

EYE OPENER  
by  
Robert Mitchell Evans

*So excited! Everyone has been talking about this party for weeks. Tonight was the night to make an impression, one that would last for the rest of high school. It was going to be so much fun.*

"Rapists exist on a wide spectrum of behavior." Ms. Gallagher lectured from the front of the class room. She didn't stay at the front of the class room, however. She patrolled the aisles like a shark, constantly in motion.

"At one end of the spectrum lie the serial killer and retaliatory rapist. These are the men who hate women and for them the sexual act is merely another way to exert power. To inflict pain on their victims. It's about revenge for a lifetime of wrongs they have imagined that they have suffered."

As she prowled the classroom, her eyes stopped and locked with each of the teenage boys in the class. She was not afraid to broach this subject with them, hard and direct. She stopped in front of Brad's desk. His eyes were downcast, trying to avoid looking at anyone in the room.

"And at the other end is the entitlement rapist. Men who believe that a meal or show obligates their dates to perform. Who think any show of affection is an invitation. Who never seem to hear the word no."

Brad looked up from the surface of his desk. Ms. Gallagher was still standing over him. He looked up to meet her eyes. He pulled his shoulders down even lower trying to make himself smaller than he already was. She tossed her head back in tiny, but powerful gesture of dismissal, then continued with her patrol.

Snickers of laughter flashed in the corners of the classroom. Better-looking boys, already looking like men, amused that Ms. Gallagher would stop at Brad's desk. As though any girl in the school would talk to him much less be seen anywhere with him. It was high humor indeed. Brad concentrated on the faded plastic of his desk, trying to force his thoughts elsewhere. Underneath Ms. Gallagher's lecture, he continued to hear the laughter.

"The entitlement rapist is often genuinely surprised when his victim names him as a rapist. He didn't hit her. He didn't pull a knife or a gun, the girl is just crazy, or she's trying to retroactively change her mind." Ms. Gallagher was back at the front of the class, accusing all of them with a stern gaze. "Crying is not foreplay! If she is not helping,

then you are raping." She stood there inviting challenge, getting none.

Brad tried to vanish into his seat. None of this meant anything to him.

"This used to be an epidemic." She leaned back against her desk, a smugness creeping into her voice.

She's loving this, Brad thought. All the girls were in a separate class, learning about their periods years after they had started. But the boys, they had to go through this ordeal.

"Monday, you will find your empathy."

Every guy in the class squirmed in his seat. No one wanted to do this, but they all knew it was coming. It was now as traditional as the prom and homecoming. Brad caught the barest of smiles on Ms. Gallagher's face. Yeah, she reveled it. It was so unfair. Do it to the jocks and jerks, they need it! But Brad wouldn't hurt anyone. He knew what it meant to hurt every day. Play his memories in their minds: the Jocks and the Queens. They could stand to learn empathy: empathy for the guys who got picked on, who got called fag in the locker room.

The class was leaving. Brad had spaced out and missed the end of the lecture. With an deliberate slowness, Brad picked up his computer and papers, lagging behind to be the last out of the classroom. If they saw him begging to get out of this it would only get

worse for him. But he had to get out of this, he didn't need any more pain. He already had more than his share.

"Yes, Brad?" Ms. Gallagher was still propped against her desk, her posture radiating a causal indifference.

"Ms. Gallagher," Brad stammered. "I don't need to do this. I'm not even dating."

"But you will."

Not in this lifetime, Brad thought bitterly. Like nearly everything he thought, he kept it to himself.

"I could never hurt anyone!" he pleaded. "If you knew what..."

"It doesn't matter," she cut him off coldly. "It's State Law." The legal invocation. A magic phrase that cut her free of all responsibility. Ms. Gallagher turned and began to pick up her computer and papers.

"Anyway, " she continued. "it's enriching to walk in another's shoes." She ended the discussion by walking out of the room, leaving Brad alone with his apprehension. Fear gnawing in his stomach.

