

The night I was attacked by a rapist

For 12 years Abi Grant struggled with the horror of being attacked by a violent rapist and the knowledge her assailant was still at large. But then new forensic evidence brought them face to face in court. Here, she relives the nightmare of the assault and her fight not to become another one of the 19 out of 20 women in Britain who see their attacker go free.

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The first thing that struck me was what a little man he was. Not just short, but petty and nondescript. When he sat he slumped forward, which made him look even smaller. His institutional grey sweatshirt matched his hair and sallow complexion, and I agreed with myself that of the two of us, I had aged better. I was aware of voices gabbling as proceedings began, but kept my eyes on him, with the kind of open glare that in a pub or schoolyard would precipitate a fight. And I felt a strong urge to fight him - to punch him in the face bone-breakingly hard. It was the atavistic call of unfinished business. Eventually he looked up and caught my eye, more by accident than purpose. I dead-eyed him and his eyes flicked nervously down and away. Ha, I thought, not so tough now, are we? I childishly reckoned I could take him and, more adultly, that if I had a tyre iron, there'd be blood on the floor.

We'd met once before.

It was January 1993. I was 28 and had written the book for a musical. After years in the sketch-show salt mines, this was my First Big Thing. Unfortunately, after a successful run in Birmingham, the show arrived in the West End just in time for the last great IRA bombing campaign on the mainland. Everything closed that Christmas, a dozen or more shows in all.

The last Friday, cast, crew, chorus and orchestra all met at a restaurant in the Strand, and although it didn't start out as the happiest of evenings, put enough gay men and alcohol together and a party will happen.

It was bumping 4.30am when I got home. As I paid the cab driver, a cheerful black boy strolled up. 'Got a ciggie?' he asked. Having just waved goodbye to my First Big Thing, I was in a grimly giving mood - why the hell not? So I pulled out my Silk Cut. 'Excellent,' he grinned, 'my brand!' I gave him two, and he loped contentedly off towards Canonbury.

I went downstairs to my flat, checked my messages (none), made a cup of tea, then slid into bed and a deep sleep.

My police statement takes it from there:

'I was then awakened with a start. I realised that the duvet had been pulled off and there was a man on top of me. I was flat on my back and he was flat on me. His chest was on my chest, and his face was inches from mine. I was pinned down and my arms were by my side.'

I didn't believe it and shut my eyes. It took several desperate 'peekings' before I realised 'this is happening'.

'The man was rocking backwards and forwards as if he was simulating sex, and was trying to force my legs open with his legs. I was for about 15 seconds paralysed with fear.'

My eyes hadn't adjusted to the dull light seeping through my blinds. All I could make out was a shape, dark, shifting and violent. He jabbed his tongue in my mouth, and I could taste the cigarettes. He grabbed my left breast through my T-shirt and began violently twisting it. 'No,' I whispered and, I think, 'please'. My voice didn't work. 'Shut up you fucking bitch or I'll kill you,' he said, his voice working fine. The swearing and threats continued as he began punching me in the face, his erection grinding into me, his excitement building.

Then he stopped punching me and tried to insert his fingers into me but I kept my legs shut. There was no way he could force them. So he grabbed my pubic hair. 'You cunt.'

'I was absolutely petrified, but I realised my arms were half free, it could be my chance to get away. His trousers were pulled down and he was trying to direct his penis into my vagina.'

He kept trying to force his dick in, but, with my legs shut, there was nowhere for it to go. He let go of my breast, shifted his weight to his left and used his right hand to 'guide' himself in.

'I realised my left arm was half free, so I tried to grab his penis.'

I missed, brushing it enough to feel its sponginess, but unable to grab it. Incensed, he reared up. He forced me back on to the bed, one hand around my throat, holding me down, the other punching my face, spitting out threats with each blow.

'He hit me at least 10 times. He just kept punching me.'

I was wriggling wildly, and managed to deflect at least half the blows from my face to the side of my head.

'The struggle became quite violent.'

Pushing his chest with my right hand, I punched his face wildly with my left. I thought I was going to die. No, not die - be killed.

What happened next was downright hallucinatory. Time expanded sideways. Facts, figures, people, places, appeared not in a sequence but as one great moment of 'knowing'. I have a vivid memory of a photograph taken when I was a child. I can still see the garden, the boy playing a guitar, the dappled light falling on a fat man on a sun lounger. It's as real as anything that happened that night.

I've come to believe your 'life flashing in front of my eyes' is the brain scrolling through everything that's happened to you, looking for a way out. Like you've Googled the word 'help'.

