

Ashley Warner



The Year After



A Memoir

Praise for *The Year After*

“Courageous and emotionally riveting, Ashley Warner's account of her year ‘after’ eloquently portrays the pain and self doubt so common in the aftermath of sexual assault. Told with the right dose of humor this gift will be an inspiration to rape survivors, trauma therapists and anyone who dares to take a good look at the difficult process of healing from trauma.” —Jean Goldberg, LCSW, Crime Victims Treatment Center St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital, N.Y., N.Y.

“In its own unique way, this story chronicles the history of the first year after rape in detail, and then subsequent years more briefly, for a young woman with determination and strength to find her own way through the storms of emotion that inevitably overtake one. Warner teaches us about the need to be patient with each individual, to let healing take its own course and time, and not to rush survivors to a ‘happy ending’ narrative. Throughout the book there are also snatches of dreams and poems which seem to suggest Warner’s own development and hint about what might have inspired her to become first a rape counselor, and ultimately, a psychoanalyst. A beautiful and brave book, it will inspire insight and empathy for therapists and lay people alike.” —Lee Whitman-Raymond, PhD, MFA, LICSW, poet and psychoanalytic psychotherapist in independent practice and author of *the light on our faces, and other poems*, as well as numerous psychoanalytic articles.

“The Year After offers a compelling account of a rape survivor’s journey from victim to victorious. Because of its groundbreaking format, the reader is given rare opportunity to experience a revealing narrative of the emotional complexities experienced by victims of sexual assault. Not only does The Year After validate any victim’s suffering, it also gives them a road map toward a full and healthy recovery.” —Rachel A. Sussman, LCSW, author of *The Breakup Bible: The Smart Woman's Guide to Healing from a Breakup or Divorce*

“Ashley Warner shows how we are not marked solely by the scars that have been drawn upon us, but identifies how we build hope for personal liberation before us. Even though we have been harmed, our lives are not robbed of their worth or of their power. Even in the darkest times, we put the broken pieces together; and we are transfigured to accept our humanity with even deeper tenderness and empathy. A wonderful testament to power and resilience.” —The Rev. Dr. Gawain de Leeuw, Episcopal Pastor

“Thank you for writing this book.” —Alyssa B.

Dedicated to all who know the year after.

To My Reader

This is a true story. While it is told with dedication to the accuracy of facts as far as memory will permit, the narrative reflects, and is intended to favor, my subjective account. In some instances, minor details have been altered to facilitate storytelling or to offer disguise for the people I write about. Members of the rape support group are represented by composite sketches to ensure anonymity. Names of most people and some names of places have been changed where necessary to protect the privacy of those involved.

The Rape

The Afternoon

“Shut up shut up shut up shut up.” The man spit the words out of his mouth. “I just want your money.” That was a lie. He was going to rape me.

It was the first hot Friday afternoon at the end of May. New York City had come alive the way it does in spring, with cafés spilling onto sidewalks and folks with time to dawdle stopping to check out the wares of street vendors. I was walking home from my waitressing shift that day with a bounce in my step. I was humming something. The change in weather distracted me from all sorts of problems, including a theater career that was going nowhere, regular early-morning calls about my past-due Macy’s account, and a string of bad dates. The prior weekend’s man-prize had pinched my cheek across the restaurant table, told me I was puffy because I ate too much dairy, then wondered why I didn’t invite him up to my apartment. The date before that had spent our evening flirting with the waiter. He had some things to figure out. That day, however, I was carrying my load blithely, skipping along, looking forward to soaking up some sun on the roof of my apartment building with a cool drink and lots of daydreams.

My roommate, Rachel, and I lived on the fifth floor of a gloomy six-floor walk-up, but our apartment was homey. The site of many a soiree, Rachel and her best friend, Amy, had entertained their cohorts of New York fabulous there long before I moved in. One friend had modeled in a jewelry ad on the pages of Vogue. Rachel pointed to her discretely as she came out of the bathroom one night, still fussing with green velvet pants that flattered her super-slim frame. “You see what I have to put up with at work!” Rachel complained, only half joking. Rachel was attractive, too, with huge, almond shaped eyes and thick, reddish-brown hair, although she was more athlete than model. I was heartened by the fact that Jewelry Girl wasn’t particularly tall. We were all still fresh enough for everything to be possible, so we took our prospects, and our competition, very seriously. We wanted our friends to shine, but we wanted to sparkle more.