*Started getting ready far too soon. Everything has to be just perfect. Maybe Jason will be there. Don't be silly, of course Jason is going to be there. Heart all aflutter just at the mere thought of him. He wasn't the most handsome guy in the school, or the toughest, but he was special. Just the thought of him brought waves of pleasure and anxiety.*

Brad was almost home now. The district provided busing, but most days he preferred to walk home. It wasn't that he enjoyed the walk, but that he hated the bus. Rather, he hated the people on the bus with an impotent, but burning passion. It was the laughter directed at him, even when he had no idea why. It was the danger. Two years ago Patrick had attacked Brad when he disembarked. The fight had been short, leaving Brad with only a couple of small bruises. But the fear ran deep. He could still hear the boys cheering Patrick on, and the girls laughing.

Of course with Patrick living only a few blocks from Brad, walking home didn't assure safety either. Today, like so many others, Brad added several blocks to his walk, approaching his house from the far side. Anything to reduce the chances of another confrontation.

The house was quiet. Brad ignored the wall screen in the living room and went straight to his room. One wall was filled with images from space. Some were from the early space program, when men flew into space on top of fiery tin cans. The rest were conceptual, visions of man's future. Far away from the Earth on moon bases and starships yet to be built. Places Brad desperately wanted to be right now.

Two other walls were filled with books. Adventure novels, Science Fiction stories, Fantasies, anything and everything set far away from

here and now. Little islands that kept him sane, that made his day-to-day life bearable.

"Brad!" his mother shouted from the living room. "Come here!" It was dark outside the window. He had fallen asleep, a book open on his chest. He stayed still, wishing that he could stay asleep. Asleep was when he felt at peace, most of the time.

"Now!" Her voice was strident and insistent.

Brad swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood. Shoulders hunched, he shuffled out of his sanctuary.

"It's about time." Anger seethed in her voice. "I've been calling forever."

You've been yelling for all of my life, but, as always, the thought died unspoken in Brad's throat. Instead he asked what was wrong.

"You know perfectly well what's wrong!"

Great, now I have to read minds. Brad studied the kitchen counter top, the ceramic gleaming with commercial perfection.

"That yard is still a mess."

Damn it! His panic over the empathy training at school had pushed everything else from his mind, everything but the need to escape.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Brad began.

"Sorry doesn't cut it, young man."

"I've got a lot on my mind. I have to..."

"You've got to learn to be responsible." Her voice shot him down.

There was no possibility of saying anything now. It would just make her angrier. She thought she was so reasonable, but she didn't have the slightest idea what was going on.

"I'll do it after dinner," Brad acquiesced.

"You'll do it now." It was a statement of fact.

Brad turned and started out toward the back lawn. Lit by bright flood lights, the yard was brilliant green, encompassed by black void.

Outside the electric mower and the grass awaited him. God, this was crap. Here they were living the in desert of the southwest, and he had to cut the grass constantly. If they didn't water and feed it so much he wouldn't have to cut it every damn week.

*Back to clothes. The purple blouse, silky and sexy, but not slutty, perfect. Ah, the black skirt, it was just the right length, and it fit so well. Shoes, now there was a bit of a problem. High and sexy were so hard to dance in, but too low and comfortable would just ruin everything! There had to be a pair in here somewhere that was right. Damn it, gotta find the right pair, just have to...there! Oh yes, and they matched the blouse, tonight was going to be magical.*

"Wash up before you eat."

Brad stopped reaching for the hamburger and ambled his way towards the bathroom. "And for god's sake stop slouching." She harped as he left the room. "You're too tall to slouch."

Hot water and soap felt good, but not good enough. Nothing felt good enough. Brad tried to remember the last time he had felt really good. He stood up straight and examined himself in the mirror. Hair that lacked color, somewhere between blond and brown, but not enough of either. At least it was better than his skin: oily and with enough pimples to earn several good nicknames. Like he hadn't had enough trouble with the jerks and assholes before. A nose that dominated his face, but failed to create any character. It was a joke that they were treating him like a date rapist. Abduction by aliens was a more likely scenario than having a date on Saturday night.

Roger sat slouched in his over-stuffed chair, the wall screen playing his sport of the season. It was summer, so that meant baseball. Half-dressed, his food balanced grotesquely on his lap and a beer in hand, Roger was a revolting sight. Just another constant in Brad's life. Brad wished that his mother had decided on the swinging life after dad left, but she settled in with this loser. Five years of Roger, living and belching in Brad's home, had been a torture he could scarcely have

imagined. Brad wandered into the kitchen to eat. It was always preferable to eat alone than to watch Roger shovel it into his face. Alone was always better, except in the middle of the night.

