

# Cause for Alarm

## *A Childhood Introduction to Sex*

BY CHRISTINA STARR

*The huge number of men engaged in these practices [of "female sexual slavery"] should be cause for declaration of an international emergency, a crisis in sexual violence. But what should be cause for alarm is instead accepted as normal sexual intercourse.<sup>1</sup>*

**A**n important lesson in our culture's female socialization was forced upon me when I was eleven years old. I was nearly raped. Only because I decided to run, and because my assailant was somewhat impaired, did I escape. But the memory I carry with me, in vivid and intimate detail, is not just of what happened between myself and the attempting rapist. It is also of an enormous and terrible message: that my experience was part of the normal conditions of male/female sexual relations and that I, as a child, must learn to accept this in becoming an adult.

It was summer. It was the middle of a bright, clear, warm, vital day. My family lived on the corner of a street that crested a ravine — a woodsy, green, undeveloped area at the bottom of which flowed the city river, spanned by railway and automobile bridges. My sisters, our friends and I considered the ravine part of our neighbourhood territory. We played hide-and-seek there, we built forts, we climbed trees, we captured caterpillars. On this particular day in my eleventh summer, friends of the family were visiting. The parents caucused for a meal, to chat; we flew towards the ravine for adventure and childhood escape.

After some time we arrived under the railway bridge, near a large steel transformer tower. We were in the middle of debating the possibility of climbing the tower when a young man dressed in jeans and a jean jacket appeared, sauntering towards our little troupe. He said with authority, "You kids stay away from that tower." We obligingly backed up and he continued towards us. I assumed he was an employee of the railway who had seen us loitering and had come to tell us, as adults do, what we were not allowed to do. He stopped near us and pointed at me.

"You," he said, "come here."

"Me?"

"Yes. I want to talk to you."

The only possible explanation I could summon was that he had important information about playing around transformer towers and under railway bridges, that he wanted to communicate to me, the oldest of the group, to guard against injury in the future. I was naively willing to consider only the best motives. But some uneasiness urged me to whisper to one of my friends as I left them, "Wait for me."

They didn't. Whether they, most of them boys, suspected the reality of my personal danger, I don't know. But they ran. Fast and without stopping they ran back in the direction we had come, back to our house and the safety of visiting parents. I was dismayed to see them go, but I had agreed to stay and talk. Nothing, as yet, indicated to me a need to turn rudely from this man and run. We walked under the railway bridge and stopped. He said, in a friendly enough manner, "Sit down." There was no place to sit so we squatted, facing each other.

"Do you want to get stoned out of your mind?" he asked. The suddenness of the question surprised and alerted me, but I still did not think him threatening.

"No."

"Oh." He changed the topic. "Who are your friends?" I told him. I recited their names. I said one was my sister and the rest were from Calgary, just visiting.

"What were you doing?"

"Just playing. Running around, climbing trees."

"Oh. Sounds like fun." He waited a moment, then said, "Can I play with you?" I assumed he meant with *us*, with my now disappeared friends and I, climbing trees, running races. It was an odd request but maybe he was lonely, maybe he liked kids.

"Sure. I guess." He reached out and placed his hands on my waist. "What are you doing?" I said, alarmed. I stood up.

"Just going to play with you," he said, calmly. But fear and suspicion suddenly surged.

"No!" I blurted, and at the same time started to run. I bolted from between his hands, leapt across a tiny creek that slipped its way down to the river beside the railway bridge, and for one brief second looked over my shoulder to gage the extent of my escape. He was following, but in a stumbling, inebriated manner, and I realized that, to my advantage, he was stoned out of his mind.

I knew I'd had a narrow escape, but I don't think I fully understood from what. After describing to my parents what had happened, I spent some time driving around the area with my father who wanted me to identify the man. I asked him why. "I'd like him to tell me what he was going to do," he answered, never explaining what he thought that might be. We didn't find him.

