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# How To Write A Rape Piece (If You Really Feel You Must)

## **Abstract**

Start with a joke. It makes you more likeable.

## **Cover Page Footnote**

"How To Write A Rape Piece (If You Really Feel You Must)" was originally published at *Booth*.



# BOOTH



A JOURNAL

May 13, 2016

## How To Write A Rape Piece (If You Really Feel You Must)

Nonfiction by Katherine Q. Stone

Start with a joke. It makes you more likeable.

*I was assaulted while wearing a tee-shirt reading “Blondes Have More Fun.” Believe me, they didn’t have much fun that night.*

The joke will not only ease the tension, it will also make it clear that you’re not one of *those* victims. You’re not exactly sold on the term survivor either, but at least you’re separating yourself from those women who travel from high school to high school, telling their stories and passing out magnets reading “No Means No” because someone told them that the best way to move on from a problem is to talk about it ad nauseam to anyone who will listen. But at least they’re getting paid to relive the worst night of their lives a few times a week, while you’re doing it everyday for free. And survivor or victim, you were still attacked either way.

*Insert a brief anecdote here, to make your story even more relatable, to illustrate, once again, how you used to see yourself as “above” other victims who you think define themselves based on the great tragedies of their lives. How you hated other survivors for defining themselves by something you were able to get past. Of course, if you do this, you won’t be as likeable, and half those reading will immediately scroll down to the comments section to write something about how you’re “obviously still*

*hurting.” But at least you’ll have painted yourself as a person with a little more depth who, with the benefit of hindsight, is capable of a being self-critical in the present day.*

You remember when the rape crisis counselor, or, as one of your male teachers called her, the “Professional Victim,” came to your school. You all filed into the auditorium, angry that you weren’t having “Mid-Morning Break” that day. “Mid-Morning Break” was when you got your yogurt and granola with strawberries on top, and the only time of the day you got to see the boy you liked. You can’t believe you’re missing that. Besides, no one here would ever do something like this anyway, so what’s the point? The Professional Victim makes her speech and the girl from your French class starts crying. She’s in the row in front of you, trapped between two members of the football team in the center of the seats, so there’s no way for her to get up without the entire school noticing. You’re old enough to piece together why she might be crying but, for whatever reason, it never occurs to you until years later.

You wonder whether or not you’re supposed to clap after a rape speech. You settle on a light tap of the palms, accompanied by an awkward glance to your friends. You feel good that you’ve escaped, that at least you didn’t break down like the girl from your French class did. You are tougher. You are fine now. Then you are separated. The boys stay seated and the girls get up to walk halfway across campus (of course) so that you can go into even further detail about how *you* can stop yourself from being raped. Do not walk alone at night. Take karate. Avoid dangerous neighborhoods. Do not wear revealing clothing if you must visit a homeless shelter or prison. The session ends with all the girls chanting, “If I am raped, it is not my fault,” which seems contradictory to everything the Rape Prevention Team Member said. You are then given a caramel candy — your favorite. This makes up for missing Mid-Morning Break. Afterwards, in the hallway, you laugh at the boys imitating The Professional Victim’s tears. You laugh because it’s safer to. Socially and otherwise. The boys are angry because they say all they got was yelled at, and the girls got candy. They feel this was very unfair.

*Quick Question: Can you still tell a rape joke if you weren’t all-the-way raped?*

One of the best things about being sexually assaulted is that suddenly you’re allowed to say all kinds of terrible things and call them “empowering” or “part of the process,” and nobody, except for other victims (whom you actively avoid) can say anything. Like your classmate who had an abortion and makes it the punch line of every joke. *I can’t believe there was a woman in the clinic’s waiting room who brought her lunch in a ‘Babies R Us’ Bag.* Of course you laugh, because you have to. To laugh at this kind of a joke is to enter into an unspoken agreement with its teller, to accept the challenge of refusing to give something the kind of attention it deserves, to let the teller believe that she has “moved on.” You agree to laugh not because it’s easier, but

because it's much harder. Because you desperately want to ask how she's doing, but she desperately needs you to laugh. To cry is something a victim would do. To laugh is the stuff of a survivor. At least that's your excuse.