Brad's plate was empty. It had been empty for a while, there was no putting it off any longer. Brad felt in the pit of his stomach that this wasn't going to do any good, but he had to try. He stood from the counter, and shambled to the living room.

"Mom," he said shakily. "I need to talk to you."

She looked up from her magazine of word and logic puzzles, but didn't put it down. This was an interruption, not a crisis, or even important. Brad took in a deep breath and tried to get through it in one fast attack.

"They're going to do the empathy training next week, and I don't need that at all. I never hurt anybody, it just doesn't make any sense for me to have to do it. You know me, I don't push people around or try to make anyone do anything! This is a waste of time and it won't make any difference..."

"Brad," she said sharply. "Are we going to get to a point any time soon?"

"If there are religious issues, the school can't make someone do it. So you could just call the school and say..."

"Not a chance." She went to pick her magazine to return to the word puzzle.

"Mom!" Brad was ready to explode.

Suddenly he was confronted by his mother standing just inches away from him. She drew herself to her full five-foot-nine inches of height, but still had to tilt her head to look him in the eye.

"No." The word was final, but she wasn't finished. "This is a good thing. If I had my way they'd play them when you were thirteen, not sixteen. They've waited too long as it is."

"What's going on?" The argument had penetrated the beer and baseball to arouse Roger's attention.

"None of your business." She dismissed him without a look.

"I just can't do this, Mom! I'm never going to rape a girl, this is..."

"Oh, is this that Pee-Cee crap?" Roger asked. "I am sick of this crap being pushed in our schools. And on my nickel, damn it!"

"This isn't your concern Roger. He's my son."

"And he's not a damn criminal." Roger had forgotten the baseball game now. Evil liberals were afoot, and that meant he had to do something. Brad held his breath, hoping that Roger could pull off the miracle of changing his mother's mind.

"This thing treats every single man like he's already a criminal," Roger continued. "It won't be long before they make every man in the country get that machine strapped to his head for a bit of torture."

"And it would be a damn good thing to do!" His mother's voice rose in pitch, this wasn't going well. She was the most stubborn person Brad had ever known. "This used to be a plague! Hardly a girl in my school didn't know someone that this hadn't happened to. We didn't talk about it, except to each other, but it happened all the fucking time!"

The room was plunged into icy silence. A line had been crossed, on that was crossed only with rarest of occasion. Brad took a step back from his mother. She was angrier than he had ever seen her.

"You're taking the experience. We'll hear no more about this." With the finality of a judge passing a death sentence, she sat back down and resumed working her word puzzle.

Brad retreated to his room, his future a little darker.

*Make-up, that took three tries to get right. The first try looked like a painted doll, like a little girl. The second was better, but ended up looking plain. Third time was the charm, even looked a bit like mom, and she was SO beautiful. Aileen's here! Gotta hurry, gotta promise mom and dad that everything will be okay and not going to do anything on the bad list.*

*Don't they get it? Sixteen is not a little girl anymore, they are such worriers.*

Friday morning, one more day of school to endure. One more gauntlet to run before the short respite of the weekend. Brad rarely walked to school. He was too tired in the mornings to do that, so that meant the bus. A little taste of the hell that the day would hold for him. The perfect mood for learning and achievement.

A cacophony of screams, profanity and laughter was the sound track for the bus ride. The noises weren't that hard to ignore, except for the laughter. That was like a knife. He tried to act like it wasn't directed at him, but so much of it was. The butt of so many jokes. Anger and pain burned in him.

Naomi. His eyes sought her out on their own. She truly was a vision of loveliness. Smooth, lightly-tanned skin. Brad doubted that she had ever seen a pimple. Long, light-blond hair, that swung and bounced when she laughed. Deep green eyes, like jade. Large, generous curves, nobody would be mistaking her for a tomboy. Today she was wearing something light and clingy.

Brad's mind swam in visions of things he had never known, with someone he would never know. Her eyes met his. Caught staring, again. Brad snapped his head down so fast his hair flew into his eyes. He

could stop looking, but he couldn't stop hearing. The laughter, with each explosive breath, spiked him with pain. He opened a book and tried to ignore the world.