When Amy’s parents convinced her it was time to step up in the world, they helped her secure a cute studio on Elizabeth Street, and I moved in with Rachel. For me, the apartment share was a vast improvement from my quirky sublet on the Upper East Side, with the bathtub in the kitchen, an incessantly running toilet, and furniture that I had destroyed. Rachel had a real kitchen—not that I cooked, but maybe I would try—and a sofa that was not crusty from my attempt to improve it with pink satin finish interior wall paint on a sleepless night. Life was pretty good.

Home at last at the stoop of my little domicile, smiling in the sunshine, I unlocked the front door to my building, although I never needed to use my key. *I really should complain about that gap between the door and the frame*, I mused vaguely. Anyone could slip a credit card or something stiff along the edge of the door to release the lock. That wasn’t safe.

Inside, I climbed the dingy stairs, which were dented in the middle from wear, to my apartment. As I stood at the door with keys in hand, a young man came up the steps behind me, passing by as if to continue to the top floor. He lingered. We locked eyes briefly, for one cold second. *Odd*, I thought. I hadn’t noticed him before. A warning flashed in my gut. The fact I didn’t heed that alarm would haunt me for months to come. As if that made it my fault. As if I should have known. At the time, what was about to happen was beyond the scope of my imagination.

No sooner had I cracked open my apartment door, he swooped in. That man. Squeezing me by the neck, pushing us inside, locking us in. It was hard to describe things accurately after that, because space and time took on another dimension. My mind raced at lightning speed in a slow-motion world. I could not think. No thoughts paused long enough to register. I was spinning. I did not understand. My feet kicked, searching for the floor, while I tried to pry his hands off my neck. My shoes seemed miles away; my hands were weak, unattached to my body. I could find no answer for what was happening. I screamed. I screamed until I had no more air. His grip was tight around my throat.

I began to watch myself from above. *Can't breathe. Oh my God, I can't breathe.* Floating, watching, not breathing. Desperately grabbing at his hands on my neck, trying to loosen them. One thought: *Breath.*

"Shut up shut up shut up shut up. I just want your money," he lied. But I was not screaming anymore. I could not breathe.

"I let go, you gonna stop screaming?" he asked. I nodded. My new tactic: compliance. I would not scream. I was past fight, past terrified, past tears. I needed to breathe. Only to breathe. *I must breathe.*

The man—he wasn't a man; he wasn't human—ordered me to cover my eyes while he dragged me across the living room by my neck, at last shoving my face into a sofa cushion. He sat next to me, still gripping tightly. I could sense him looking around, plotting. Then he jerked up, pulling me into my roommate's bedroom, my hands still covering my eyes. "You ain't looking, are you!" he said with a snarl. It wasn't a question. It was a threat.

"Answer me!"

I shook my head.

"Answer me!" he demanded again.

"No," I whimpered almost inaudibly, not wanting to speak. Wanting to disappear. Talking interfered with disappearing.

"You married? Who you live with? Where are they? Where's your money?"

I must have answered. I remembered only breathing long, loud, measured inhaled and exhaled through my nose as he pushed me facedown on the bed.

"You move, I hurt you, you got that?"

I thought I answered.

"You got that!"

"Yes," I peeped.

"Good!"

He left the room. I could hear him in the kitchen and in my bedroom, opening drawers and banging around.

I tuned into the staccato, rushing sound of my breath in and out of my nostrils as my heart clamored to escape my chest. *Surely, I am not meant to be here,* I thought, *hands on eyes, facedown on my roommate's bed.* I assessed my situation with acute and methodical reason. The room's only window was five stories high. There was no ledge, no fire escape. If I tried to run back through the living room to the front door, I would never make it. He blocked the way. I was trapped.

