

Healing



Date Rape at 38

Sexual assault isn't something that happens only to college students. Here's how I became a victim of rape and domestic violence—and what I want women of all ages to know.

BY MARY DAVIS*, AS TOLD TO BARBARA BRODY

I was ready for a fresh start. After my husband and I divorced in 2009, I found a new job and moved to a different city in Tennessee to be closer to work. My girls, who were 12 and 8 at the time, didn't know anyone in the area, and neither did I. So when Michael*—an acquaintance from our old town—moved in a few blocks away, we were all glad to see a familiar face.

Michael had kids, too. They primarily lived with their mother, but his son was in my younger daughter's class, so we bumped into each other frequently. One day he asked me to dinner, and before long we were spending tons of time together. I had only recently re-entered the dating scene, but he seemed like everything a woman could want: He was polite, considerate, and romantic. He often bought me gifts and prepared elaborate dinners on nights when he knew I'd be too exhausted to cook.

Everything seemed perfect until one night about two months after we started dating. I was at his place washing some clothes, since my apartment complex had terrible laundry facilities. Michael came home with a bottle from the liquor store and proceeded to get drunk really quickly.

I had never seen him drink like that before, nor did I have any reason to suspect that he had an issue with alcohol. When I asked him if something was wrong, he blew up at me.

I told him I didn't need such negativity in my life, and that maybe we should go our separate ways. He became irate and threatened to kill himself. I left, but his words stuck in my head. Would he really harm himself? A few hours later I decided to check on him. When I returned I found him tearing out pages of some of my books and stomping on hair clips I had left behind. I quickly gathered as many of my belongings as I could, told him he needed to get help, and got out of there.

Michael and I saw each other a few times after that, but soon I officially ended things and he seemed OK. We continued to cross paths at our kids' school, and sometimes I'd give his son a ride home or we'd all meet at the park.

When he mentioned that he had started dating someone new, I took that as a good sign: He had moved on, and we had firmly entered "friend" territory. Michael said he'd love to talk to me about this new woman and asked if he could stop by later to chat.

That night I was by myself; my daughters were spending the night with their dad. Of course I let Michael in, since I was expecting him to stop by. It took me about 10 minutes to smell the alcohol on his breath. A few minutes later, he pulled a half-empty bottle of rum out of his laptop bag and started downing what was left of it.

I immediately told Michael he needed to leave. I reminded him that he tended to lose his temper when he drank, and that I didn't want any part of that. He became furious and said he wasn't going to leave until we had sex. I told him that part of our relationship was over, but he was not deterred. He grabbed my wrists and said that if I didn't have sex with him he'd find another woman to rape. I kept struggling to get away, but he was so much bigger than me. Then he said he'd hurt my daughters if I didn't "let him" have sex with me. I eventually stopped struggling, but I kept saying no. I think he felt entitled to demand sex and force me to be intimate with him. I am not sure he realized—then or later—that what he did was wrong and illegal.

**Names have been changed*

THE AFTERMATH

After Michael was finished, he immediately passed out. I went into the bathroom, took a shower, and hid. I thought about going to the hospital or calling the police, but I never did either. In fact, I didn't tell anyone. I was embarrassed and thought I was partly to blame. I knew him; I let him in. I remember feeling upset, but mostly just numb.

Hours must have passed while I hid in the bathroom. Eventually I heard him moving around the apartment. He yelled "I'm leaving," and that was it. A few hours later, my alarm went off. I had made plans to meet a new guy to go hiking, so I got dressed and went on the hike as if nothing had happened.

After I returned from hiking—I didn't get cell phone reception in the woods—I noticed several missed calls and texts,



all from Michael. He kept insisting that he needed to talk to me, and that he "didn't do anything wrong." Eventually he texted, "If you don't respond, I'm going to kill myself."

That evening, when the texts finally ceased, I couldn't help but worry that he might have harmed himself. I decided I'd drive by his house—if the lights were on, I'd keep going; if they were off, I'd go in and make sure he hadn't taken pills or something. The house was totally dark, and though I know in hindsight it was foolish, I went in.

FROM BAD TO WORSE

I found Michael in the kitchen. He was drunk, again, and he exploded when he saw me. He threw a plate at me, then grabbed a drawer and pulled it out of the cabinet; forks and knives fell all over the place. I turned and tried to leave, but he grabbed a knife and held it to my throat. Then he started hitting me. He said neither of us deserved to live, then he broke down sobbing. He said he loved me and didn't do anything wrong. I couldn't believe what was happening.

I left as soon as I could get away from him, but I still didn't call the police. I thought if I reported him he wouldn't get to see his children anymore. Looking back, I realize he didn't deserve to see his kids. But at the time I felt guilty.

