An Open Letter to Rape Culture

Mariah McGuire*

*Iowa State University, mariahmm@iastate.edu

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Dear Rape Culture,

According to you, it’s our fault. That the actions of those who assaulted us were somehow our problem. Angeline shouldn’t have been wearing a skirt to a rave. Nora had the nerve to be walking to her car alone after astronomy lab. Torrance wore red lipstick. Obviously we were casting voodoo magic on the guys around us. How could they resist?

Rape culture, some of the things you’ve done astound me. When Steubenville happened, the two boys raping that girl while she was unconscious, the news outlets portray it as tragic—for the boys, because they lost their football scholarships. I watched it with an old friend, I’ll call him Will, and Avery (she of the vendetta against cat-callers) while eating Mallow Magic popcorn.

“Can you believe it?” I said. “There are people getting years in prison for illegally downloading the latest T-Swift Album and yet these men are getting months for raping an unconscious teenage girl.” I was so angry, yet Will laughed. He said he couldn’t take me seriously with marshmallow fluff coating my fingers.

“Right? What creeps. How could you do that to someone?” Avery asked sharing a look with me.

“She probably shouldn’t have passed out around...
all those drunk guys. And anyway, Taylor Swift isn’t worth going to prison for,” Will said, tossing more popcorn into his mouth.

I wish I’d seen you then, ensnaring yourself in his brain before I ever had time to realize. Avery and I didn’t want to freak out, be called crazy, so I just took the popcorn out of his lap and then we threw unwrapped tampons at his head.

As if by magic, you turned Jordan, who was just walking home from work alone, into a whore. She shouldn’t have been walking on an unlit street at night, you say. Jordan shouldn’t have bent over in front of the lab tech when she was wearing jeans that tight. I held her as she sobbed, knowing what she’d been through. She didn’t go to the police because she knew nothing would happen. Besides, it was raining that night, and she thought it had washed away the evidence his fingers had left. She was the one who quit her job and moved on and he stayed on to later become a manager.

There’s not enough chocolate in the world for what you do to people.

Catcalling is only a problem because of you. The feeling of dread settles like an oily snake in the pit of my stomach when I march along city streets alone or with other girls. Each step is purposeful, long. Our heels clack against the pavement like the drumbeat of a platoon. When the inevitable happens—“Hey sugar-tits, how about you get that sweet ass over here, eh baby?”—we keep faces forward. Except Avery. She flips the bird and runs.

Victoria was beaten for yelling back once. Now she keeps her head down, face forward like the rest of
us. You did this to us, Rape Culture. We live in fear to walk down the streets. We’ve lost our right to take up space. The concrete is not a catwalk and I shouldn’t have my arm grabbed for not smiling at every man who walks by. Eye contact is a must though. Torrance got her guy locked up because she was able to pick him out of a line-up. It must be creepy for innocent dudes to walk by our pack. We stare and stare, marking every freckle, scar, and hooded eyelid. You do not have the power to make them unrecognizable, thank God. We will remember them.

You’re also an incredibly influential teacher. Abuse pornography spread like wildfire through my high school, where women are handcuffed and taken from behind. Violence is sexy and sex is inherently violent in your curriculum. Rape culture, because of you, my boyfriend thought tearing off my panties with his teeth without asking would make me want to jump him, when all it actually made me was pissed. He saw it in a sex tape, he said, it was so hot. The girl had red eyes and puffy cheeks, but it was still titillating for him to watch as the actors fucked on camera, portraying her scripted lack of consent as something we should all hope to achieve.

You’re the one that made 50 Shades of Grey into a cultural and sexual phenomena instead of showing it for what it really was: sexually abusive and rape-y. Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele are now seen as the doable faces of subs and doms, as Selena and Corbin try and reclaim their community from the helm of CROPS, the BDSM Club in town. Robin Thicke made millions off teaching radio listeners that there’s
a blurred line between yes and no. This ear bug only made you stronger. Angeline cried every time she heard it. I assumed I knew, just because I was aware of what happened to her. But it was more than that. It came on once when we had Pandora radio going during a sleepover.

“He told me that I just needed to be a good girl,” she got out between gasping sobs. “That I wanted it.”

You’re the one that taught my rapist that my one time yes was an all-access pass.

My little brother got an X-box 360 for Christmas this year. With his chore money, he pays for an X-box Live account, meaning that now he can talk with other kids across the world while he games. Cool, right? No. Because you’ve permeated this, too. Now, he thinks rape jokes are funny and cool, yelling “Look at that, I just raped you in the ass!” when he wins at Halo.

“Raped my childhood” is now a meme on the internet and Darcy doesn’t know how to feel, because it happened to her such a long time ago. Her stepdad is three-states, five wives, and ten years away, but she still has nightmares.

Since you’ve been around, everything has become mixed signals. When I smile, I’m flirting. When I’m polite, I’m toying with you. When I say no, I’m kidding. When I yell, I’m overreacting. No, I am not on my period, Rape Culture, I’m just pissed.

Nude pictures taken without consent reflect on the purity of the woman instead of the skeeziness of the photographer. Kate Middleton was on vacation when the paparazzi took pictures of her and Jennifer Lawrence was the victim of sexual harassment. Yet
Perez Hilton, virally popular blogger, still spread the images and Reddit was abuzz for weeks because they had you backing them.