Dear God, I implored, I can survive this. Just don't let him rape me.

But then he was over me again, touching a knife to my side. “You feel that!” It wasn’t a question. It was an order. I did. “Turn around.” I did. “Pull down your pants.” I did. “You ain’t looking at me!” I wasn’t.

Dear God, I prayed. Breath in, out, in, out. I can survive this. Just don’t let him kill me. He started kissing me, demanding I kiss back. Repulsive lips... *Breath in, out...* The stink of his breath... *In, out...* I opened and closed my mouth robotically while his tongue darted around my tonsils.

“I love white women,” the man murmured, rubbing me all over with his foul hands. Touching my breasts, my stomach, my thighs. Discovering my body with his tongue. *Breath in, out...* “Mmm.”

Hands over eyes, I continued to hover somewhere above my body. I was a spectator. Maybe I needed never to come down. *Dear God, I begged, I can handle this. Just please don’t let it hurt when I die.*

The sound of paper ripping. Penetration. Thrusting. His rubbery penis shrank. It fell out. He tried again. He shoved. He told me to help him. I did. He couldn’t get it up. He moved on. He slid his face between my legs once more. “Mmm,” he said. “You like that?”

“Huh,” I mused, detached. *So this is where my life ends.* I imagined I would live longer. *You never know where the day will take you. Mom’s gonna be pissed. I can’t believe I never went to Europe. Or Peru. I never learned to sing. Or dance the Mambo. I never realized I didn’t have forever.*

A feeling: *I am sorry for my family’s pain.* A thought: *I’ll be dead.* The thought was comforting. At least I wouldn’t have to bear anyone else’s suffering. The suffering of my own would be enough.

Dear God, I thought next, I will handle the pain. Just let me die fast, so I can rest. It was an earnest prayer. That was where I made my peace. I had lived the best life I knew how to live. If I had had time, I could have recounted all my mistakes, all the times I’d been selfish and unkind. The times I had squandered my strengths. I could have been so much more, but in the end there was no room for regret. Remorse didn’t count. What was left undone didn’t matter. What mattered was that moment, the accumulation of every other moment of my life. It was what I had to offer. *I am released. I am.*

I didn’t know how much time passed as I hovered over my body, talking to God, before the rapist got up and left the room. “Don’t you even think of reporting this or I’ll come back for you, you got that?” He was calling from the living room.

Silence.

I said nothing, every one of my cells strained to the task of listening, sensing. There were the usual sounds coming from the street. An occasional shout. Car horns. The distinctive *pssht* of bus brakes stopping on the corner to drop off passengers and take in new ones. Inside: silence.

I waited, hands over eyes, lying on my roommate’s bed. Breathing in and out.

With great fear, I peeked through my fingers at the quiet room. The sun still shone brightly outside, casting flirtatious glowing polygons on the walls. Beneath me, the garden of purple and pink flowers on my roommate’s new sheets presented a jolting contrast to the truth. Life as I knew it was over.

The clock on the nightstand said 4:25. I might have died at 4:25.

I waited.

Silence.

At 4:35, trembling, I tiptoed to the bedroom door. The apartment was in shambles, the front door wide open. He was gone.

The Aftermath

When I realized he had left, I raced to the front door to lock it tight. *Quick, quick.* I was in a panic, waiting for him to pop in again suddenly from the hall. My thoughts were startlingly clear.

I dialed 911. "Um, I was just raped," I remembered saying.

"Is he still in the apartment?"

"No."

"Are you in danger now?"

"No."

"Are you injured?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. My throat hurts."

"Okay, miss, sit tight, help is on the way."

With pointed attention, I formed a mental list of calls I had to make.

911.

Check.

I called my roommate's restaurant. She wasn't working.

Check.

I called Amy. She didn't know where Rachel was either.

"I was just raped," I said matter-of-factly.

"Oh my God, Ashley."

"Yeah. I'm okay. My weekend's shot. Let me know if you talk to her? Thanks."

