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Wed07

## Straight Back Chair

Posted by [Katy](#) on Dec 7, 2011 in [Sarah Plummer](#) | [3 comments](#)



My mom takes something readable with her wherever she goes – magazines, newspapers, books – anything will do as long as she can read at any given moment. She also likes to share what she's read, often saving newspaper

clippings of passages deemed worthy of re-reading or ones that adeptly express an opinion she held or describe a matter she considers important. She mails them off to me wherever I live or holds onto them until she sees me in person. Recently, my mom snipped and saved *this* piece, from Chapel Hill's ***The News and Observer*** "[Silent fight: Sex assault against servicewomen.](#)" [Sunday September 18, 2011, page 19A.] The article, written by Melissa Dribben, states, "A 2010 study commissioned by the DOD found about 70-80% of victims [of sexual abuse or assault] do not report their attacks. Soldiers remain silent because they fear that they will not be believed or that they will be blamed for sending mixed messages. They worry about being branded as weak or damaged or untrustworthy. Among the few victims who come forward, even fewer press charges."

I know why women don't want to tell....because you cannot imagine (before it happens to you) that it COULD ever happen to a self-sufficient woman like you....a strong person like you...a *Marine*, for crying out loud. This sort of thing (I preferred not to name it at first) only happened to unfortunate idiots – not that any woman ever "asks for it" – just that, well, they must've been *not smart* in some way for *that* to happen to them. Of course I thought rape was horrible for people who truly were victims, but knew with certainty it would not – could not – ever happen to me. Plus, what about all those highly publicized cases where then it turned out that the victim was falsely accusing someone in order to cover up a misdeed of their own? Those seemed to be the cases people talked about most. I rarely recall hearing about a poor girl who was raped by a classmate without at least a hint of skepticism. Surely the statistics couldn't be correct – that nearly one out of every three women has been sexually assaulted or raped. Maybe those numbers only applied in shady towns, or they referenced attacks on innocent, helpless children by leering, pedophile next-door neighbors.

Therefore, when "it" happened to me two months before my twenty-second birthday, my natural conclusion immediately after the event was that it was my fault. Somehow it was easier to blame myself, punish myself, commit to knowing I needed to change something about myself than to say I'd been sexually assaulted, let alone *raped*. I perceived myself as a successful go-getter, so this was merely a mistake that needed correcting in order to keep climbing my internal ladder. I'd been drinking that evening, so it must have been a simple case of alcohol-induced judgment impairment. Thus, I imposed a quick fix – I resolved to cut back on drinking and turn up the heat on my self-discipline regimens.

I talked to my best male friend, a fellow Marine Corps ROTC midshipman, the next day. He was also my Christian "accountability partner," so on a friendship and faith level, I shared the basic details of the night. I told him I was all for taking the blame, admitting it was my screw up, that I should have reacted faster, should have stopped it, something, anything. I did, however, concede, "I hate to say this, but I *think* it... could've actually been..." and I whispered the word, "rape."

His reply still echoes in my memories today. "Sarah, c'mon, that's not rape," he said. "Rape is when you're tackled in a dark alley by a stranger who forces himself on you." I felt like I was in an afterschool special. Friend 1 tells Friend 2 they think they were raped. Friend 2 responds with comment x. Knowing Friend 2's comment is incorrect, how should Friend 1 respond?

But it wasn't a made for TV special, it was my life, and I was in disbelief. As naïve as my perceptions were about this sort of thing, even I knew that was a bogus comment. He loved me as a friend, was an educated young adult, yet even *he* didn't get it. I wasn't mad at him, though – not then and not now. I accept that this isn't one of those things everyone will get

and that even though the fact is that rapes are overwhelmingly committed by a person the victim knows, people still have the stranger stereotype in their minds.

Days passed. But something still *hung* there. I ruminated over the night, the sequence of events, looking for clues as to how it could've happened, where I stumbled, where I could place more concrete culpability on myself and move forward under that pretense of self-blame. The memories of that night rolled through my head, like a movie reel of a tide coming in. I was the character suspended in front of myself. Immediately after kicking my assailant down my stairs, screaming, flailing, throwing punches, and shoving him out the door, I called my then-fiancé, but he was asleep and didn't answer. (An occurrence he'd incessantly guilt himself over for years to come). I then called one of my best friends at the time, Megan. My lyrics came lurching out in puffs and spurts, along with tears and snot, and I gulped for what certainly wasn't enough air to form the words I needed. I told her what had happened; I told her I was confused; I told her I felt like it all happened in slow motion, but as soon as I realized what was going on, I started screaming at the guy, telling him to stop; that I ran away from him and up to my room crying uncontrollably. All of this did not sound like a case of bad judgment to me. I also recalled that he immediately began a mantra of "I'm sorry, calm down, it's all my fault, it's *my* fault" indicated it wasn't a consensual "oops." When I ran away from him, he followed me to my room saying, "I know it's wrong, but I can't help myself" while he started to force himself on me again. "No. No. No." I repeated the word, drawing it out. He obviously wasn't in his right mind. That doesn't make it any less wrong.

He was a friend, though. If you've never had something like this happen to you, you may have trouble envisioning an attack as being anything other than black and white. That is what I used to think – "Why are all these rape cases so convoluted? Either the guy or girl said yes, or he or she didn't. End of story." It may not be easier, but if it is a stranger, in some ways it may feel clearer that you were a *victim*. The fact that it was a close friend made it all the more unfathomable, all the more earth shattering, all the more core-rocking to the depths of my identity. The fact that it was a fellow Marine Corps Officer in training made it unreal.

A few days after it happened, I went to my MOI and told him I didn't want to be a Marine anymore. I told him I knew the Corps wasn't an utopia, neither was the rest of the world, and that bad people existed everywhere, but that I'd seen some things recently that made me believe I couldn't, shouldn't, no longer wanted to be, associated with the Marines.