I 'woke' with one simple thought - let him get on with it and live (advice that was bandied around at that time). So I stopped struggling and lay completely still. It seemed to work. He stopped hitting me and let go of my throat. Then he lifted up my shirt, and took his time to feel me, not swearing this time but moaning, 'Oh yeah.' As he started to part my legs I had another simple thought. 'I'm going to be raped.' And then, 'I don't want to be raped.' So when he turned his attention back to my face, stroking my hair, and putting his tongue in my mouth, I bit it as hard as I could.

He yelped, and lurched backwards. I saw an opening and went for his dick. This time I made it. I squeezed, twisted and dug my nails in and he went berserk. I can't remember being hit - all I was thinking was: 'I'm not letting go.' At some point he tired of hitting me or maybe the pain got too great. Anyway I saw another opening and using his dick for leverage, I hauled myself up into a sitting position.

'And then I managed to head-butt him.'

As hard as I could.

'He went "Arrgh" and leapt backwards, he had loosed his erection (sic) and jumped back and ran out of the room.'

I recoiled back on to the bed - momentarily concussed. When I came to, he was gone.

I ran to the front door desperate to escape, but it was locked, which didn't make sense. If someone's in your flat, they must've come in through the front door, right? I remembered I'd dropped the keys next to the kettle in the kitchen when I'd made the tea. I was trapped, and still had no idea where he was. I ran back to the living room and grabbed an old sword stick I kept tucked behind the TV. It was a rickety old thing from the Twenties, picked up as a curio, but holding the 2ft blade I immediately felt stronger. I knew if he came back in I'd try and kill him. Still operating on simple thoughts, I stood square to the kitchen door. 'If he comes in, go for the torso.' One... two... Nothing.

I grabbed the phone and dialled 999, but there was no line. The wire had been cut. I looked down and there, laid out neatly on the floor, in descending order of size, were the knives from the knife block in the kitchen.

I held my breath to listen properly, then hearing nothing ran into the kitchen for the keys. The window was open. He'd left the same way he'd come in. I shut the window and

grabbed my keys. I was shaking as I hauled on clothes then ran upstairs to my friend and landlady Peri. I pounded so hard on her door that I left marks in the wood. She let me in and phoned the police. The whole episode had lasted no longer than 10 minutes.

Fifteen minutes later the police arrived and the machine took over. A PC wiped blood off my face and asked me to 'take him through what'd happened'. I was driven to the station, and on the way another policeman asked me what had happened. The police doctor scraped and prodded me, then took a blood sample for an Aids test. 'Oh,' he said matter-of-factly. 'Your nose is broken.' Pinching the bridge between his first finger and thumb, he clicked it back into place. Two policewomen came and asked me what had happened. Peri brought fresh clothes and I was led to the only changing room they had - the women's toilet - where I put what I was wearing into brown paper bags. I was beginning to slow down, sedated by shock. Finally I was taken to a room full of uniforms, where a senior officer asked me what had happened.

I was driven back to Peri's during the morning rush hour and gazed bewilderingly at people waiting at bus stops, life carrying on. Hadn't the world just changed? Of course it hadn't. Mine had, that was all.

The next few days were a blizzard of statements, visits to hospital (I lost 10 per cent vision in my right eye) and mundane racism. 'Black guy, was it?' said the BT man reconnecting my phone, merely the first of many. My black friends admitted they were relieved he was white, and then that they were embarrassed they were relieved. But everyone wanted to know. I became an expert at sussing out when they'd ask, and how euphemistically. 'Did you get a good look at him?' was popular. Nobody ever assumed he was white.

Privacy was a thing of the past as forensic teams in their bunny suits, booties and gloves traipsed through my flat. They removed everything with blood on it and left strange patches of silver dust in their search for prints. Everything was opened, everything searched, lots of things were taken and nothing was returned.

A few days later, the Islington Gazette linked it with other attacks that weekend and emblazoned the headline 'Sex Beast's Reign of Terror' on the billboards outside newsagents. I'd never read about myself before and it took a second to realise the '28-year-old professional woman' attacked in her basement was me. While enraged at the use of my suffering (and others) to sell copy, I also noted I'd made it into the professional classes. Ten years earlier and it would've said 'park keeper'.

Seven months on, the forensic evidence made it to the front of the queue, after which I was informed that, whoever my attacker was, he was 'not known to the police'. Then the machine moved on. The rest was silence.