Check.

I am so calm in a crisis. It's impressive, really.

I called my friend Ben. No answer.

I called my friend Mark. I was beginning to tremble. He answered. I told him what happened.

"I need to get dressed." The idea occurred to me abruptly.

"All right." His tone was calm.

"I'm scared." I realized again suddenly.

"It's okay. You're safe now," he assured me.

"Okay," I said, unconvinced.

"I'll wait here on the phone," he added.

"Okay," I repeated.

"You can go get dressed."

"Okay."

I raced to my room for sweats and I raced back to the phone with terror. The phone in the living room was the only safe place.

"I'm back," I said.

"I missed you," he joked.

"Uh huh."

My neck hurts.

"I'm going to stay on the phone with you till help comes."

"Okay."

It was becoming difficult to speak. My voice was raspy. I couldn't talk and breathe at the same time.

“Don’t worry. You’re going to be fine.”

“Uh-huh.”

The doorbell rang. I jumped.

“That will be the emergency team,” Mark reminded me.

“I’m scared.”

“Ask who it is first. When they get inside, let me talk to someone.”

“Okay.”

There were two paramedics. One checked out my apartment while the other followed me around trying to ask questions and perform an examination. I paced, smoking cigarettes in a daze. The paramedic stayed with me. I walked in circles around the living room, then around the kitchen. I wandered down the hall to my bedroom and back again. He followed. I was inattentive, distracted, and uncooperative. His task was not easy.

“Picked a bad day to quit,” I whispered hoarsely, trying with shaky hands to light up. Then I paced some more. “I’m going to be wearing turtlenecks all summer,” I added, glancing in the hall mirror at the emerging bruises on my neck. The joke fell flat. Must have been my delivery. I walked trancelike to the bathroom and back down the hall to the kitchen. The paramedic followed. On my way past the counter for another lap, he gently blocked my path and caught my eye. “Hey,” he said kindly as I paused, surprised. “I need you to stop for a moment.” He was cute. It was just a fact. I was sure I’d never care about cute again.

I saw in his eyes how pathetic I appeared. *This is not how I behave*, I thought from a swirling, faraway place. *This is not who I am. I understand things.*

Such thoughts surfaced, lingering at the edge of consciousness, only to disappear again into the deep. A realization emerged: *So what*. It was my first encounter with a changed me. *Before*, I wouldn’t have wanted Cute Paramedic to think I was crazy. *Now I don’t care*. It was the first moment of dividing my life into *before* and *after*.

Codependent No More! I recalled in a flash the title of the book Mark had recommended once. I had never read it. I didn’t need to! I was healed. I had just become a person who didn’t care what others thought. *This is amazing!* I made a mental note to suggest a chapter on overcoming codependency through violent crime. *I’m back.*

Don’t share this idea with the emergency team.

If Cute Paramedic had chuckled at even one of my jokes, it would have meant the situation wasn’t so serious. Any second the chaos would have vanished, the emergency team would have broken into a Rodgers and Hammerstein number, and I would have marveled about how vivid my daydreams could be. Every second, I was surprised that didn’t happen. The rape really happened. That fact was indescribably baffling. I could not make sense of my afternoon. *There was that moment on the stairs. A confused feeling as I was swept up by the neck. I screamed. Then there was no more breath.*

“Sweetheart, I’ve got to ask you some questions. Come sit down a minute. Just for a minute. Did you see the man who did this to you? What did he look like? Was he lighter or darker than I am?”

It was becoming more difficult to communicate. I couldn’t suck enough air through my squeezed windpipe, so talking left me out of breath. My neck throbbed in pain when I tried to laugh or swallow. Even whispering took effort. Somehow I managed to light another cigarette.

Cute Paramedic informed me he also needed to finish his examination. "I'm so sorry, hon," he began, "I need to see..." I stood up and dropped my pants before he finished the sentence. He had probably anticipated some resistance to checking the scene of the crime given the circumstances, which was nice of him. *Hell*, I thought. *What have I got to be shy about now?*

"Thank you," he said, making notes on his clipboard. I pulled up my sweats with the intention to resume pacing. Before I could head down the hall, however, Cute Paramedic suggested instead that I go with him to the hospital for a full exam, as well as to have my neck attended to. *Ah, that's a better plan*. I was grateful to be given any kind of direction.