Breakfast. His bus ride got him to school earlier than most, so Brad spent the thirty or so minutes each morning in the cafeteria. Outside of the school, the student body was already dividing itself into its warring little cliques. Some smoking, some not, each with their rules and exclusions. Brad managed to be excluded from all of them.

"G'Morning," Salvador said, his mouth full of what the school passed off as food. He sat heavily across the table from Brad. Of course heavily was the only way Salvador could sit; calling him round would be pushing the at borders of politeness.

"Morning, Sal," Brad said flatly.

"What's up?"

"Mom said 'fuck' last night."

Eggs exploded from Salvador's mouth as he laughed. The laughter was contagious and Brad found himself giggling as he plucked egg off of himself.

"No shit?" Profanity, unlike in Brad's household, was a normal part of Salvador's dialect.

"I tried to get out of the Empathy training, and she blew a drive," Brad explained.

"That's no surprise. Ain't a woman alive would give a guy a pass on that." An entire piece of toast disappeared into Sal's mouth.

"I gotta get out of it." The desperation was plain on Brad's face.

"Not going to happen, buddy." Something that pretended to be potatoes of some kind were next to go into Sal's mouth. Brad always found it a wonder that Sal never seemed to choke. Breathing and talking didn't conflict with Sal's eating.

"It's not as bad as the real thing, though," Sal continued. "It fades, I hear, my brother says after awhile it's just like a bad dream."

"I was awake all night. I'm going to be totally flipped by Monday."

Sal was just about the only one in the school that Brad was comfortable with. They had met in middle school, the geek and the fat kid. High school had changed a lot of things, but not everything.

"It's just something we gotta do. Anyway you've done an experience before." The last ounces of Sal's soda now poured in to wash away the remains of breakfast.

"Yeah, could we do one tonight?" Hope edged Brad's voice. He was sure he sounded totally desperate. Sal's dad had an expensive consumer-grade experience player. He also had a nice library of

experiences to play. Brad's favorite came from an astronaut on a space walk. It was unbelievable, nothing he had read had prepared him for the visceral, almost primal feeling he had gotten being alone two hundred miles above the Earth.

He wondered why that astronaut had sold the experience. He couldn't imagine that it could ever get so routine that being up there was just another day on the job.

"Not tonight," Sal said intruding on Brad's reverie. "I got plans tonight. But we can get together this weekend. Maybe I'll find where he stashes the good stuff." Sal had been convinced for years that his father had a secret stash of pornographic experiences hidden somewhere in the house. Christmas presents Sal could find, but these mythical forbidden experiences had foiled him. He stood from the cafeteria table and stretched his corpulent frame.

"Yeah, sure," Brad agreed lifelessly. He knew that Sal's plans didn't include him. Sal had that almost magical ability to get along with nearly everyone. To be accepted into almost any clique.

"Gotta get a smoke before class," Sal explained. And then he was gone, leaving Brad alone again.

*Just going to explode with anticipation! Aileen, Kimmie, and Nadia talking so loud and fast on the ride over in Aileen's car. Aileen was*

*eighteen and a senior, but she remembered what it was like to be a junior. The bass was booming a block away, so scared about being late, but Aileen saying it was cool. Never look too needy. The party was in full swing, people out front, in the house, and all around the pool. Smooth out the skirt, have to look perfect walking in. 'too good for high school boys' Nadia says as they walk back to the pool.*

"Without an explicit written wish from you parents, or some other legal guardian, I can't grant a waiver on this." Mr. Shutte's voice was full of sympathy. Brad heard none of it. His world was composed of a single towering word: no.

"Thanks for seeing me, Mr. Shutte." Brad got up from the straight-back chair and started to shuffle out of the office.

"Brad, " Shutte said. "It's really for the best."

"I don't see how."

"Look, I know you wouldn't do anything like that. But there are other reasons why you should really know what it's like."

"Why? If you know I'm safe, why treat me like this?" Brad's voice cracked with the fear and injustice of it all.

"Because once you know what it's like for others, you won't forget them. Because you won't ignore their pain when they come forward."

Even if this program didn't cut the reported rapes by more than half, it would still be worth doing."

"Easy for you to say, Mr. Shutte. They weren't doing this when you went to school back in the two oh."