Later that evening, after supper, I sat in the bathtub and

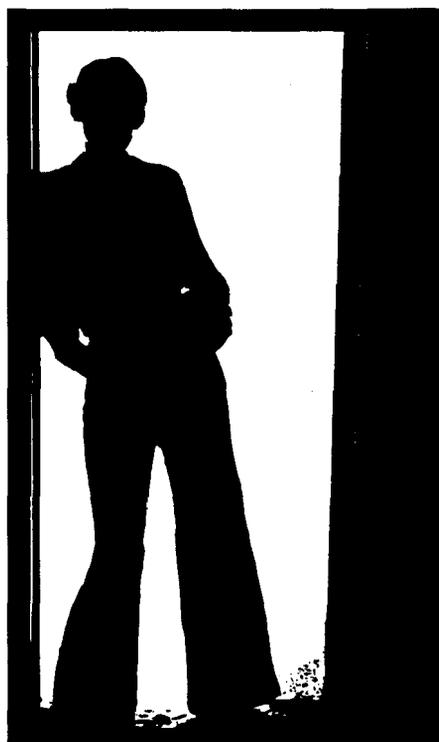
considered many things, among them the implication of my encounter with the stranger. I think I was vaguely aware that his intentions were malevolent and towards my body, but I doubt the event had taken on special significance in the catalogue of childhood incidents. My mother came to talk with me in the bathroom, as I sat naked and vulnerable in the tub. She asked, as she stood just inside the doorway, whether I knew what it was that man wanted to do to me. In that moment, in the tone of her question and in her avoidance of the issue, I knew she was talking about sex. And so, in that moment, I did know what that man had wanted to do to me. I said, uneasily but confidently enough to avoid any further discussion, "Yes." She waited a moment, gathering courage I imagine, and then said "That's, you know, what your father and I did to have you."

My body felt suddenly very conspicuous and small, exposed to the interested gaze of my mother and to anyone else who might have entered the bathroom. I knew this was her attempt at a "parental talk." From this distance, I can understand her motivation. I had nearly been raped which had brought to a point the question of how much I understood and how much I needed to know to protect myself. She was trying to be frank, sympathetic, but I felt only embarrassment and humiliation. My slim, white body, covered only by clear, unprotective water, was being considered as an object of sexual interest. I did not want to consider it that way, I did not want to talk about sex with my mother, and I did not want her to know that I had been caught unawares by this new fact: That what I had nearly escaped as a child was what I would voluntarily undergo as an adult. I said "I know." And she left it at that.

And this is the real violence of my story. That an eleven-year-old girl should embark on her sexual maturity by discovering that the forceful possession of her body by a man; that fear, haphazard chance, and the absolute absence of her own consent were normal facets of adult female sexuality; that a mature woman would view her own and her daughter's sexuality as at the mercy of male impulses, from tender caresses to anonymous brutality. Such is our socialization; such is the strength of the forces amassed to coerce our submission, our sexual slavery. In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich asks mainstream (white, heterosexual) feminists to consider heterosexuality as an

institution forced upon women. Her premise is that the social structures that channel women into heterosexual relationships leave little room for any real choice. Women are conditioned to accept that a man's sex 'drive' amounts to a right to a woman's—any woman's—body, and as a consequence, "sexual abuse and terrorism of women by men has been rendered almost invisible by treating it as natural and inevitable."<sup>2</sup> In the context of such prevalent and unacknowledged force, Rich questions how much consent is possible in any sexual pairing of men and women. She does not want so much to deny the validity of "self-described" heterosexual women's experiences as to encourage women to see how the institution of heterosexuality has denied them the strength, empowerment and affirmation of women-centred relationships and connections.

Natural and inevitable. Certainly that was my understanding of rape as I grew into sexual maturity. An unfortunate fact of a woman's life against which she had limited means to guard herself. I accepted the situation. I even considered that being raped might be an easy, less awkward way to be introduced to sex, to lose my virginity. I didn't just consider, but actively made myself available to a man to whom I was only mildly attracted for my sexual initiation. Thank God I did not become pregnant, then. I did not realize that sex was something I might enjoy, I might



Graphic by Tee A. Corinne

desire and want, until a partner appeared with whom the experience was passionate. I have only recently realized that sex — passionate, satisfying sex — is something I can legitimately need. And I have never really considered that I had much choice, or what that choice might mean, in the expression of my sexuality.

Not that this painful and debilitating journey (though, certainly, compared to that of others, untraumatic) stems from that one afternoon and the ponderous message received from my mother. As an introduction, a preliminary glimpse into the functions of sexuality, I was not filled with anticipation but dread. I accepted from my mother, there as I sat in the bathtub, a burden of fear; a burden of my sprouting body as a liability, a target, a handicap. Our culture is abuzz with the communication that women are not only always available for the fulfillment of male sexuality, but also enjoy that fulfillment, whatever the manifestation.

My initial fear was confirmed over the next few years by the stories — real life stories, newspaper stories — I began to hear and read: young girls gone missing; a body stuffed in a refrigerator; an adolescent on her way home found later naked in a ditch, her head beaten beyond recognition. And I felt that it could have been me, that I would never really know what I had barely escaped, that it was up to me to be careful and guard against such dangers in the future. I have a daughter now. The anguish I feel in recognizing that she could be raped, that I could have laboured and loved only to produce more fodder for male violence, is unbearable. But I intend to work, for her, against the compulsion of heterosexuality, against the normalization of violence in sexual relations, towards a sexuality that is erotic, mutual and female.

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), cited by Adrienne Rich in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Rich, Adrienne, p. 45.

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