"Okay."

I knew the hospital would use a forensic rape kit to pick up traces of semen, hair, blood, urine, and whatever else might be considered valuable evidence for prosecution if the rapist was caught. I didn't know why I knew this. Maybe from a crime show. Of course, prosecution didn't matter to me in that moment. I was operating strictly on a heartbeat to heartbeat basis. Most goings-on bounced off my supersafe shield of numb, while my thoughts echoed weakly as though from a different body. Justice was an abstraction.

"I don't have health insurance," I remembered, my face flushing.

"Don't worry about it," Cute Paramedic said, shepherding me toward the door like an adult guiding a toddler. He didn't touch me; he simply made it difficult to advance in any other direction. "Let's go."

Let's go? Just like that? Go? I was really perplexed. We're going to go without locking the apartment? I was raped less than an hour ago. I must lock up. Where are my keys? Why are you rushing me?

Cute Paramedic must have read my mind.

"Clarence will lock up. Don't worry. I'll ride with you to the hospital."

How? How will Clarence lock up? He doesn't have keys. Shouldn't I give him a copy of the keys? Why doesn't anyone else realize that Clarence doesn't have keys? Why do I have to think about this? How about my wallet? Don't I need that? Who's Clarence?

I took it upon myself to bring my pocketbook, even though I couldn't figure out what to put in it. Like a little girl who must carry her dress-up purse to Pizza Hut with nothing but cherry scented lip gloss and sparkly stickers inside, I was accommodated patiently. I didn't grasp the fact that my apartment was a crime scene soon to be filled with investigators who would still be working when I returned.

On the way out with my little purse, which held cigarettes and keys, I slipped deeper into a haze as we passed through the fifth-floor hall, down the steps, and out the door to another waiting paramedic in the ambulance. Did the neighbors watch? I didn't know. I didn't care. Codependent no more! I was a ghost.

I rode to the hospital in the back of the ambulance, staring at a spot on the shiny steel wall. I tried to put it all together, which was hard because my head sailed miles above my body. *There was that moment on the stairs. A confused feeling as I was swept up by the neck. I screamed. Then there was no more breath.*

The Emergency Room

Escorted by the paramedics, I floated through the busy ER waiting room while my detached body clomped along below. We went right in; I didn't have to wait. I sort of felt like a celebrity, although the special attention I received only continued to confirm the gravity of my circumstances.

Amy jumped up as we pushed through the doors, causing her tight, flaxen curls to bounce. "Oh my God, Ashley, I came right away!" She gave me a hug, attempting to stave off tears. How did she know where I was going? Mark was there, too. His whiskered face with concerned expression was another surprising but welcome sight as he put his arm around my shoulder. *Why are they here? How did they know where to go?* Clearly, a lot had happened I wasn't aware of. That would have bothered me *before*. I didn't care anymore. Somewhere a nurse said, "She's in shock."

In the examination room, I lost all sense of time. I was spinning then weeping. Then spinning again. Whatever strength had gotten me through the afternoon, whatever grit had helped me make phone calls and put keys in my little purse, were gone now. In the safety of the hospital, I let go. My thoughts centered around one theme and one theme only: *Why me, why me, why me, what did I do wrong?*

"You did everything right," A nurse named Nancy insisted, reading my mind. She was in charge and spoke with confidence. She had a nice smile. Kind Nurse Nancy.

"Why me, why me, why me, what did I do wrong?!" I asked out loud.

"Not a thing," she answered again emphatically while taking my vitals and attempting to make me as comfortable as possible.

Nothing soothed. My head throbbed in time with my heartbeat. "Why. Why. Why. Why. What. Did. I. Do. Wrong."