"I've been through it, Brad. I played the experience for myself."

"Why?" Brad's eyes open wide in surprise. He nearly dropped his computer and papers.

"For all the reasons I have already told you, and because I wasn't going to make any student do anything I didn't fully understand myself." Mr. Shutte got up from his comfortable chair and walked over to Brad. He might have placed a hand on his shoulder, but the rules were clear on teacher-student interaction.

"I won't lie to you, Brad. It's going to be rough. You're going to feel every emotion, every thought, and every sensation that poor girl felt. The strongest boys cry afterwards. But it fades. A replayed experience isn't as permanent as a real one.

The lesson will stay with you, but not the pain." Mr. Shutte turned away and walked back to his desk. "It isn't that way for the survivors."

Unless they sell the experience, then they just have a hole in their life. Brad didn't voice his rebuttal. He just nodded and headed to lunch.

*Everything is going so great! Dancing to great songs that will be forgotten in a year, moving so right. And catching Jason's eye. Almost ran over to him, but steady Aileen with such great advice. Play it cool, don't look needy. So hard, but it works and Jason walks over. Dancing with Jason, could it get any better?*

The cafeteria was a bedlam of noise. Each clique was grouped around their standard tables, trying to speak over all the others and creating a roar in the process. Here and there were isolated people who either traveled between the cliques, like Sal, or were outcast from them, like Brad. Sadly for Brad, Sal was nowhere to be seen. Another lunch alone. He had a few other friends, but none as close or well-liked as Sal.

Then there she was, Naomi, in her usual cluster of friends plus a muscular, handsome senior who seemed to be nearly always in her presence. Brad assumed it was her boyfriend, but since he had never spoken a word to her, he really didn't know. Rachel, short black hair that perfectly suited her petite frame. Once, when she had left her books on a table, Brad had hurriedly grabbed them and returned them to her. Hoping that after that first terrifying moment of seeing her eye-to-eye he would be able to say something, anything to her. He didn't.

She thanked him for bringing her books, he froze, and she danced away. The only thing he had been able to take away from the

whole incident was her name. And that was because he had opened her one of books to find it.

It looked so easy! Just stand there and talk. Tell jokes, get along. Brad seethed with anger at himself, for his weakness and fear. He should just stand up, right now, and walk over. It can't be that hard, everyone does it so easily! Just then Naomi and Rachel spotted Brad looking their way. Revulsion flashed across their faces. It was there just a moment, but Brad had seen it. Now a laugh from all three of them. Without hurry or concern the trio left the cafeteria. Brad sat and fumed. At them, at himself, at everything.

*Gotta stop dancing for a little while. It never looks good to be all sweaty. Standing with Jason by the pool. He stopped dancing, just hanging and talking. Eye to eye. Sipping punch and feeling so good. Wink to Nadia, she's hooked up with Carl, all the girls are winning tonight. Jason says something about the punch, oh it's spiked. Act cool, not a little girl, this is nothing new. He buys it, just don't drink too much. Oh he is so cute!*

School's out, the weekend's here and it is time to party. If you have a party to go to. If anyone invites you to their parties. Brad walked with his shoulders stooped, and head down as he crossed the parking lot of the school. A lot of students had their own cars, but then a lot of

students came from families with more money than Brad's. A car, that would make such a difference, Brad thought.

With a car he could get a job, maybe even go on a date. Brad's imagination ran off into fantasies as he shambled along the road. Smooth, quiet electric cars sped past him, filled with happy teenagers all off to have a better weekend than his.

It took about ninety minutes to get home, but Brad liked those ninety minutes. There generally was no one to bother him, and his personal thinking time. Ideas seemed so much easier than people. They followed a certain logic. People never did, who could figure out their rules? If you knew what to say or what to do, then everything seemed to open up for you. But how could you know what to say or to do without knowing their fickle rules? Brad felt that he would never learn, that his whole life would be spent alone.

The house was again empty when Brad got home. How he wished it could stay that way. Even as he desperately wanted to be included, Brad valued nothing more highly than privacy. Selected isolation. A can of soda from the kitchen and then a retreat to his room. It wasn't a castle, but it was his own.

