codgers tell late at night around the fire (we still make fires). Younger people can't believe the stories.

"Why would anyone want to do that?" they ask. "Where's the fun in that?"

Soon the young people don't even want to hear the old stories. Rape has become alien to human experience.

I'm sure we can do this. We can do anything.

NOTES

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WHOSE BODY IS IT, ANYWAY?

TRANSFORMING OURSELVES TO CHANGE A RAPE CULTURE

PAMELA R. FLETCHER

Being in this intimate relationship with my young body, I grew to understand and confirm three things: My body belongs exclusively to me, my soul is not at rest when my body is detached, and we (body and soul) must take good care of each other.

RAPE

I NEVER HEARD THE WORD while growing up. Or if I did, I blocked it out because its meaning was too horrific for my young mind: a stranger, a weapon, a dark place, blood, pain, even death. But I do remember other people's responses to it, especially those of women. I specifically remember hearing about Rachel when I was in high school. The story was that she let a group of boys pull a train on her in the football field one night. I remember the snickers and the looks of disgust from both the girls and the boys around campus. It was common knowledge that nobody with eyes would want to fuck Rachel; she had a face marred by acne and glasses. But she had *some* body.

While I am writing this essay, I remember the stark sadness and confusion I felt then. This same sadness returns to me now, but I am no longer confused. At the time, I wondered how she could do so many guys and actually like it (!). Then I thought maybe she didn't like it after all, and maybe, just maybe, they made her do it. But the word *rape* never entered my mind. After all, she knew them, didn't she? There was no weapon, no blood. She survived, didn't she? And just what was she doing there all by herself, anyway? Now I know what *pulling a train* is. Now I know they committed a violent crime against her body and her soul. Now I know why she walked around campus with that wounded face, a face that none of us girls wanted to look into because we knew intuitively that we would see a reflection of our own wounded selves. So the other girls did not look into her eyes. They avoided her and talked about her like she was a bitch in heat. Why else would such a thing have happened to her?

I tried to look into Rachel's eyes because I wanted to know something—what, I didn't know. But she looked down or looked away or laughed like a lunatic, you know, in an eerie, loud, nervous manner that irritated and frightened me because it didn't ring true. Now I wonder if she thought such laughter would mask her pain. It didn't.

PAINFUL SILENCE AND DEEP-SEATED RAGE

I remember another story I heard, this one when I was in college. Larry told me that his close friend, Brenda, let Danny stay over one night in her summer

apartment after they had smoked some dope, and he raped her. Larry actually said that word.

"Don't tell anyone," Brenda had begged Larry. "I never should have let him spend the night. I thought he was my friend."

Larry told me not to ever repeat it to anyone else. And, trying to be a loyal girlfriend to him and a loyal friend to Brenda, I didn't say anything. When we saw Danny later at another friend's place, we neither confronted nor ignored him. We acted as though everything was normal. I felt agitated and angry. I wondered why Larry didn't say anything to Danny, you know, man to man, something like, "That shit was not cool, man. Why you go and do somethin' like that to the sista?"

It never occurred to me to say anything to Brenda, because I wasn't supposed to know, or I was supposed to act as though I didn't know—stupid stuff like that. I sat there, disconnected from her, watching her interact with people, Danny among them, acting as though everything was normal.

DENIAL

While writing this essay, I had difficulty thinking about my own related experiences. I hadn't experienced rape. Or had I? For months, in the hard drive of my subconscious mind, I searched for files that would yield any incident, of sexual violence or sexual terrorism. When certain memories surfaced, I questioned whether those experiences were real rapes.

I have some very early recollections that challenge me: Max, my first boyfriend, my childhood sweetheart, tried to pressure me into having sex with him when we were in junior high. Two of my friends, who were the girlfriends of his two closest friends, also tried to pressure me because they were already "doing it" for their "men."

"Don't be a baby," they teased. "Everybody's doing it."

But I wouldn't cave in, and I broke up with Max because he wasn't a decent boy.

A year later, when we reached high school, I went crawling back to Max because I thought I loved him and couldn't stand his ignoring me. He stopped ignoring me long enough to pin me up against the locker to kiss me roughly

and to suck on my neck long and hard, until he produced sore, purple bruises, what we called hickies. I had to hide those hideous marks from my parents by wearing turtleneck sweaters. Those hickies marked me as his property and gave his friends the impression that he had done me, even though we hadn't gotten that far yet. We still had to work out the logistics.