A friend of yours likes to bring up her rape at dinner parties. It's uncomfortable, but no one can say anything. Once, someone brought up a recent trip to Milan, and she interjected:

*Milan. Beautiful city. Did I ever tell you I was raped there?*

Usually, the party ends shortly thereafter.

### **Rape: The Numbers, or, Better You Than Me**

When writing about rape, it's also advisable to avoid statistics, which have a tendency to scare people. When you hear things like "One in every three women will be raped in her lifetime" or "A rape occurs every two minutes in America" you immediately start to think of three women you know and wonder which one of you is going to get raped, which one of you is going to get cancer, and which one of you is going to have a stillbirth. (Because if you're looking up rape statistics, you might as well check on the cervical cancer and miscarriage ones, too.) Or worse, what if everything happens to the same person? Maybe you did your friends a favor by being the "one in three," maybe they won't be assaulted because you already took care of it for them. But does this mean you're also going to get cervical cancer? You start to get angry at the injustices of statistics. Should you *really* have to be the one who gets raped *and* gets cervical cancer? How is that fair? These are the kinds of thoughts statistics induce into people. Besides, you wonder, how accurate can they really be anyway? It's not like women all over the world are exactly foaming at the mouth to complete surveys on sexual assault. Speaking of: while you're reading this, between two and five (if you skim a few sections) women will be raped. And whether you read faster or slower, you can't do anything to stop it.

You once read an article where the author kept referring to what happened to her (you could also write, "What was done to her") as "My Rape." This makes it seem like a chronic illness, which is more accurate than you'd care to admit.

*Sorry girl, can we push back brunch? My rape is acting up again this morning.*

*Ugh, I so feel you. A couple weeks ago my rape woke me up in the middle of the night and I couldn't get back to sleep! Thought I was feeling better but keeps happening 2-3 times a month!!! So annoying!! 😞 Hope they find a cure soon xoxox*

### **Asking for Forgiveness, or, How to Embrace the Victim Label in Order to Avoid Alienating People**

Start by apologizing for your sort-of-rape. Apologize first for co-opting the term. Appease those who are going to be angry that you might be claiming to be a part of something you're not actually a part of because it's often easier than having to clarify the situation when you admit to being "assaulted" or "not really raped." Explain you've learned you can't just dangle a term like "sort-of-raped" out there and expect people not to ask you what happened. That's how you ended up telling the wrong version of your story on a crowded six train during rush hour a few years ago, because your friend just wouldn't take "sexually assaulted" for an answer. You're still worried that you implied that you were all-the-way-raped. She assumed a lot, but you could have corrected her. You should have corrected her. Instead, you just nodded, because you just didn't feel like getting into it on the train. So wherever she is now, she thinks the wrong version is the truth. Years later, you're still sick with worry that it counts as lying. It probably does. But everyone on the train was listening. So now everyone on the train also has the wrong story. The moral is: always be willing to relive and to talk about your rape in great detail when someone else brings it up, but never, *ever*, bring it up yourself.

Looks like you're due for another apology, because here you are, talking about it, ruining everyone else's good time. *Triggering people*. You're being selfish. You'll need to act fast. Explain that you know it's not only a real downer, but also that it's been done to death. Empathize with everyone who is just so tired of hearing about rape. Be sure to throw in a few lines about how you know that all men aren't rapists, and link to a few anti-rape causes and organizations led by men, so that you don't risk alienating half your audience. Throw in that quote from a male celebrity about people with power needing to stand up for people without power. For some reason, you find that usually works. Probably because you've reminded men that they have power. Who said that, again, and can you find more like it? You really can't afford to alienate the male feminists. They're a very sensitive group. They don't like feeling picked on. Appease them, right out of the gate.

Next, acknowledge the inconvenience of this kind of a story, the excessive heavy-handedness, the accompanying afterthoughts of guilt and depression, apologize again for the potential triggers. Insist that you wouldn't bring it up if it weren't so important, if you didn't really need to talk about it. Thank them for doing you the honor and favor of listening to "your truth."