April 2005. Twelve years later. I was finishing my 60th or so TV episode of Thomas the Tank Engine when I heard a knock at my door. 'My name's DC Andy Jackson and I'm with the Cold Case Squad,' said a man in his late-thirties, as if he'd walked straight off the TV. 'I'm DC Donna Mitchell from the Sapphire Unit,' said a woman with dark hair and an impossibly kind face. She asked if I was the woman who'd been attacked in 1993. I

told them I was. 'Have you heard of a Greig Strachan?' I told them the only Strachan I'd ever heard of was Gordon. 'Can you think of any reason why Greig Strachan's fingerprints would be in your flat?' No. I'd never heard of him. 'Then I think we've got him,' said DC Jackson firmly. The machine was back and I invited them in.

Over tea, Andy and Donna (as they were to become) said the government had set up the Sapphire Unit to help boost the lamentable number of rape convictions (they didn't use the word lamentable). All unsolved stranger assaults were being re-opened, and having run the old evidence from my case through their new machines they'd found a fingerprint match. 'Where was the print?' I asked. 'We can't tell you,' they replied (a phrase I was to become familiar with). Did I want to go ahead with the case? If not, they'd go away.

I'd been appalled by the statistics, too. In 1985, one in four men accused of rape were convicted. By 2003, that rate had fallen to one in 20. That's 5 per cent. Any lower and they might as well give every woman a gun and make it legal. But here was a chance to buck the trend, so I said: 'Sure, let's do it.' Donna, now my official Victim Support Officer, made a date to return to collect more statements, and within 20 minutes they were gone.

I went back to Thomas (he had a circus to deliver), and later called my friends. We all agreed it sounded terribly exciting. As it turns out, we were all wrong.

Donna came and took my 'impact statement'. In the last four years I'd begun a second career writing, among other things, *Thomas the Tank Engine*. I had a great new agent, a lovely safe flat, money in the bank; I was branching out and felt the right side of cheerful.

I'd forgotten how much I hated him. Because of this man, I lost everything: home, relationship, agent, money, career, even my dog. It didn't happen overnight. Trauma is like an earthquake that gradually pulls apart the tectonic plates of your life and leaves you struggling to remain upright and sane.

I started drinking and blew more than £10,000 on drugs and alcohol in the first year alone. I became increasingly isolated, despite the best efforts of friends, who wanted to understand but didn't. Trying to articulate how you feel without a common reference point is impossible. As Seneca put it, small cares have many words, big cares have few, and I ended up saying less and less. Soon the gap between how you're presenting yourself (I'm a survivor!) and how you actually feel is unbridgeable. It's like that feeling when you wake up in a hotel and for a few seconds wonder where you are. I used to do that with my entire life.

Descent is a bumpy ride, and I was shocked to be reminded I was once referred to the Waterlow Unit in Archway as a suicide risk. I don't remember wanting to kill myself. I do remember wanting the pain to stop.

Eight years down the line, following a particularly hopeless relationship, I was homeless and broke, had sold anything that could be sold including my records and was reduced

to cleaning for a living. Given that's what I did when I left school, the sense of failure was complete.

It's usually at this point that someone says, 'That which does not destroy you makes you stronger' and I have to resist saying, 'Spoken like a German.' It doesn't make you stronger, it makes you limping and mean.

And unlike a lot of people whose lives take a turn for the worse, I knew whose fault it was. Time had turned him into a phantom. Now he was real, and I badgered Donna for information. Who was he? Where was he from? If the police had a print match he must've been in the system - what for? 'I can't tell you,' said Donna, often adding, 'Even I don't know that.' I knew she was lying, and she knew I knew.

I took comfort in the police's awe-inspiring pedantry. No fact was too small to be cross-checked, no statement left untaken. To give them access to my medical records, I had to sign permission slips for each person they wanted to contact, then that person had to counter sign, saying their comments could be used. And that's 12 years after the event.

It soon became apparent the case wasn't straightforward. It was definitely his fingerprint, but you can't date fingerprints. You can prove they were left, but not when. I even had to sign a separate statement declaring I'd shut the front door before running up to Peri's so he couldn't claim to have slipped in during the 15 minutes between the attack and the police arriving.

In conversations with Donna, I remembered I'd been burgled a year before the attack. A thief had kicked the door in, grabbed a mate's toolbox and scarpered. I knew the thief hadn't been in my bedroom because I had more than £300 cash from a breast-cancer benefit sitting on the dresser, and it was still there.

So where was his fingerprint? If it was in my bedroom he was definitely guilty. Donna's answer was the same. 'I'm sorry, I can't tell you.'

As a victim you're in the paradoxical position of being at the centre of everything while being told nothing about it. 'We're not allowed to coach witnesses,' they repeat, but it's more than that. Our system is built on catching the victim unaware, making their testimony seem 'more honest' to a jury. Because it's not you versus him, it's the Crown v him, you're a witness, a legal veal calf to be led blinkingly into the witness box when your time is called. Then you're on your own.