I hated when he gave me hickies, and I didn't like his exploring my private places as he emotionally and verbally abused me, telling me I wasn't pretty like Susan: "Why can't you look like her?" I remember saying something like, "Why don't you go be with her if that's what you want?" He answered me with a piercing don't-you-ever-talk-to-me-like-that-again look, and I never asked again. He continued, however, to ask me the same question.

In my heart, I realized that the way he treated me was wrong because I felt violated; I felt separated from my body, as if it did not belong to me. But at sixteen I didn't know how or what to feel, except that I felt confused and desperately wanted to make sense out of what it meant to be a girl trapped inside a woman's body. Yes, I felt trapped, because I understood that we girls had so much to lose now that we could get pregnant. Life sagged with seriousness. Now everybody kept an eye on us: our parents, the churches, the schools, and the boys. Confusion prevailed. Although we were encouraged to have a slight interest in boys (lest we turn out "funny") so that ultimately we could be trained to become good wives, we were instructed directly and indirectly to keep a safe distance from them.

We liked boys and we thought we wanted love, but what we really wanted was to have some fun, some clean, innocent fun until we got married and gave our virtuous selves to our husbands just as our mothers had done. We female children had inherited this lovely vision from our mothers and from fairy tales. Yet now we know that those visions were not so much what our mothers had experienced but what they wished they had experienced—and what they wanted for us.

In the early seventies, we thought going with a boy would be romance-filled fun that involved holding hands, stealing kisses, exchanging class rings, and wearing big letter sweaters. Maybe it was for some of us. But I know that many of us suffered at the hands of love.

I soon learned in high school that it was normal to be mistreated by our boyfriends. Why else would none of us admit to each other the abuse we

tolerated? These boys supposedly loved us, so we believed they were entitled to treat us in any way they chose. We believed that somehow we belonged to them, body and soul. Isn't that what so many of the songs on the radio said? And we just knew somehow that if we did give in to them we deserved whatever happened, and if we didn't give in we still deserved whatever happened. Such abuse was rampant because we became and remained isolated from each other by hoisting our romances above our friendships.

We didn't define what they did to us as rape, molestation, or sexual abuse. We called it love. We called it love if it happened with our boyfriends, and we called other girls whores and sluts if it happened with someone else's boyfriend or boyfriends, as in the case of Rachel and the train.

We called it love because we had tasted that sweet taste of pain. Weren't they one and the same?

REALIZATION

One sharp slap from Max one day delivered the good sense I had somehow lost when I got to high school. After that, I refused to be his woman, his property. When I left home for college, I left with the keen awareness that I had better take good care of myself. In my involvement with Max, I had allowed a split to occur between my body and my soul, and I had to work on becoming whole again.

I knew that I was growing stronger (although in silent isolation from other young women and through intense struggle) when I was able to successfully resist being seduced (read: molested) by several college classmates and when I successfully fought off the violent advances and the verbal abuse (what I now recognize as an attempted rape) of someone with whom I had once been sexually intimate.

But how does a woman become strong and whole in a society in which women are not permitted (as if we need permission!) to possess ourselves, to own our very bodies? We females often think we are not entitled to ourselves, and many times we give ourselves away for less than a song. The sad truth of the matter is that this is how we have managed to survive in our male-dominated culture. Yet in the wise words of the late Audre Lorde, "The Master's tools

will never dismantle the Master's house."[1] In other words, as long as we remain disconnected from ourselves and each other and dependent on abusive males, we will remain weak, powerless, and fragmented.

A NOT-SO-AMBIGUOUS BEGINNING

I am cute and three years old. My mother has braided my hair and decorated it with red barrettes. I sit on the edge of the couch dressed in a red checkered jumper that ties in the back. I swing my legs back and forth, back and forth. I lift and spread them in the air. I am making a discovery. I am in awe of my long legs and the way they move. My body tingles with pleasure. This is how a sparrow must feel while soaring freely in the sky.

"Don't ever do that again," my father says. "Always sit with your legs closed."

Suddenly my joy is squelched by the strange tone of his voice, and I crash.

This is a recurring and haunting memory.

Had I been my brother, I would not have been scolded for exploring my physical prowess. I would not have been commanded to stop my arousing behavior. My father was only doing his duty: to control me and to train me to be his proper, feminine little girl. But what is so wrong about a girl knowing and appreciating her body? Whose body is it, anyway? My tender, indomitable spirit would not surrender.