You know what? No, don't start with an apology. You're forgetting what the Professional Victim said. *If you were raped, it was not your fault.* Start with what happened itself. That's a good hook. That'll get page views. Besides, if you don't get to the good stuff until halfway down the page, people will have either already stopped reading, or they'll be disappointed that your story didn't have enough pay-off for the time they put into it.

### **If You're Skimming To Get To The Rape Part, Here It Is**

Start with getting ready. Start with how excited you were for your first dance. Talk about how you applied makeup with shaky hands, when it was still sold in tubes with scents like "Blooming Blueberry" or "Gorgeous Grape." Explain how you didn't know how to put on lip liner so you settled for a light pink lip gloss from Clinique. How you straightened your blonde hair until your split ends crackled between the bronze-colored clamps. And don't forget to describe the shirt. Light pink, slightly sheer, reading in gold glitter: *Blondes Have More Fun*. Say how cool you felt wearing the shirt, because it was from the store that everyone else shopped at but that you always felt you were too fat and too weird to even walk into. But now, you're wearing the shirt, and you kind of like that it's advertising something. Your mother doesn't approve. Your father doesn't say anything.

*Stop. You can't say that you liked the shirt and the makeup or imply that they made you feel like you were an adult. That, for sure, can and will be used against you. And to some men that would mean you were asking for it. Try again.*

Start with the church. Establish the setting. But be aware that people may think this is an attack on God and religion, and that people will get defensive when they think their beliefs are being attacked. They will remind you that God didn't do this, just like guns themselves aren't *really* the things killing people. Someone broke God's law by doing this to you, just like school shooters take advantage of responsible gun owners.

Mental illness, poor upbringing, absent parents, rejection — especially rejection — are responsible for these unfortunate choices. Not the church. You need to make that clear. Besides, it's confusing. People will think you mean a priest did it, that you were molested behind a confessional curtain or in the vestibule after communion, which is what people usually assume happened (like that day on the six train.) But that's not what happened, and frankly, what did happen is not as exciting. You feel a need to clear up the assumptions of others, as if, they too, are your fault.

*Look, this isn't going well. You've already told several backhanded and poorly-delivered rape jokes, which is going to set off arguments over whether or not you, or other, better, all-the-way victims, have a right to joke about rape, even if you're employing dark humor. You've also brought God into it. You've admitted to lying, or at the very least not telling the whole truth. You've said you were wearing well, kind of an inappropriate shirt. You've said that you liked the implications of that shirt. And you haven't even said what happened.*

Start with looking him up on social media fifteen years after the fact. You find a picture of him smiling from a chrome-decked boat with a beer in one hand and the other protectively curled around a kind-looking woman. You thought she was beautiful, and for a second, you allowed yourself to think that maybe he had changed, he had used the moment to become a better person, that maybe he told her, in a night filled with tears — on his end and hers — about what he did to you, about how he apologized, about how you halfway accepted his apology because there were people looking, because you were young, because you didn't really have another choice. About how you vaguely recall a note from him and his father, delivered in person on your doorstep, reading "I am sorry for what my friends and I did." But you don't remember there being any friends. Discuss how you heard that people saw his mother sobbing in the country club lobby two days after it happened. Don't say that you liked hearing that. Talk about how you start to type up a message to the girlfriend, or maybe the fiancée, of the not-all-the-way-rapist, the barely-assault guy, and how you consume half a bottle of wine while your finger lingers over the "send" button. No. Don't start there. You sound crazy. You weren't even raped. Maybe you were just dancing and don't remember. Don't risk ruining someone's life.



## Get Back To The Story

You're wearing the *Blondes Have More Fun* shirt and you just came back from the bathroom of the church basement, where you sprayed on a few more pumps of something that you can't believe was ever marketed as a "subtle scent" onto your hair and wrists. You vaguely remember that you were also wearing hairspray with flecks of gold glitter in it, and potentially even acid wash jeans. Admitting that is just as embarrassing as talking about what happened, but it was the early 2000s and you were thirteen, so you feel like you're owed some leeway here.