"You did nothing wrong," Amy promised between doctors, shots and tests. A doctor with brown curly hair who didn't speak to me performed a forensic rape exam. Maybe he had said hello when Nancy introduced him. I didn't remember. Compliantly, I lay like a corpse while he combed my pubic hair. Swabbed my cervix. He probed my violated body parts while chatting with his assistant about restaurants or something. He had an accent I didn't recognize. At one point I watched him at the foot of my exam table holding some sort of scissors before he shuffled back to the counter in his clogs. For no good reason, the vision stuck in my mind.

I told my story over and over. "I was walking home from work..." I began. *There was that moment on the stairs. A confused feeling as I was swept up by the neck. I screamed. Then there was no more breath.*

Amy came in again. Then Mark. "Why me, why me, why me, what did I do wrong?" I was bawling.

"Absolutely nothing," Mark said firmly.

It hurt to cry. It hurt to ask why. It physically hurt. My neck was covered with red handprints. Nancy told me my larynx was bruised, which was why I couldn't speak above a whisper or swallow easily. It would heal. "You are lucky," they all told me, "so lucky." I felt guilty for not feeling lucky at all.

A couple of hours must have passed, though I had no sense of time, when Nancy asked if I was ready to speak to the detectives.

"Huh?"

“There’re a couple police detectives here who’d like to talk to you if you’re ready.”

“Oh,” I muttered. “Wow.” It hadn’t occurred to me that police would be notified. Detectives had been dispatched, discussions held about what happened to me by people I didn’t even know.

“Yeah, okay,” I said, coming to with a jolt. “May I pee first and wash my hands?” I hadn’t been allowed to do either because of the risk of destroying evidence. My skin reeked with the sour odor of the rapist and I was sticky. “Please,” I implored.

Amy helped me down the hall to the bathroom after the doctors gave the go-ahead, where she joked about the contents of my purse. “Cigarettes and keys—what else could a girl need?” she concurred. I almost tripped at the unexpected chuckle, unsteady as I was. Laughing was an ordeal. My head throbbed and my neck strained under the force of wind through damaged pipes. It was worth it. I could have used a few more minutes in that bathroom, and more soapy paper towels.

Back in the exam room, I met Detectives Murphy and O’Brien. Detective Murphy was a solid, mustached man in his mid-forties with a slight paunch who did most of the talking. His female partner, Detective O’Brien, was a bit younger than he with a pleasant face and short brown hair. Being a woman seemed to be her main job just then. The two of them kept asking if I wanted some water. They were very thoughtful.

“What happened?” Detective Murphy began. He was poised with pad and pen to take copious notes.

How many times had I told my story so far? Five? Six? I went through the paces easily. It was all words, nothing more. The words had conveniently disconnected themselves from their meanings. Then Detective Murphy asked some questions that wouldn’t have occurred to me, like if the rapist had acted “romantically.” *Huh*, I thought. “Yeah,” I said. “That does kind of fit.” After he had subdued me, the rapist was all soft-talk and kissing, trying to get me to kiss him back. It was an odd way to look at it, but it felt right. Some rapists, apparently, acted “romantically,” others “viciously.” *Oh God!* I shivered suddenly. *I could have been killed.* The tears welled up again with force. “Why me? What did I do wrong?”

“Absolutely nothing,” Detective Murphy, said.

“Not one thing,” Officer O’Brien, Woman Detective, said as she put her hand on my shoulder awkwardly. I was moved by the detectives’ sensitive approach, which made it easier to finish the interview.

A short time later I wanted to curse a well-meaning nurse who shook my hand. My reactions were inconsistent. Released by the doctors at last, I was leaving with Mark, Amy, and the detectives when he called me over to grab my hand from across the central desk. I didn’t know the nurse—he hadn’t been treating me—so I didn’t understand why he had to chime in on my way out. He held my hand tightly, making me promise to come back to the ER if I needed anything. “Anything,” he reassured me, tugging for emphasis. “Anything.”

“I will,” I said. *Let go of my goddamned hand*, I meant.