Over the next few months, Michael and I continued to bump into each

PROTECT YOURSELF

You're older, smarter, and wiser, so you might think you're immune to the danger. Unfortunately, that's hardly the case. In 2013, almost 70,000 women ages 50–64 were victims of sexual assault/rape, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics National Crime Victimization Survey. (Those numbers include acquaintance rape, commonly called date rape.) While violence can't always be prevented, there are a few things you can do to decrease your risk.

EDUCATE YOURSELF. If you're getting back into the dating scene, perhaps after a divorce or losing a spouse, talk to single friends so you have some idea of what to expect. "We often hear of middle-aged women who are willing to allow their boundaries to be crossed because they're not sure what's normal or appropriate now,"

says Jennifer Marsh, vice president of victims services for the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN). "Instead of trusting their instincts, they think, maybe this is just how dating goes now."

WATCH THE ALCOHOL. No means no, even when you're drunk. But if you drink to excess, you could make yourself more vulnerable. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, there's a strong connection between heavy drinking and sexual victimization.

KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR BEVERAGE. Some perpetrators use drugs such as Rohypnol ("roofies"), GHB, GLB, and Valium to diminish a victim's defenses. These drugs can make you feel sleepy, confused, dizzy, or nauseated. They also can render you unconscious and induce amnesia. If

you have to leave your drink to go to the bathroom or hit the dance floor, get a fresh one when you return. And if you suspect you've been drugged, get help immediately.

TRUST YOUR GUT. "If something doesn't feel quite right, safe, or comfortable, be OK with saying, 'I'm going to call it a night and head home,'" Marsh says.

BE IMPOLITE IF NECESSARY. Once you've sensed that a situation could become dangerous, act quickly. Don't worry about offending anyone, and say whatever you need to extricate yourself. "It's OK to tell a white lie," Marsh says. "Say you need to leave because you're feeling sick or having a family emergency. Just get to a safe place."

other. I largely ignored him, until one night when he cornered me in the parking lot after a school play. I didn't want the kids to see us fighting, so I told him I wasn't mad at him and everything was fine.

The next time I saw Michael was right before Christmas. We ran into each other at a store, and he seemed pleasant enough. My daughter remembered that she had left a video game at his house months before, so I asked him if I could come over and get it. Of course, that was another mistake.

When I arrived at Michael's place, he locked the door and wouldn't let me leave. He didn't hit or assault me, but every time I made a move for the door he pushed me down on the sofa and tried to kiss me. Again, he threatened to kill himself. I got sick of trying to dissuade him and said "just do it already." He swallowed a whole bottle of aspirin, then panicked and went to the bathroom to throw up. I took that opportunity to get out. This time, I immediately called a friend who was a former police officer.

PICKING UP THE PIECES

Soon after, I moved away. I wanted to be even closer to my job—and as far away from Michael as possible. When he tracked me down and showed up at my workplace, I knew I had to take further action. I ended up going to court and getting an order of protection, and I haven't seen or heard from him since. Hopefully I never will.

I'm now 43, and I've spent a lot of time in therapy. I needed to find a way to forgive myself for the mistakes I made and for letting this man stay in my life as long as he did. Once I understood how manipulative he had been and why he was able to have such power over me, I was finally able to start to heal.

Sharing my story has also been crucial to my recovery. As a volunteer for the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), I've spoken to groups in an effort to raise awareness about sexual assault,

including acquaintance rape and domestic violence. I've also decided to pursue a master's degree in family counseling with a concentration in trauma and crisis. I want to help women who have experienced violence.

Although it wasn't easy at first, I'm now more than willing to discuss what I went through. Sadly, different elements of my ordeal resonate with a lot of women.

After one of my talks for RAINN, an 80-year-old woman approached me and told me that her boyfriend had raped her when she was 22. She confided that she thought she was to blame because she had flirted with him. "I've been carrying this around for almost 60 years," she said. "I finally know it's not my fault." And that's exactly what I want other women to understand: You're never responsible for the hurtful actions of others. **■**

YOU'VE BEEN VICTIMIZED; NOW WHAT?

GET SOMEWHERE SAFE. If you require immediate medical attention due to serious physical trauma, head to a hospital or call 911. Otherwise, ask someone you trust to come to you, and call 1-800-656-HOPE, a national rape crisis hotline. That number will automatically route to a crisis center in your area, and a counselor will provide you with specific guidance about what to do next. For example, the counselor can point you to a hospital in your area that does forensic exams (not all do). She can also arrange to have a support person accompany you to the hospital and for local law enforcement to meet you there.