The town is very conservative and social class divides are very strong. Oddly enough, church is one of the only places in town where everyone mixes together, which feels right. You love God — you think. You have attended Christian summer camps in the mountains of North Carolina for three summers now. You enjoy praise songs, devotionals, and prayer, though you keep those sorts of things to yourself. Still, it's the kind of place, and you're at the age, where it's almost trendy to be religious. Your friends bring books with titles like *E-mails from God* to sleepovers. They also use religious fasts as a way to hide their eating disorders, but that's neither here nor there. You left your old church, the Presbyterian one, because most of your friends attended the Methodist one a block away. The Methodist church also has a cooler youth pastor who orders a lot of pizza and teaches you how to tie-dye. You wonder if you could have avoided everything if you'd just stuck with the Presbyterians.

Your friends are still putting on extra coats of their mothers' mascara but you didn't feel like waiting on them. Tired of sitting on the sidelines, you head out to the middle of the dance floor and decide to dance by yourself. You've never been anything close to a good dancer, but you figure there's no safer place to try than God's house. You're just starting to feel confident around members of the opposite sex, but they don't seem interested in you, even with the glitter hairspray. You start to mimic some of the moves you've seen on television.

You realize suddenly that there is someone on your back, pressing, pushing into you. You don't know who it is because your neck is being held so that you can't turn it. You don't remember the exact mechanics of it, but you remember not being able to clasp your hands in prayer. Is God watching now, and if so, should you be embarrassed? You are now in the middle of a circle of spectators as he grips you and thrusts into you and pulls at your clothes. He won't let go, and you can't get him off you. He keeps pulling you into him, harder and harder.

Slowly, you start to recognize the faces surrounding you, watching you. Some are frozen, unsure of what to do. Others gaze voyeuristically between the cracks of their fingers, pretending to shield their eyes in an attempt to appear disinterested. Some

stare openly, arms folded, mouths agape, eyes wide, willing witnesses to the spectacle. There's the boy you painted benches with on your youth group trip to the orphanage. You remember how you'd flicked paint at each other that summer, writing your initials in navy blue on the seat of the bench. There's the boy who goes to your school, who has seen everything and will recount the events of tonight to everyone. Finally, there's the boy on your back, whose face you can't see but whose breathe you can feel; unrelenting, hot, sticky. When you wanted to be the center of attention, this wasn't exactly what you had in mind.

Before your vision starts to blur again, you spot in the corner, withdrawn from the circle, the boy with you like, the one you'd tried to look so nice for. You see that sweet and silent boy nobody ever pays much attention to, aside from you, and remember how you would always partner together for scavenger hunts in the church parking lot, how you dipped your fingers into the same bucket of green dye, gripping t-shirts bundled with rubber bands. Your hands had been stained a sickening shade for days afterwards, but you'd liked looking at them, because they reminded you of him.

But now he is barely looking at you from his spot in the corner. He takes off his glasses, and if things were slower you might have seen that they were fogging up. But the corner is far away from where you are, and now you've once again lost focus. You have tears in your eyes that you can't wipe away, as he is still holding your hands behind your back.

The faith is continually whisked out of you as, blinded, you twist around the room once more. You realize you've been fighting back all this time, attempting to extract yourself. You become conscious of the fact that you're kicking, screaming, beating his sides and head with a ferociousness that seems to have been building for years. Everyone is still watching, except for your friends, who are still primping in the bathroom. In your last moments as a believer, you beg God to show you some of the mercy that has made Him so famous. Finally, you land a bite on the boy's arm that loosens his grip. You leave every part of the life you once felt so certain of inside that now impenetrable circle.

An irrelevant and unknowable number of minutes later, you are sitting on the faded yellow steps just outside of the basement. You can still hear the thump of the music and the laughter of your friends, a few of whom have taken rotating minute-long shifts to come check on you. Eventually, your youth pastor comes outside. He doesn't sit on the steps with you. He says one sentence. "If I didn't see it, it didn't happen." Then he walks away.