I stepped into the hot night with my entourage. The detectives and I climbed into their unmarked sedan, which was parked close to the emergency room entrance. I sat beside Detective O’Brien in the back, concentrating my attention on the headrest of the

passenger's seat in front of me as we rode in silence to the crime scene. Amy and Mark followed in a cab.

The Evening

My apartment was full of police officers, a tornado of activity. I stood clutching my little purse, shocked, the eye of the storm. Uniformed men bustled around me, some with faces that smiled in my direction, others who kept to their task. I could feel my swollen eyes stinging from crying, my yellowy-purple neck steadily aching. I was wearing a dingy old T-shirt with no bra, and sweatpants sized for a linebacker. For a second I was embarrassed about how ugly I must have looked. Then I forgot about that. Poof. My mind spit out chopped thoughts like a wood chipper so I couldn't keep up.

The cops spoke into walkie talkies while studying my apartment from different angles. Someone was taking pictures. Someone else was lifting fingerprints from the counter. They were all very busy, very much in command in my own home. It seemed like there were dozens of them, though it couldn't have been that many. The commotion was at once reassuring and devastating. People were on top of the crisis. That was the good news. The bad news, it was real. It really happened. All those people knew.

Rachel was home. In tears, she came over to hug me tight. She needed the hug, not me. I stood rigidly while I patted her once lightly on the back. I didn't want to be touched. "I'm okay," I whispered weakly. *Don't fucking touch me*, I meant. *How odd to be furious at well-wishers*, I thought, *with no anger at all for the beast who choked me on this spot, and raped me over there*.

The place was a wreck. The rapist had turned over drawers, pulled books off shelves, and ransacked closets. Black dust covered almost every hard surface where the police searched for fingerprints. The kitchen counter was covered, as were the knives and the doorknobs. To my dismay, even my wooden jewelry box, the one handmade by my high school sweetheart in woodshop, was black from fingerprint dust. My heartbeat quickened as I considered giving the dust-happy officer a piece of my mind. *See what you did!* I wanted to shout, shoving my treasure in front of his face. *It's ruined!*

The officer was brushing away on a bookshelf, attending to his job in a good-natured way. "There sure are lot of fingerprints here!" he said.

"We have a lot of parties," Rachel said, grinning, flirtatious even in crises.

I remembered how excited Ryan had been to give me the jewelry box. We had been awash in the sweet joy of first love when he had brought it over to my house one night, beaming. He had stopped to pick some flowers from the planetarium garden of the local university as well, which we had later learned was illegal, but it was an honest mistake. I had barely had time to invite him in and shut the door when he had handed me the bouquet and the box, breathless. His ruddy cheeks, scrubbed clean with acne wash, shone in competition with his bright smile as he bent to kiss me in the kitchen. My heart had burst, realizing the work he had put into his project, the extra hours in the woodshop, all the while thinking of me. The moment and the jewelry box were priceless. How far away that day felt as I held the thing covered with black dust. I was suddenly very, very old.

The officer looked up at me and smiled.

Funny, the small blows that hit hard as the gravest trauma loomed, almost unapproachable.

The Night

The truckload of cops and detectives left. Or were there only a few? No matter. The point was, there we were: Rachel, Amy, Mark, and me. Familiar people in a familiar place in unfamiliar circumstances. We stood in a little circle in the middle of the living room looking at one another in the first quiet I'd had since 4:25. *What now?* I thought. *What the hell happens now?*

For me, the rape suddenly became mine. It was like the officers handed it back to me as they filed out the door and wished me well, their job complete. Perhaps they were heading to the office to write reports or out to grab a drink with a buddy, work day finished. Maybe they went home to kiss a sleepy wife, crawling into bed to caress her back beneath a satin nightie. Or maybe they called their daughter just to say, *I love you*, thinking, but not saying, *I'm so glad it wasn't her*.

Here I am.

