know my own boundaries anymore, but I long for the day I do again.

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