Finally, one wet morning, two months later, I was at home working when Donna phoned sounding pleased. 'We've arrested him - he's been remanded into custody.'

I felt the need to celebrate. It was too early for a drink, so I went to the fridge and grabbed a pot of raspberry jelly. Even though it was a cold grey day, I put on my coat, shut the door, and stood on the balcony and ate it. Because I could go outside and he couldn't.

The CPS found there was a case to answer and Strachan was given the opportunity to plead guilty, but didn't. The legal arguments kept going until Christmas, then in the new year I was finally given my trial date, 6 February, to run for four days.

But the trial date was cancelled, and another put in its place. When that and the next four trial dates were cancelled, I realised the worst thing about going to trial is actually getting there. My life was spent waiting for the call.

Work became impossible, sleep a luxury, the temptation to quit almost irresistible.

Then a trial date held. On a cold, dank morning, Donna collected me and my friends Marsha and Amanda and drove us to Snaresbrook. Seated in the witness waiting area, I was presented with the floorplans of my old flat. There, marked with a red cross, was the spot where his fingerprint was found. On the inside of my bedroom door. I was shown the police photo of my injuries to be presented to the jury. Looking at a younger you is always strange, a younger battered you doubly so. I was less upset than curious; was that really me? And didn't long hair suit me? My inappropriate vanity was interrupted by a middle-aged woman plonking herself next to me, smelling so strongly of perfume and cigarettes that she reminded me of the Seventies. She was 'our' barrister. She patted me on the shoulder, said I'd be fine, and vanished.

A court official appeared and led Amanda and Marsha to the public gallery but I had to wait while they removed Strachan from court. I'd refused a video link, opting for a screen instead.

I took my place in the witness box, the jury opposite a baffle board to my right. Strachan was led back in and I found it strangely gratifying to hear the clanking of the warden's keys.

As I sat down after taking my oath (no God), I felt dizzy and asked the judge if I could have some water. A clerk swiftly appeared with a cup and those were the last few seconds when I felt I had a say in the proceedings.

As 'our' barrister opened with questions about the night of the attack, I was aware of the jury as a mass, not individuals. It was only when describing Strachan physically that I noticed their eyes flicking to the other side of the board and I wondered if what I was saying matched what they could see. I was asked about my cleaning habits, and having been a chamber maid, said I was good at cleaning and did it regularly. It was all over in about 25 minutes.

It was the defence's turn and his barrister stood: a Home Counties woman, 60-ish, blonde hair, heavy jewelled and wearing baby-pink lipstick, which was a mistake.

She started in a 'sincere voice', saying the defence was, of course, not disputing that I'd been attacked, and I found myself saying, 'Thank you,' which annoyed me. I realised Donna's advice to 'just tell the truth' provided no clues as to the rules of engagement.

'I see you kept your wallet in the kitchen,' she started.

I said yes, which was true and it wasn't. I'd dropped it next to the kettle the night of the attack, but I didn't 'keep' it there as a matter of course. But saying yes allowed her to launch into questions about pizza-delivery men. In the six years I'd lived in that flat, did I ever ask pizza-delivery men into the kitchen to pay them? ('No.') Did I ever ask them to bring the pizza through because my hands were full? ('No.') When she asked me whether I'd ever asked a man to bring the pizza in because the box was 'too hot' and finally 'too heavy', I didn't know whether I was allowed to say, 'Are you insane?' or 'Don't you eat pizza in Esher?' I'd twigged she was trying to place this man in my bedroom consensually, but didn't know how long was I expected to answer dumb questions without reacting to their idiocy.

After similarly tortuous questions about gas men, electricity men, postmen (did you ever have a package that was so heavy you...), she started on men in pubs, making the fact that I had drunk in local pubs sound like an admission.

Did you ever talk to men in pubs? (I've no idea, I must have.) Surely in all your conversations, you must have had one so fascinating you said, 'Let's finish this at my place?' ('No.') What, really? ('No.') Never? ('No.') Are you telling the court that in all your years of drinking in pubs you never once had a conversation so fascinating you felt the need to finish it later? ('No.') So you've never been out with friends and etc etc, into endless variations of 'Did you pick men up at pubs?', all in a tone of scepticism, implying I was withholding something ('Oh you're right, I forgot - I was a slut').

Did I ever have workmen in? (A friend was a builder). Painters and decorators? (My next-door neighbour). Finally she hit on motorcycle couriers. I must have used them and asked them into my bedroom, as that's where my computer was. I said no, I didn't use couriers, and even if I did I wouldn't ask one into my bedroom.