A new novel to read, snacks to eat, sodas to drink and music to ease the pain, that was all he really needed, wasn't it? What he listened

to really was music, but it felt like no one at all shared his opinion. Sal had called these songs whiny chick tunes, but at least they said something. There in the lyrics, someone was singing about what mattered to Brad. Brad had said more than once that if you knew his music, then you knew him. Of course he didn't say that at school any more. It just added to the myth that he was gay. Trying to push the memory from his mind, Brad buried himself in the book.

Hours passed, mercifully Mom only bothered him for dinner. Baked chicken and potatoes, he ate it in to his room. It was nearing eleven when he finished his book, and still he was not sleepy. Grabbing the controller, he switched on his video screen. In the living room the family had a full wall-screen, but here all he had was a tiny thing, barely five feet across. Tonight he instructed the computer agent to fetch for him a random selection of horror films, modern and classic. It was his typical late night escape, and often his cover. Cover for actions and noises he didn't care for his mother to investigate.

Tonight it was both. It began as escape. Brad tried to lose himself in the manufactured terror, but found himself constantly distracted by the ample curves of the monster's victims. Hormones were shouting to be sated. At last, he yielded to them. Using passwords Sal had provided, Brad accessed a selected pornographic site and displayed it in another

window on his screen. As pornography went it was rather tame, the sort of thing that used to be sold in convenience stores before online porn killed the magazine markets. But it was what he liked, and served it his needs. Afterwards he felt relieved and ashamed. Switching off the view screen, he rolled over and tried to sleep.

*Slow dancing, melting in his arms. Is it the punch or is it Jason, but everything seems to slow down, like this night will go on forever. His arms feeling so safe, so...secure. A kiss. Gentle and so fast it was over before it registered. Then another, slower, longer, better. Warm inside, pulled closer, tight against his chest. A whisper. Someplace alone, quiet, private. Yes.*

Where had the weekend gone? Brad could remember all of it, but it had passed in a blur. Already back in school, and now there was nothing between him and the empathy training.

For the entire length of the day his heart pounded in his chest. Anxiety crippled his mind and stole his appetite. By the time the final period arrived he felt empty inside. His body ran on automatic as it walked him to his class.

"The training will take place in two groups of twelve," Ms. Gallagher informed the class flatly. "Coach Bennet will monitor the session."

Brad looked around the room, and thought if he wasn't so totally terrified he would have enjoyed the scene. Not a single guy in the class looked relaxed. From jock to geek, each and every one was squirming in his seat.

"The intensity of the experience has been turned down from a normal replay," Ms. Gallagher continued. "The goal is to educate you, not traumatize you. The experience will be intense and fully real as you live it, but it will fade very quickly."

The door behind her opened and Coach Bennet stepped into the room.

"We're ready for the first batch." He checked his palmtop and started reading off names. Brad rejoiced at not having been selected for the first grouping, then sank as he wallowed in the terror of waiting.

It was execution quiet after the first group left the class room. Next door was the school's replay facility. It was, the vast majority of the time, the dominion of the sports teams. A chance for lesser players to truly learn from the better ones by being in their shoes. But once each year, it was a place that was not loved by the jocks, or anyone else. Silence hung in the class room. Thick and oppressive it killed any smile or emotion save anxiety.

When the first sobs filtered through the wall, their impact was like a thunder clap. The sobs weren't loud, if there had been normal classroom noises Brad doubted if he would have heard them at all. But he could hear them. One person at first, but slowly more. Then the sobs died away, leaving only an echo in Brad's mind.

After long minutes, Coach Bennet again opened the door. "Okay, the rest of you." His voice was weaker, more tired than before.

Brad rose, and trailing near the rear, followed the others through the door.

A dozen low couches filled the room. They were old and the blue of their fake leather had nearly faded away completely. Each of the boys went to a couch and laid down on it. Brad chose one towards the back of the room. With his mouth dry and his throat tight he stared up at the ceiling. And waited.

"Roll over, I'll show you what happens to sissy boys." The world greyed as Brad sat up with a start. His breathing was coming in fast ragged cycles. Slowly he realized that Roger wasn't here. It was just another unwanted memory forcing itself to the front his mind.

"Relax," Coach Bennet said, mistaking flashback terror for present-state anxiety. "It goes easier if you don't fight it." Bennet was

holding a headset for Brad. So many terrors griped Brad, shredding him emotionally.