Less than two years before, I'd put everything in my 20-year-old existence of a life on the line in order to pursue the calling to be a Marine. Physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, I had bull-whipped myself toward growth and success. I went from being able to do zero pull ups to fourteen. I went from not being able to climb a rope once with no gear on to being able to climb it several times back to back with combat boots and wearing a flic and a flack. I went from being a totally flustered fire team leader to calling commands and cadence as platoon commander. During those two years I went from holding unbeliever religious status to being a new Christian and having courage to follow God wherever He lead me.

But now, there I sat – concave – in front of a man I revered. He was positioned behind his ship-like mahogany desk; I sat in an old-school leather straight back wooden chair with brass nail head trim around the edges. It was one of those chairs that made you sweat no matter what mood you were in. Half a dozen times in our conversation, I paused, about to

say something more about what had happened, to tell him a fellow midshipman had done something to me I couldn't yet articulate...but I didn't. I wept and told him I faced the deepest doubt yet about my path.

I don't remember exactly what he said to me that afternoon, two weeks away from my commissioning, but he convinced me to see it through. Maybe he thought it was just a particularly bad case of self-doubt I faced that week, as midshipmen were always knocking on his office door with the desire to sit and vent our questions about being Corps-worthy. We always knew we'd leave feeling reassured without having been patronized. He had a gift.

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### **Matriculate This**

Other than once whispering the question to my friend, I didn't even call it "rape" for weeks after it happened because that word wasn't in my vocabulary with respect to *myself*. It was an unknown quantity, like cancer, that only happened to other people. You felt bad for those people. I saw rape as something that could be prevented if certain steps were followed.

In what would have been the normal whirlwind of events of matriculation, I went on with my life in a hurry – I finished finals, graduated from college, then got commissioned without any noticeable external hiccups, and I never officially reported it because I didn't have the means to. (I graduated from school and hovered in the gray area of being a commissioned officer in the United States Marine Corps but with no orders, so I was entitled to no benefits or care. I spent time with my parents in Georgia and my fiancé in Florida and waited to get told to report to TBS.) There was one exception to the calm façade – the night before my graduation when the creeping crack kept in check throughout the day violently ripped open like a fault line. The flesh and blood of my soul earth quaked out. I kicked my bedroom door off the hinges. I screamed, cried, moaned and yelled simultaneously. I slurred words, explaining the rape over and over again to my fiancé until I eventually collapsed in his arms.

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I imagine it must be worse, in a way, if you're a man and this happens to you. Or maybe being a Marine and it happening to you is like being a man – the assault must cut even deeper into your notion that *I am strong*. If you see yourself as meant to be the ultimate kind of sturdy – whether by societal or institutional definitions – then how can you even accept that you were in one of the most vulnerable positions possible?

I read a response to one of SWAN's blog posts [November 1, 2011](#) by a man named "Ted." Several of his comments resonated deeply with me. He spoke of the core values of the Army, then of insult being added to injury in regards to his command's handling of his report of having been sexually assaulted. He then mentioned how when he went to another command and reported the event again, it was also to no avail of proper handling or care. He said, "*As a man, I have different emotions and realities that I have to deal with, being that traditionally the man is the protector of the family. If I didn't protect myself, how could I ever protect someone else? That is an impossible question to answer yet it plagues me. I had no choice in the assault, I was lying in a bed passed out from alcohol, yet it still is troubling. There is a sense that my own masculinity was compromised. Now how do I go about*

*redefining something that I had never truly defined in the first place? It was just there, but now I know that there is something missing. Explaining what was lost is nearly impossible, but it is one of the things that I must overcome. It's learning to live and forgive, not just my attackers, but myself, and to trust again – those are my difficulties.”*

His words ring true for many of us – man or woman, Army or Marine, recovering or recovered.

## 3 Visitor Comments

1.

[Sarah](#) March 14, 2012

I believe it's possible to say that God is in control without that meaning that God "allowed" me to be raped or that He is my puppet master. To me, as awful as this particular experience was, and as far reaching as the ramifications were, I would never pluck this incident from my life's past because through it I have grown, through it I have deepened my faith, and through it I have been able to help others. It has been a more difficult path to walk at some times than others, that's for sure, but in the big picture, I am happy, healthy, and grateful for every day I have. Thank you Walter and Ted for sharing your comments. 😊 Blessings to you both, in gratitude and friendship. ~Sarah

[Reply](#)

2.

ted December 12, 2011

lets be real here, God is not a puppet master, he allows humans to make their own choices, saying that "God is in control" gives the implications that He willed someone to be raped or violently attacked, when in fact that is all within human control, without getting too deep into theology, He does have ways to make the best option the one that is chosen by us(though we may not like it). that is why paul could say, "all things work to the glory of God for those that trust in Him" romans 8:28

when i posted the blog i had no clue as to what to expect, and to be honest i couldnt check my email or facebook for a bout a week afterward, it was quite the process of sharing something so personal to a vast audience that had me terrified. not just the assault, but my personal struggles, and now i must say that it is an odd feeling seeing that others can identify with it, i have spent so much time focused on myself, to see someone else say that they feel the same way, it is much relief. im glad that you were able to share, as it has encouraged me to continue to share my story with whoever will listen, and become a voice for those that suffer and think that no one else understands.

be blessed

ted skovranek ii

[Reply](#)

3.

Walter December 8, 2011

Let me start by saying that it was NOT your fault. Let me next state the God IS in control. I don't know why this happened but I am glad you are reaching to educate. I am proud of who you are and what you are doing.

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1. [Marine Chick | Marine Chick](#) - [...] <http://servicewomen.org/2011/12/straight-back-chair/> [...]

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