

Rape Victim's Plea for Maximum Sentence*

by Rachel V.

I have traveled to Hartford from my home in Canada so that you would see for yourselves the woman John Doe raped. This isn't easy for me. For several weeks now I have dreaded this visit—going back to a city I now associate with pain, to look into the face of a man who is responsible for the last eight and a half months of confusion, shame, anger, depression and fear.

It was a rainy Sunday morning last June when, while visiting my cousin and her husband here in Hartford, I decided to go jogging in Elizabeth Park. I won't re-tell this story in excessive detail because John Doe has already pleaded guilty and because I spend most of my time trying to forget the details of that morning: getting jumped and knocked to the ground, the loss of breath caused by the Walkman wrapped around my neck, listening to the cars drive while I was forced to take off most of my clothes and lie back almost naked on open grass while a strange man raped me both orally and through penetration, closing my eyes after he ordered me to not look at his face, listening to my voice trying to convince this man to leave my clothes on the ground and to not hurt me, the escape out of the park and then running down the street clutching my shoes in my hands, sitting in the kitchen of a stranger while she called the police, and then seeing the faces of my brother and cousin's husband as they came into the kitchen, the trip to the hospital, the overwhelming feeling of nausea, the doctor taking semen samples and counseling me about the dangers of AIDS as a result of the rape, the raging headache caused by being knocked to the ground, going back to my cousin's apartment and throwing up.

All of that was horrible, like some sort of surreal nightmare. But because I have since spoken to several people who have been raped, I can tell you what other rape victims will tell you: maybe the worst moment is right at the beginning_ that first few seconds when I realized I was about to get jumped, and when I realized my life would never, ever be the same.

At times, my most overwhelming feeling is that I am lucky. That is true. Since last June, almost no day goes by that I don't realize how lucky I was that John Doe didn't kill me. The first few months after the rape, I cried at completely irrational and inappropriate moments just thinking about how close and easy death really is—how a stranger can, in a few minutes, take your life away. But John Doe didn't kill me. Instead, he left me alive to deal with all the fear, shame, confusion, depression, and pain associated with being a survivor.

I am 30 years old and have lived alone for many years. After the rape, I returned to my apartment in Canada and attempted to return to my normal life. Easier said than done. I think surviving a rape is a process of re-education. Why? Mostly because you

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have to learn to live with fear. My apartment, the park across the street from my apartment, the streets around my apartment—they all became scary places. So did my bedroom at night. For months, I was afraid to go to sleep because I was convinced that John Doe or some other attacker was going to climb through my window or come bursting through my front door. I was also afraid of nightmares, and of re-living the rape and its aftermath over and over again in my sleep.

Daytime was no great relief. There is the overwhelming sense of sadness which at times seemed to swallow me up. The five-block walk to the metro from my apartment became traumatic for me. The five-block walk to the metro from my apartment became traumatic for me. Often I found myself starting to scream if strangers got too close to me on the street, and I jumped upon hearing even the slightest sound behind me. Downtown was worse. Even now, I sometimes have panic attacks. My breathing becomes short, my vision becomes blurry, and I feel a wave of irrational anxiety that someone is following me, or is about to touch me or jump on top of me. I feel vulnerable and exposed. I still haven't quite figured out what to do about that, though certainly months of counseling and therapy is helping. One of the main decisions I have made is to stay in Canada. The thought of returning to the United States, where so much rape and violence is now the norm seems incomprehensible to me.

There is also a physical side to surviving a rape—besides the obvious. John Doe has a prison record, which doctors told me puts him in a higher risk group for AIDS. For several months I lived with the uncertainty of the possibility that I might be a risk for AIDS. On the advice of a doctor back home in Canada, I decided to take the drug AZT as a means for slowing down the disease if I had, in fact, contracted it. (I was also advised that this was one way to pressure the courts to get John Doe tested.) This is not a small step. The drug AZT is powerfully toxic. It made me nauseous and extremely tired. It also gave me a constant low-grade headache and caused rectal bleeding. All this, in addition to living for a few months with the great unknown of AIDS and the regular visits to the AIDS clinic at a local hospital where they drew blood and prescribed AZT.

At one point during this whole nightmare of the last many months, a prosecutor from the State Prosecutor's Office asked me if I thought John Doe had ever raped anyone else before me. I realized that the answer was so obvious, I had never before asked myself the question. After all these months, I am as sure today as I was then that he has raped other women. This fact is one of the most upsetting aspects of this whole experience for me. The idea that he could go back out onto the streets of Hartford and put some other woman through the same terrifying and life-threatening experience a few years from now? I would be wrong to travel all this distance if I did not take a few more moments of your time to say something about the legal system here in this state. I am not a lawyer, nor have I ever been involved in any other case in my life. But in these last several months I have learned a lot. What I have come to realize is that the system is not self-evident. What I mean by this is that much of the burden falls upon the victim to push the system in order to make the system work as it ideally should work.

Many individuals were very supportive. My comments are directed at the system as a whole.

First of all, I think all rapists should automatically be obliged to get an AIDS test. In this day and age, the victim should not have to ask—much less plead. Further, a Victim Bill of Rights and other such aids would go a long way in helping rape victims in this state to educate themselves about their rights and to use the system to see justice served. In my case, I have the education and resources at my disposal to help me push the system. I worry about other women who are raped in this state—women who have less education and fewer resources or support on their side. Rape is not like being robbed. To be raped is to be personally and intimately violated and exposed. There is already enough shame and social stigma attached to raped. The system should make it as easy as possible on the victim so that more victims will do the work necessary to put rapists behind bars.

Most importantly, you can show that the State of Connecticut is serious about prosecuting rapists by sending John Doe to jail for a maximum term. I understand from police that he has a criminal record. By committing another crime, he has already shown a disregard for the rules of the State. Does the court honestly believe that this man will walk out of jail a few years from now a new man? That he will not rape other women? I certainly don't think so, and I hope you won't make the mistake of putting a rapist back on the streets of Hartford anytime soon. Please give him the maximum sentence and deny him parole eligibility. If the State can do so, please also make sure he gets treatment for sex offenders. From all the reading I have done recently, I have learned that more than any other type of criminal, sex offenders are the hardest to reform. That said, I still believe it is worth trying.

My life has changed in dozens of small and big ways since last June. Never in my wildest imagination did I ever think that I would be traveling to a Connecticut courtroom to make the case to put a stranger in jail for a very long time. But that stranger changed my life forever. It also changed the lives of my friends and family forever. I will never forget the look of profound pain and shocked helplessness on my brother's face or the tears of the women friends who shared their own experiences after they found out what happened to me. I hope when you sentence John Doe you will take into consideration not only my experience, but the reality that he could very well rape again.