

Without Consent

by Myra King

You never thought you were capable of rape.

Before fifteen, life is footy, friends and nothing worse than the occasional whiff of tobacco shared behind the shelter shed, its rusted roof and bowed gutters giving little shelter to you or your friends who huddle, crooked backed, hands curved in defence against a wind which threatens to extinguish the glow before it's even your turn.

You frantically search for lexicon loopholes but find only confirmation of your shame.

It's there in black on white: **Rape - The act of taking anything by force.**

Your mother flutters by and smiles, her thoughts as translucent as the fragile pages you turn in desperation. *My boy is studying hard looking up words in the dictionary.*

Your guilt becomes a living thing, gnawing at the corners of your life, tearing chunks from satisfaction gained in kicking goals, and snatching pride from attained 'A's in bold underlined ink on essays.

You taunt fate to get you if it dares.

You dare. And win. Each success diminishes you. Unfairness tips unbalanced scales until they touch the ground and go no further.

Years rush and faded memory becomes a Monet painting of the past which only comes into focus when you stand back. And you never stand back.

You think *I was so young then.*

Now your computer has mail with a request from the class of 66.

Grey words on your screen, grey thoughts in your mind, grey skies above a landscape you don't deserve.

Your wife reads over your shoulder.

"Danny, you should go. It would be fun. Catching up."

It is fitting punishment. Flaying yourself with let's play remembering. *"Remember all the good times Danny, all the games we won Danny. Remember Brother Leaver? He was a dirty bugger wasn't he, Danny?"*

You think: *He never molested me.* In an intro-pervverted way you wonder why and suddenly wished he had. To even the score.

"You remember Maggie, Danny?"

You shake your head, half yes, half no.

"Sure you do. You went out with her. Remember, Danny?"

Margaret McGuire. Maggie. Beautiful, sweet, and pure as youth. Hair which channelled the sun in fire filaments of red gold. You remember the day you met, the day you took her home, the night you saw Dr Zhivago together. How she quavered when you first held her hand, and, when you went to let go, how she caught it up and held it tight until the end of the movie.

Mam always says she's so glad I'm going out with you Danny. Says she knows her little girl is safe with Danny Sullivan. He's such a nice boy she tells my pa. Why are parents always like that Danny? Don't they know I'm not a baby anymore?

You think of your children, how even now, with children of their own, they are still your kids.

Even the smell of your alma mater, despite the renovation of the years, is the same.

You know there is a name for recollection by aroma. But you can't recall it.

You do remember hers. 'Lily of the Valley'.

You are glad the perfume was not a common one. Now, no one wears it.

"Maggie was the one with the big tits. You never did tell me, Danny, did you get to touch them? Did you get to first base?"

You turn away from your friend and look at the honour board. It brings no joy to see your name in every list. The letters etched in brass which only fire can destroy. Milestones with mindless epitaphs of false words: BEST and FAIREST.

The year book is turned to your page. *Most likely to succeed* is the heading. You look at the photo into eyes that are as old as yours.

You cannot breathe. You escape through familiar doors to a quadrangle you cannot remember.

You turn the corner and a cold breeze lifts leaves and dust in tiny maelstroms of activity. The light of the moon glints off the shelter shed's new roof. But that is all that has changed. You walk in hushed feet towards the place where the shed joins the main building. The blind spot.

Danny, we can't do it here!

It's night, no one will see us. Did you bring the blanket?

I took the old grey blanket from the spare room. Mam won't miss it then.

You are sure you can see the depression where you both lay. But the night was darker than this.

I'm cold Danny.

Here, have my coat.

Thanks Danny.

How does that feel?

Oh Danny, that's so nice.

You like that?

Your face is burning despite the breeze.

You have taken an antique from its original wrapping. Now you see its true colours, feel its real texture. But any worth is ruined.

What are you doing? We have to stop now. Danny please stop. Please stop! I don't want to do it now. Please, Danny, please! You're hurting me...

You kick the shed. You don't care if anyone hears. You hope they do. Then you will tell them, yes! I raped a girl here, on this very spot. She wanted me to stop but I wouldn't.

"Maggie I'm so sorry. I am so bloody sorry!"

You realise you are screaming.

Someone touches your back. You turn around. A middle aged woman is standing there. Her hair is grey but her perfume is familiar. Lily of the Valley.

“Danny? Jack said you were out here.”

“Maggie?” You don't wait for an answer. You start to say something but speech has burned to bile in your throat. Tears stream down your face and you are glad of them. Proof of your remorse.

You see that you are not the only one who is crying.

“Are you really sorry, Danny? Are you? Can you say honestly you've given me any thought over all these years? And leaving straight after, like you did. I felt like sex was the only thing you really wanted.”

The strokes of memory become a stark picture. You see yourself running until you collapse, until your sobs match those of the girl you left behind on the old grey blanket, curled like a question mark, with your coat draped over her.

The sluice is opened. Words tumble from you. You tell her how penitence has turned your life to monochrome. How you wish you could change that night to frame a different image. And how truly sorry you are, not for what you have missed but for what you have taken.

Maggie tells you her story. Of self blame, of sadness, of isolation. Then of empowerment and marriage and children.

Finally strong arms encircle you. You feel the warmth of forgiveness.

Your wife was right. Reunions are all about catching up. You wish you had done it sooner.