*Pretend you're being interviewed for a television show.*

Host: Are you glad it happened?

You: What?

Host: I mean, in the sense that if it hadn't happened, you might still be really religious and conservative, potentially bigoted, maybe a denier of feminism. Do you think you could have supported the women's rights movement fully without a tragedy to back up your narrative?

You: What?

Host: Would it be fair to say that being assaulted made you into the woman you are today?

You: I don't know.

Host: You weren't even fully raped, you know. Nothing that bad even happened. It could have been a lot worse. You should be grateful.

You: I am.

## **After**

You start to think that after you tell your story, you will be a victim first and foremost. Everything you do will be seen by others as having been accomplished through the lens of a survivor. Your successes will be qualified, your failures undeservingly forgiven.

You find support in the strangest places, including other formerly religious people. Many of them were abused by members of their religious communities, or sometimes even the leaders of those communities. They talk about what happened to them — joke about it, even — frequently enough for you to tell them about your own experiences. They get that it wasn't just your supposed "dignity" or "agency," or whatever buzzwords you're supposed to use, that was lost — it was the security of your religious beliefs and community. Like you, nobody ever believed them either.

They were told they were liars, troublemakers, people that had a problem with God and wanted to ruin it for everybody else. Because of these new friends, you finally end up addressing the situation. You watch as they confront their abusers, form support organizations, and try to stop it from happening to their own children, who of course, they are no longer allowed to see. You talk each other down on bad nights, you forgive their random, angry outbursts and they forgive yours. You realize it's "very wrong" to sit around telling jokes about your sexual assault, but you always feel better afterwards, and they do too. It's a lot better than "processing your feelings" or making a collage about how you felt, or having a conversation with your inner child in the form of a stress ball, or making a "peace candle" and "lighting it to let the fear burn." It's a lot more effective, too. You're allowed to laugh at a joke, whereas if you laugh at the "peace candle" you'll probably be asked to leave. That's why you never went to therapy.

*But have you thought about the consequences of speaking out?*

Listen. Don't write it at all. It's really safer not to write it at all. Someone could sue you, or worse, label you as the girl whose using her so-called rape that wasn't even a rape to have something to write about. You can have the most heartbreaking story in the world, but good subject matter doesn't automatically make you a good writer. Besides, rape stories are kind of passé, like addiction, parenting, or abuse memoirs. Especially, as the statistics show, everywhere somebody's got a story they're just dying to sell to a publisher. You imagine how that conversation would go: So what makes your rape different? Can you give us an Elizabeth Smart-esque narrative? Were you gang-raped daily over the course of ten years? Were you raped with an object? By members of a popular fraternity or a prominent member of a political party or religious organization? Was your rape filmed and distributed without your knowledge? That's the kind of rape we're looking for. Give us something new! And we need it to have a happy ending. We don't want young girls reading this and thinking a rape is the kind of thing you can't get over. Give us a message of empowerment!

Just move on. Don't send the message, don't ask your family what happened to the note, and for God's sake don't attach your name to this. Think of the potential employers. What happened to you may not be your fault, but how you choose to handle it is. Is this really the kind of thing you want your friends and family to be reading? Nobody can be honest about a rape piece anyway. What are they gonna say? "I hated the rape piece, I couldn't relate to it and it was too depressing." You'll never know if people think you're a good writer or if they just feel sorry for you. And it's a label that's going to follow you forever if you make something like this public. *Your name: Raped.* What is this going to do to your dating life? This is the sort of thing that could be a real deal-breaker to people. Think about that. When writing about your

rape, be sure to consider the feelings of others. Think about whether or not you too, are ready to become a Professional Victim.

You decide not to write the Rape Piece.

Katherine Q. Stone's work has appeared in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Fiction Magazine's* Online Edition, *Crack The Spine*, and other publications online and in print. Originally from North Carolina, she is currently pursuing her MFA at The City College of New York.