In discovering quite early that there is a strong and essential connection between body and soul, I could not stop loving and moving my legs. I simply moved my body out of my father's sight whenever my soul wanted to enter into the purely physical world that liberated me from my constrictive surroundings. In that other world, I ran races, climbed trees, roller-skated, hopscotched, and tussled with the neighborhood boys while wearing dresses with shorts underneath. And don't ask me why, but I never, ever thought that the boys were stronger and faster and braver than I. Many of them could not compete against me, especially in races. Fortunately, I had yet to encounter the myth that boys are inherently better athletes than girls. It never occurred to me to be worried about being a girl who was acting like a boy. I only did

what was natural. I was in love with my body, so if it enjoyed doing wild things, I had to make it happy.

Being in this intimate relationship with my young body, I grew to understand and confirm three things: My body belongs exclusively to me; my soul is not at rest when my body is detached; and we (body and soul) must take good care of each other. As a black woman-child living in a predominantly white, suburban world, I had to find ways to invent an affirmative reality, and I used my body to help me cement the cracks in my soul that were split open by the daily onslaught of racism that prevailed outside my home and sexism that permeated the air inside it. In elementary and junior high school, I became an athlete, specifically a runner. I sprinted the fifty-yard dash to keep from dying inside and leaped the broad jump to forget momentarily what I had to remember: I am constantly at odds with the white and male worlds.

Ironically, my father was pleased when I took first place in the fifty- and hundred-yard dashes and by my accomplishments in the 440 relay race, in which I always held the anchor position.

"You could win gold metals just like Wilma Rudolph," he said one day. He rarely missed my practices and never missed my races.

"We're going to go to the Olympics," he announced on another day with a smile. He was serious and began to coach me on the side.

My mother, on the other hand, would have nothing to do with my athletic ability or activity. It embarrassed her. "I don't know why you want to do something that's going to make your legs look muscular and ugly like a boy's."

I longed for her approval. Since she had enrolled me in ballet and tap dance lessons when I was a child, I assumed that she would be supportive of my joining a dance troupe in high school. One day I came home with my costume, ready to demonstrate the dance I had choreographed for an upcoming performance. I put on the gold leotard and the leopard-print wrap-around skirt and began to move like a sultry big cat.

"Look how skinny you are!" she laughed.

I evaporated into a wisp. Up to that moment, I had been proud of my body because it was strong and supple, so I was confused by her outburst. I didn't know what she meant by it. I just knew that somehow I felt ashamed. Later, during my dance performance, my mother's laughter and words

resounded in my head and I wished she and my shame would disappear from the auditorium.

I now know that I suffered the same bewilderment I had encountered as that three-year-old child with her legs sticking straight up in the air. Just like that child, I was doing something natural and liberating, and she, just like my father, focused solely on my body and ignored my soul. Now I know that they were distracted and troubled by the freedom I granted my body and the joy I took in connecting to myself. After all, as a female I was supposed to be bashful, restrained, and disconnected. They felt uncomfortable with my love for my body and for physical pleasure; they associated the body with shame.

Both times, my soul parried their attempts to subjugate my body. I would not allow them to constrict me because I could not allow them to split me in half, taking away my selfhood, diluting my power.

I stopped running in high school and began to dance seriously, later joining a dance troupe in college. After college, I continued to dance, run, and do whatever I felt I needed to do to free myself from the trap that society had set for women like me.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, OR, A MODERN-DAY TALE

What I did not realize then as a woman-child and what I know now is that the body-soul connection I derived from my physical activity built a strong sense of self that I now exude. This self-contained, self-assured image is what others see, especially those men who are prone to victimize and rape women. This is not an image I can see readily, but my friends and colleagues see it. "You walk in like you own the place," they tell me, or, "You move around with that don't-you-dare-mess-with-me look." I've been told, "You don't look like a victim." This attitude that I convey is rarely staged intentionally. It must be my soul guarding my body from anyone's attempt to split me in half.

I am not naive or arrogant enough to think that, because of this image, I could never or will never be raped or molested. I know all too well that I cannot control everything—or anything, for that matter. If the conditions are just right and if someone considers you vulnerable, he will strike.

Let me illustrate. Several years ago, I was granted a six-week residency at a

Wyoming arts program to work on a novel-in-progress. During that retreat, I wrote and took the necessary time to recuperate from the recent and tragic death of my partner, with whom I had had a six-year relationship. For five of those years, we had shared a home. Wyoming's desolate but serene landscape calmed me, and each day I grew spiritually stronger as I healed.