Penelope’s photos were leaked throughout the whole school when we were in 10th grade and she got suspended.

“He said ‘I thought you loved me,’” she told us later. “I wasn’t going to, but he said he’d break up with me if I didn’t.” More than one boy was caught jerking off to the pictures.

The world rejoiced when some guys invented nail polish that could detect date rape drugs when dipped in drinks. Nora and I got it for Christmas. Now it’s another thing we have to wear when going out or else get blamed for not being careful enough.

And you’ve heard of the three “–ate” rules, yes? Well you should have. You’re the reason they’re necessary. On college campuses across the country they teach girls to vomit, pee, or shit on themselves when a man is assaulting them. Regurgitate, urinate, defecate. If only I’d remembered this when it happened to me because piss is easier to clean off sheets than blood.

Hell, you’ve turned even my government against me. There are politicians who say rape happens, get over it. Or that women call it upon themselves. But it makes me wonder, if these men are so easily swayed by the flash of side-boob or the curve of an ass, why should they be running our country? They talk about abortion in congress, defending their conservative anti-choice propaganda by saying in cases of “legitimate rape” the body has ways to “shut that down”.

You’re telling girls who have been taken
advantage of that their sexual assault wasn’t legitimate because a child came from it. Now they’ll have to spend the rest of their lives wondering what they did to delegitimize the crime against them. I suppose that makes my rape legitimate, right, Rape Culture? Did my body have a way of shutting that down? Or was it because I convinced my parents to let me get birth control from their insurance? I told them I wanted it because my period cramps were really bad and that the bleeding was super heavy or whatever. I would’ve said anything they needed to hear so that I could have a way of protecting myself.

I knew the statistics. When my friends and I took a picture of ourselves on our first day in college, I knew that by the end of the school year, one of us would be sexually assaulted, statistically speaking, even if we already had been.

Oh! And I shouldn’t even get started on the ridiculousness of high school dress codes. Heaven forbid a girl’s bra strap shows or her leggings are “too tight”. Wouldn’t want to give the boys a boner, because their education is so much more important than girls’. That’s what you’re telling little girls, Rape Culture. That’s why it was darkly laughable when Eliza was told she needed to go home because her V-neck was too low as Ryan Taylor wore a shirt that said That’s Funny Bitch, Now Make Me a Sandwich.

Because of you, I find it hard to trust guys. I always wondered what a rapist would look like, even though I knew I’d seen them before. Which man on the bus had done it? Did that cute boy in my chem lab grab a girl’s boob because it was “out there”? 
I trusted Will because he was my friend since high school and a one-time fuck buddy. A countless number of times we’d hung out alone until he just couldn’t handle my “teasing” any more. It was my senior year of college. He used fuzzy pink handcuffs on me, ones he’d bought from a sex store. It was almost certainly premeditated because the act was so quick. He walked me home and as soon as I shut the door he locked it. Out of nowhere, he was unbuttoning my shorts with one hand and holding my wrists too tightly in the other. I knew he’d scoped out the bed we’d watched so many movies on because he knew just which post to lock me to. He paid attention to where I kept the towels so he could more easily gag me.

You taught him that my body was something that belonged to him. That he was free to do as he wished with me because he’d brought me flowers and ice cream and DVDs after every breakup. He felt vindicated in his rape because he was nice to me for years before. The kind of payment he wanted for those years of kindness and pints of Chunky Monkey wasn’t money, it was sex. I’d never realized that, according to you, I’d been carrying a tab.

Under you, I even felt guilty afterward. My water bill was enormous for the month after because I showered with scalding water for hours, scrubbing at myself after I’d collected evidence. I thought that if I scraped hard enough at my skin I could get the memory of his fingers on my breasts out of my brain. That maybe, with enough soap, I could forget the feeling of him forcing himself into me.

I was so scared, ashamed, and alone. When I told
Avery, she said for me to call the police and then held me while I cried.

My roommate, Yulia, she told me to suck it up. Happened to everyone.

I went to the police station and my rape kit was analyzed and confirmed to be him. Charges were filed, but he never went on trial.

“Not enough evidence, honey,” they said, treating me like a child. As if his semen inside me wasn’t proof enough something was wrong, like his skin underneath my fingernails was the calling card of a lover, not a criminal.

They only ever called it sex, even as I screamed rape. My parents thought I just regretted it afterward.

Slutty Whore was spray painted on the windshield of my Miata after I reported the event to campus police. His friends came to me and told me how I’d ruined his life. He’d gotten reprimanded at his job, they’d cut his pay. I’d ruined his life by reporting the crime he committed. You have so much power, Rape Culture, that I took the fall for the actions of another person. And for the longest time, I felt bad. Until later I realized it wasn’t my fault. It’s yours.

And this will keep happening because of you. Everywhere, women and girls live their lives terrified of you. The worst part of it all is, I don’t know where you started and I sure as hell don’t know how to stop you. So this is me writing to tell you to quit it. Begging you to stop. Please, just stop.

Sincerely,
Emma Wyndgate