I showered. It occurred to me as we were standing there that I could shower. Showering was my first independent decision *after*. *I will shower*. I announced it. "I am going to take a shower." The others seemed as relieved by this plan of action as I was. *Ah, yes, good*, they said. *That's what to do. Shower.*

How good it felt to stand under hot water! Washing my hands and arms at the hospital had done little to clean me, much less kill the rapist's rancid stench, which mingled with the scent of my own acrid urine. My bladder had given way in those first terrifying seconds when the criminal had lifted me up by the neck, my feet kicking, a scream giving way to desperate clutching for air. I had smelled like the darkest corners of a filthy subway station all afternoon, well into the night, for the sake of forensic evidence. Finally, in my shower, lavender soap! *Can this be the same day?* Clean clothes! How I had taken for granted those simple comforts. Small luxuries were all you could count on, really.

Polished shiny except for the dull bruises I hid behind a collared shirt, I headed to Grand Central Station with Rachel and Amy to catch the train to Connecticut. Amy's parents had offered to take us in for the weekend. That plan had come together when I was in the shower. Mark put us in a cab on the corner, handing me forty bucks. "Here, Ashley," he said. "It's all I've got on me, but you can borrow more later, if you need to." I nodded my thanks.

I hadn't thought about money. I didn't have a penny to my name. I had cashed my small weekly paycheck at the restaurant that afternoon and the rapist had stolen every dime less than an hour later. My starving artist persona, usually cultivated with such young pride, was suddenly rendered trite and irresponsible. It didn't stand up in an emergency. I was ashamed of my life.

The cab ride, buying train fare, and traveling to Stamford became a blur, yet we arrived. Amy's father met us at the train station. He stood beside his Volvo wearing a fedora and overcoat holding a bouquet of flowers for me, even though I'd never met him. *I don't deserve kindness*, I thought. If I had had a responsible job, I would not have been home in the middle of the afternoon. If I had listened to my instincts, I would not have unlocked my door. I should have screamed louder, kicked harder. I had brought my predicament upon myself.

“You did nothing wrong,” Mr. Lewis assured me. He was a self-possessed man with wise brown eyes.

“Welcome to our home, dear.” Amy’s mother said when we arrived at the house. Mrs. Lewis was an alert, tenderhearted woman with cropped grey hair and a short, roundish build. She hugged me as if I had known her forever and ushered me into the kitchen.

I imagined how my own family would have received me. My mother would have been distracted by her own devastation. “Oh-oh Gah-awd!” I could hear her saying in four southern syllables, face withdrawn in a grotesque expression of pain. She would have flailed her arms and gritted her teeth, tortured. If I had told my mother, she would have called everyone she knew. “Oh-oh, Gah-awd.” She would have cried. She would have suffered loudly, without me, and nearly died from anguish. Then she might have consulted a psychic. *I will not tell my mother.*

My father would have reacted coolly, focusing on plans of action while his girlfriend baked bread. He would have said, “I’m sorry, Ashley,” although his sympathy would have sounded a little stiff. Then he would have changed the subject. *Maybe I will tell my father.*

At the Lewises, there was no comment on the late hour of our arrival, no lecture about carefulness, no show of anguish. It was disconcerting. In place of panic, only concern. Mrs. Lewis made tea. Mr. Lewis carried my bag into the guest room. Food was offered, but I declined out of exhaustion and the pain of swallowing. All I needed to do was make myself at home, they insisted, so I crawled into bed atop an extra high, luxury mattress. I felt like I’d been shot with a tranquilizer gun. My own bed was a trial by ordeal in comparison, no better than a pile of rags. *I could get used to a pillow top mattress, I thought. I’ll join everyone in the kitchen in a few minutes.* I rolled over. *In just a few more minutes.*

When I didn’t emerge, Mrs. Lewis brought me a glass of water and the two pills the hospital had given Amy for me. The first was for sleep, which I took although I clearly didn’t need it. The second was a morning-after pill to prevent pregnancy. “I think I’ll just stay in bed,” I announced to Mrs. Lewis.

“That’s a fine idea, dear.”

Muffled voices down the hall were a comforting lullaby as I drifted off again. Late the next morning, surprisingly late, I awoke to the same soothing sound. I had made it through the first night.