The evening before my departure, the evening before I was to venture out into the real world again, my new friends, the other residents, and I sat together at the dining table for a special going-away meal for the three of us who were leaving the next day. During this wonderfully prepared meal, we were bothered by the thick smell of smoke, but we didn't see any sign of fire. As the sun set, we discovered a gray, ominous cloud of smoke and the glorious blaze of a brush fire. I had never witnessed such a sight in person before. I was both mesmerized and frightened by it. It seemed so close. In fact, it was rapidly approaching our ranch. Volunteer fire fighters soon lined up their pickup trucks along the dirt road next to the ranch. We were instructed to go to a neighboring town twenty miles away.

The group, seven women and one man, decided to seek refuge in a bar until further notice. I had an immediate gut reaction about going to a bar because (1) I don't drink, and (2) I don't trust drunken white males. I was the only black person and I felt unsafe. I determined, however, that I would be safer with the group than I would be staying somewhere else alone. Against my better judgment, I went to this white bar in a white town, and I held my breath.

I had been in that bar for about fifteen minutes when I encountered a large, drunken white cowboy who asked me to dance. I politely declined. Before I knew what was happening, he had put down his beer bottle and begun to fidget with the fanny bag that hung around my waist. I had everything of value that I could fit inside that small pouch: cash, traveler's checks, credit cards, airline tickets, and my medicine bag.

Alarmed, I asked him, "What are you doing?"

"I'm turning this around so we can dance."

"ButIsaidIdon'twannadance."

He ignored me and seized me by my waist, lifting me up from my stool. Then he began to carry me to the dance floor with his arms wrapped tightly around my torso. The right side of my face was smashed against his chest.

My feet dangled. Realizing that my legs could not touch the ground, I suddenly became unglued. I felt shocked and afraid. How could I get away if my legs were immobilized? I repeated as calmly and slowly as possible, "I told you I don't want to dance with you. Leave me alone." I also felt stupid and wondered how I could have allowed myself to be in this white bar surrounded by virtual strangers.

When I told him that there was no music playing, he said, "Who needs music?" He continued to carry me toward the bandstand. Nearby was a pool table. Scenes from *The Accused,* a movie based on a true story in which a woman gets raped on a pool table in a bar in Bedford, Massachusetts, played in my head in accelerated motion. I thought, "I'm going to be raped. This is how it happens. I'm going to be raped." I could not believe this situation was happening to me; I felt utterly alone and terrified. Would anyone help me? Would anyone care?

Although I did and said all I could to resist, this man, who held me so tightly that I felt as if he were crushing my bones, would not hear my voice. Finally John, the lone man in my group, jumped up.

"Leave her alone; she's with me," he said, rushing up to him.

John had to say it several times before the drunk acknowledged his male voice and released me.

"All right, buddy, she's all yours," the cowboy said, jovially slapping John on his back. Actually, I was bracing myself for a barroom brawl.

What struck me at that point was that it was not safe for me to be there without a man to claim me; it took a man to save me from another man. Crudely speaking, it was a transfer of property. My body did not belong to me. It belonged to one of them. And I could not help but wonder how much of a part my color played in this madness. After all, when the cowboy entered the bar with two of his friends, they immediately walked up to me, and one of them announced, "We saw you walking around today." One frightening thing about this announcement was that when they had seen me that afternoon I was twenty miles away from that bar, strolling along the dirt road near the ranch, and I had not noticed them driving by.

The other frightening thing is that they paid little or no attention to the white women in my group. As John so astutely observed, "You were prey, Pamela. I've never seen anything like it. It was like watching *Thelma and*

Louise." John also said that he could vividly imagine what fantasies went through their minds earlier when they spied me, an attractive African American woman wandering around the countryside (an odd sight, indeed), and when they saw me later as they walked through the door of that bar. I, too, can imagine what they saw: a hot, wild, and wanton dark body for their pleasure.

Lord knows I was fortunate to escape that place physically unscathed. But days later, I could still feel his rough grasp around my waist. My body felt so sore, I wondered if I was only imagining that the hurt was there when it was really in my soul; I felt like such a fool. That night, as it had at no other time, my soul suffered a deep wound that has yet to heal. I'm certain that other such incidents pierced my soul, but this time was different somehow. This time it happened in the presence of other people, other women, who felt no affinity with me, who could not or would not identify with my precarious condition. As a result, it is difficult not to blame myself or not to feel ashamed, especially when the women in my group told me, "It wasn't personal, Pamela. They were only trying to be friendly, but they didn't know how to be," and "It's because you look so exotic, you know." And the final blow, delivered with sharp laughter: "Do you always get hit on like this?" Their insensitivity stabbed me. I wonder just how impassive they would have been had the situation been reversed, had one of them found herself molested by a large, drunken black man in a black bar in a black town. I found it ironic and painful that John realized and admitted what they dared not acknowledge. He was the courageous and compassionate one. Those women epitomized the mark of female oppression: They entered into a conspiracy with the white patriarchy in exchange for a false sense of security. Did they forsake their femaleness to reap the benefits of their white skin privilege? If I had been white, would they have had a similar response? Whatever influenced them consciously or unconsciously, they merely reaffirmed and reinforced a sexist and racist white-male-dominated culture. I fear that I could have been raped and those women would have done nothing to help me.

