



The Island Ape

9 years ago, I was raped. Last year, I was raped again.

That's not how I usually begin pieces for EVB, and I don't usually write in first person. But for this task, for this month, it's essential.

It's essential because sexual violence – any sort of male violence against women, in fact – is about human beings, not simple statistics. It's important because I've had my humanity stripped away once, and it's time to stand up and speak as me. Just me.

And who is that? If you asked me to define myself, I'd instantly bristle - I hate labels; hate boxes that close me in. I'm a teacher - that is the very first thing I'd tell you – and I'd probably add that I work in a brilliant and supportive primary school that allows me to talk about gender equality with the children. I'd probably also tell you that I'm 29 (and a little afraid of turning 30), that I'm rather highly strung, a bit of a perfectionist (though you wouldn't know it to look at the chaos on my desk) and love all things Disney. I'd tell you that I'm a Christian, and possibly how that tears me apart, given that I like women.

I don't often use the word lesbian. I don't know why, though I'll use it if asked to identify, but it just seems to come with so many stereotypes, labels and stigmas attached. I got to a point – not long after I was first raped, in fact – where I was fed up with the “knowing” looks and comments, where I wanted to be me rather than a word.

To give this a bit of context, I started dating other girls / women at age 14 and pretty much had girlfriends throughout my teenage years. When I started going to my (very conservative) church at university, I felt pressured to “try and be straight”. People told me to try dating men because I might like it.

And I did. Try it, I mean, not like it. I dated this guy called Michael while I lived in Germany, in an attempt to be “normal”, but didn't like it. So yeah, I was dating a man at the time, but it didn't make me straight. I sometimes jokingly call it my “phase”.

So I was on a staff night out with my place of work. I was being introduced around and was, obviously, a bit of a novelty, being the token foreign girl. Something a little bit different and exciting, especially in that small town! I was introduced to Peter, a friend of a friend, and we got chatting. He was charming and interested in me and I basked in the attention, and (like many men seem to) quite interested in the women angle.

The following day, he raped me.

I tried phoning my friends, they didn't pick up. I went to the police and they laughed at me. “You're English,” they told me, “You were asking for it”. They called me an “Inselaffe” which means Island Ape, a derogatory stereotype that is used for Brits in Germany. They were so obsessed with their idea that all English girls were drunken “Schlampe” (sluts), that they



wouldn't believe for a second that I didn't consent.

When I told a colleague, she explained that she "didn't have time for [my] teenage dramas" and told me that I had "probably had a bit too much to drink, like all English girls."

Right from the outset, I was treated differently because of my nationality. My experience with the police, with colleagues, with others around me was shaped by labels and stigmas rather than the truth of the situation. Simply because I was foreign – and English in particular – it must have been my fault, not a nice, German boy. I can't imagine that it would be much different for women in this country.

Then the other stuff kicked in. The sexuality stuff.

"Did he know about you being a lesbian?" my mum quizzed, when she finally worked it out. "Were you being stupid and flashing it around for all to see? Of course a bloke's going to rape you if you announce something like that."

At another point, she told me, "How were you dressed? Were you all butch and manly? It's like you were asking for it."

"He was only trying to give you a good seeing to," someone else once said. "Can you blame him? All you lesbians need is the right man."

And the difference in treatment didn't end there. Assumptions were made. Assumptions are still being made. Every time someone hears, I get an understanding nod and a comment along the lines of, "No wonder you're a lesbian, I would be too if I'd been through that." As if sexual identity were so black and white. No, the thought of contact with a man was abhorrent – but so was contact with a woman... attraction is far more complex than all that.

Even one counsellor I worked with made the assumption that it was the "turning point", that I had gone for women as a result of what happened, with the underlying assumption (presumably) that I could be "healed" from that. She seemed a little taken aback when corrected!

Statistically, lesbian and bisexual women are far more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than heterosexual women. I hate statistics (because we are women, not numbers) but in terms of cold, hard facts, it's the truth. And women of other nationalities and ethnicities are "statistically" less likely to report if raped.

But is that any surprise? When I recall my own experiences of sexual assault, of treatment by the police, colleagues and others, what hits me is an overwhelming sense of stereotypes superseding facts; people unwilling to change their perceptions because their world view must be maintained at all costs.

I can't count the number of times I've been told that I must have "misunderstood". I don't meet society's view of a rape victim – I wasn't meek, mild, pretty, thin, straight or anything else



– so society assumes that I’m lying or just getting my “knickers in a knot over a bit of rough sex” (yes, that’s a real comment).

And while this view of a “perfect victim” goes unchallenged, the stigma and mistreatment for those that don’t meet this “ideal” will just get worse. We must fight back, speak out for those who can’t, and believe those who can and do.

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