



## Safety advice

Just recently I got into some dull and unimaginative chat with friends about the small people who've populated our lives over the last few years. It was a veritable baby bore off, until one friend said to me "but having 2 girls brings so much more responsibility to keep them safe than you having just 2 boys". I was a little taken aback and suggested that it was with the parents of the boys that all responsibility lay to ensure that they didn't become sexist, abusive men.

The entire rest of the group disagreed; of course we had to be careful to keep the daughters safe, but we didn't need to worry about the sons because somehow our boys "just wouldn't". I had to let it go, as I was about to lose it altogether, and so they baby bored on.

It got me to thinking about when I was young, how my parents (well, Mother mostly) dealt with her daughters and son differently. And when I look back at it, with distance, it's really bloody alarming.

At about 14 I was issued with a rape alarm (so I could walk home from Youth Club in the dark), then another, then another, by the time I left home 3 years later there was a carrier bag full of the bloody things in a drawer in my desk. Then, over the years, I was given all sorts of helpful hints and tips, wear a baseball cap to hide your hair so you look like a boy, have a man's bike so you look like a bloke cycling home at night, carry trainers so you're not in heels when you walk home from a rave or club. Then there was walking, definitely "no flouncing" that was a big no, no, instead I was told "walk with big confident strides". My Sisters were given the same advice, 5 daughters; my Mum must have felt what my friend did, this burden of "responsibility to keep them safe"...which translated into "how to not get yourself raped". I'm pretty sure she thought she was somehow freeing us, giving us advice so we could go out and do as we pleased, rape alarms, how to dress, she thought she was enabling us.

The drugs advice was slightly more off the wall (she thought she was oh so freakin' cool to discuss it with us and acknowledge recreational use):

- 1) Never try a new drug if you're with people you don't know,
- 2) never drop a pill until you've booked a taxi home, and (my personal favourite),
- 3) don't take too much acid or you won't know whether you've been assaulted (???)

The thing is, she was so far from the reality of what went on, she missed the point so magnificently...Coz when it happened I didn't have a rape alarm on me (why would you take a rape alarm to a wedding?) and anyway, who'd have heard it? Big, busy wedding, loud music, drunken adults. My alarm, out the back, in the woods, no one would have heard a bloody thing. And I wouldn't have used it anyway, by the time it dawned on me, the reality of what was happening, it was already too late, I couldn't have set off some alarm, I couldn't fucking move or breath.

When he reappeared in my life, when he hit me, or burnt me, or bit me, or spat on me, when he groped me and followed me, I'm pretty sure my lack of heels had very little bearing on any of it, and I certainly wasn't going to sound an alarm- I was doing my level best to keep it all hidden.



My hair in a baseball cap to walk home from a rave wouldn't have stopped him following me, finding me, and hurting me, over and over again.

That's not to say it's my Mother's fault, or she did a bad job of keeping me safe- she couldn't have stopped any of it, however much she wanted to. But there's loads more useful advice she could have given me....where to score ketamine to get through the following days, how to hide bruises from teachers and friends, how to casually get out of situations that scare the living hell out of you...The truth is, all Mum's ever so helpful "advice" did was add to my 3am catalogue of "what if"s and "if only"s, what I could have done differently, what I should have done to stop him.

I always assume my Sisters were/are OK and safe, though I know really there's every possibility they have their dirty little secrets just like I have mine. If they don't (and God, I really hope they don't), that's down to luck, not some poxy alarm at the bottom of their bag.

That was the daughters; there was also the boy, the one son. And in the midst and worry of keeping these 5 daughters "safe", what did they say to him? (aside from what she said to him by proxy as she told us how to dress and walk)

What did they say about respect, or consent?

Absolutely nothing.

So distracted was my Mum with issuing the daughters with alarms and suggesting we cut our hair, the boy was totally ignored. And no, he didn't grow up to become an abusive man, but my folks definitely had their focus the wrong way round, as do my friends, as, I suspect, did the parents of guy who raped me.

Safety advice achieves a great big, fat, fuck all.

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