Despite how alone and frightened I felt, I knew that I was not going to yield to that man under any circumstances. My body is mine, and I had a right to refuse to give it to him, even in a dance. Somehow I remained calm, even when another man, who walked into the bar immediately after the incident, approached only me for a dance. I wanted to scream, "Do I have a goddamn Open Season sign on my forehead, you crazy jerks?" I felt so angry and violated, I wanted to blast all of them, both the men and women. My friends tell me that I managed to get out of there safely because I didn't break under the man's pressure. I am uncertain and full of rage.

A CALL FOR SELF-EXAMINATION AND TRUE CHANGE

I am certain, however, that while today we females cannot control the violent world in which we live, we must take control over our bodies. To me, it is at least one step we can take to challenge this rape culture in which we live. In protecting ourselves, we must realize that we cannot afford to continue dissociating our bodies from our souls. We must claim ourselves as whole human beings. When we are empowered physically, we are both spiritually and physically strong. Being in tune with our bodies helps us to trust our instincts. We are aware of what is going on around us and are able to guard ourselves against danger. When and if we are in danger, we are able to rely on our physical selves as much as possible to free ourselves from harm because we know and trust our strength. When our souls are connected to our bodies, we do not allow our bodies to be taken for granted or to be taken away from us—at least not without a struggle.

I envision a world in which all girls are free to experience and move our bodies as we grow into ourselves. I hope for a time when females are no longer afraid to move and push our bodies because we no longer believe the myths that competition is not feminine, that we are less competitive and aggressive than males, that we cannot attain peak athletic performance during menstruation, that weight lifting builds large muscles in females, that contact sports harm our reproductive organs and breasts, and that we cannot regain physical prowess after childbirth. I envision a world in which it is just as common and natural for females as it is for males to be physically active in any sport or activity we choose.

This new world is only possible when we women take control over our body imagery. As long as we believe that we are weak and dependent on men for our self-definition, body definition, and safety, we will continue to be paralyzed by our fears and controlled by our sense of inferiority.

Moreover, we must realize how much we, ourselves, perpetuate our rape culture when we abandon, reject, and alienate ourselves and each other. Yes, it is difficult to admit, but we must be honest with ourselves and each other if we are ever to heal. Just imagine how different our lives would be today if we were not injured by internalized misogyny and sexism. Imagine how different our lives would be if we would only open our mouths wide and collectively and loudly confront males and *really* hold them accountable for the violent crimes they perpetrate against females. Imagine how our lives would be if all mothers told their daughters the truth about romantic love and taught them to love themselves as females, to value and claim their bodies, and to protect themselves against violent and disrespectful males.

What if we girls in junior high and high school had believed that we deserved respect rather than verbal and sexual abuse from our male classmates? What if we girls in my high school had confronted the gang of boys who raped Rachel that night on the football field twenty years ago instead of perpetuating that cycle of abuse and shame she suffered? What if Larry and I had confronted Danny for raping Brenda that summer night in her apartment? What if Brenda had felt safe enough to tell Larry, me, and the police? What if the women in Wyoming had confronted that man while he terrorized me instead of defending him? What if they had protected, comforted, and supported me? What if we females believed ourselves and each other to be as important and deserving of our selfhood as we believe males to be? Just imagine.

Envision a time when we women are connected to ourselves and each other, when we no longer feel the need and desire to conspire with men against each other in order to survive in a misogynist, violent culture. We must alter our destructive thinking about being female so that we can begin to accept, love, and cherish our femaleness. It is the essence of our lives.

Readjusting our lens so we can begin to see ourselves and each other as full, capable, and mighty human beings will take as much work as reconstructing our violent society. Neither job is easy, but the conditions and the tasks go hand in hand. Two ways to begin our own transformation are to become physically active in whatever manner we choose so we can take pleasure in fully connecting to ourselves and in growing physically stronger, and to respect, protect, support, and comfort each other. Once we stop denying

that our very lives are endangered, we will soon discover that these steps are not only necessary but viable ways to empower ourselves and claim our right to exist as whole human beings in a peaceful, humane world.

NOTES

1. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

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