"I really don't need this!" Brad almost told the coach why. About the flashback, about everything that he didn't even admit to himself. He didn't.

"Sorry Brad," was all Bennet said. Brad finally bowed to the inevitable, and acquiesced.

Bennet fitted the headset to Brad, covering his eyes and ears, leaving Brad alone with his memories, and his terrors.

Alone in the dark, time stretched out to infinity. It was a physical shock when the Brad found himself living the life of a teenage girl he had never known.

*The room spinning, or the world is spinning. Down on a bed, soft thick covers. Thick deep comforters, and Jason, also a comforter. More kisses. French, scary and intense. Breath hot, skin hot, everything seems so warm. Music booming in from outside, shaking the window like little earthquakes. Blouse loose from the skirt. No. Not there. Jason's face, so sorry, so tender. He's back to being a good boy.*

*Kisses, so strong so insistent. Hands under the blouse. No! Apologies, soft words, but Jason's hands don't get out. No, stop. Fingers*

*in her hair, caressing, but holding too. Too strong, pinned to the pillow with aggressive kisses. No! Jason's face, angry, scary.*

*"Are you a tease?" Everything too loud, too dark, too frightening. Ouch, hair pulled as another kiss is taken. Again, "Are you teasing me?" God how can this be Jason? Please, no I don't want to. Skirt moved aside. Oh god please stop. Jason's hands, tearing, violating. Can't he see the tears? Doesn't he care? He was a friend! His eyes so scary. Don't fight, don't make him really mad. Just stop fighting.*

*Tears of shame, tears of pain. Hurts so bad, soul being torn away. Dying inside, becoming all empty. There is nothing left but shame, pain, and fear. Time goes away. After an eternity, stillness. Blood and tears on the bed.*

*Jason holding, like this is all okay. Jason saying don't cry, it's okay. No one will know he promises. No one will know you did this, he doesn't tell. Sobs, no words now.*

*Jason gone now. Alone, dead and dirty. Running from the room. Seeing no one. To the bathroom, to the shower. Tearing clothes off, too pretty, too slutty. Hot water, no cold, gotta get clean. Hot cleans, gotta get clean. Skin red, scrub more, gotta get clean. So dirty.*

The room was filled with tears. Most of the guys in the room were openly crying, and those that weren't shook with silent shuddering

sobs. The sound of guys not allowed to cry. Brad remained still for a long time. It wasn't new to him after all. That didn't make it easy, but the shame and the horror were things he had learned to bear years ago. Don't show it. They can smell it on you. If they smell it, they will attack. The guys with fists, the girls with laughter. No, just be quiet, never let it be known.

Brad rode the bus home that day seeing the world for the first time. Nothing looked quite the same. It was just amazing how small the girls were. He had never been aware of it until he had looked up at Jason through her eyes. It was an image he knew, looking at the taller and stronger people all around you. It was how the world had looked to him, years ago. Why had he continued to look at it that way? He had been so stupid! He knew! He knew that he was six feet tall, what did he insist on thinking of himself as small? Because everyone had made him seem so small. The bastards and bitches, they tried to make him small and he had let them.

There was Naomi laughing. Who cared, he thought as he walked past her to the exit. He wasn't small anymore. No Naomi, the power has shifted. He felt good as the bus drove away. He felt really good.

Lingering on his bed in the late afternoon, Brad continued to think about the experience. Jason hadn't been really that tall, he didn't

seem like a jock or anything. But she had been so much weaker, in every way. Brad knew that men had more upper body strength, he just had never accepted that he had more, too.

Jason never even knew the power he had. He could have had anything. There was a black market for experiences from rapists. He wondered how you went about finding those? That would be something to experience. That would be a taste real power, wouldn't it? Brad hungered for more than taste.

His black thoughts were shattered by the shrill tones of the phone. He looked at the display, Sal was calling.

"Hey, Sal!" Brad answered.

"How are you doing?" Sal voice was rich with concern.

"Oh, it wasn't everything they said it was. I was all worked up over nothing."

"Nothing new there, Brad."

"Oh it was an eye opener. I'm glad I didn't get out of it. I think it's going to make some real changes in me."