Her eyebrows shot up in disbelief. Are you sure there wasn't one draft that absolutely had to be there that afternoon because etc etc?

I finally explained I'd worked on sketch shows that were time contingent, but the musical was a major piece that took three years to complete. She turned to the jury with a knowing smile: 'Oh, I'm sure we'd all like three years to finish something.'

I was dumbstruck. Implying I'd fucked the Household Cavalry might be germane to the defence, but sneering at me? I was so thrown I lacked the resources to point out I'd have liked to have got to 30 without being attacked.

Before I realised it she'd moved on to my flatmate, asking whether I knew her 'male acquaintances' and any other men she may have 'brought home'. I gathered myself and said we'd been at the same comprehensive, so yes, I did know her 'male acquaintances' and her boyfriend - singular.

Her last serious dig was during questions about the burglary. I explained (again) the burglar had grabbed the tools and left and I knew he hadn't gone into my bedroom because the cash was still there.

She asked whether, having reported the incident to the police, I later pursued it. I said no, it wasn't that serious a crime.

'Well, maybe not to you,' she replied. 'After all, they weren't your tools that were stolen.'

I wasn't taking that. I told her I'd paid for my friend's tools to be replaced and was sure that, if asked, he would agree that 'having a toolbox stolen was slightly less serious than being attacked by a rapist'. Now fuck off.

I was eventually released from the court. Donna said I'd done well, my friends said they were proud, and I was furious but relieved.

Thank God that's over, I said. If only.

The next afternoon Donna arrived at my door. By then I'd succumbed to the flu and was trying vainly to write. Bleary eyed and wearing pyjamas, I let her in.

She looked unhappy, and told me earlier that day the defence had introduced something 'that made him look good', something they knew they weren't allowed to do, but leaving the judge no option but to dismiss the jury. There was going to be a re-trial. For the first time since it all began, I burst into tears.

February dragged on into March, and three courses of antibiotics later, I was still ill, only now I had thrush, too. I lay in bed wondering what did 'made him look good' mean? Was he working with handicapped kids? Had he repented - if so, why was he pleading not guilty? If I'd heard what had been said in open court, it would've been fine, but the police thought it better I be kept in the dark (again). It was maddening, but by now I'd spent enough time with Donna to believe she had my best interests at heart. I also knew that beneath her doe-eyed kindness lay a woman who had every episode of *The Shield* on DVD. So for want of a better plan I decided to trust her.

I had a eureka moment, too, when I realised the defence was operating on a misassumption - that I'd lived in the flat continually for six years. I'd missed it in court because I was busy being wrong-footed, but I'd moved out after four years, only moving back in after my flatmate went travelling.

More significantly, in between her going away and me moving back in, our neighbour painted the place white from top to bottom.

So to hell with pizza-delivery men and how often I cleaned: the print had to have got there after I'd moved back in. I wrote a statement, Peri and Martin wrote supporting statements, and a new trial date was set for May.

By early April I was back at work and enjoying it - it was so much more fun than real life. But as I was settling down, May was sneaking up. I had been feeling positive, but when the first three trial dates were cancelled one after another I fell into an awful slump.

During the five days spent waiting for the next trial date (also cancelled), I became despondent. It was impossible to escape the conclusion that I'd been better off before the police had arrived. So far I had gained nothing, lost hugely, and knew I had worse to come.

Fortunately, the next trial date held. Donna collected me and my friends Christine and Garry and drove us to court through the Friday traffic. I was shown my statements and Donna and my friends were led into court.

Then Strachan was led out and I was led in. I noticed we had a new male judge, and while standing to take the oath, saw two women I took to be members of Strachan's family in the public gallery. Not the cashmere type.

Our barrister began and told the court I was a playwright. I corrected her, I used to be a playwright, but hadn't worked for eight years after the attack and now wrote *Thomas the Tank Engine* (one of the few occasions it has ever worked as a name drop). I again described my attacker: white; medium build (about the same height and weight as an ex-boyfriend); rough, angular face and thin lips. A few more questions and our side was done.

Strachan had a new barrister. There in Muttley's place stood an old white man with droopy eyes and deceptively sympathetic face. He said, of course the defence wasn't questioning that I'd been attacked, and being reflexively polite,

I again said thank you.

I'd been told about the new judge and Strachan's new barrister. It never occurred to me he might have a completely new defence. We were returning to a familiar theme of yesteryear. Black guy, was it?

Droopy started with the sophistry. 'I see that, according to your statement, you were stopped in the street by a black man?'

The police were very excited about this at the time and I had to tell them repeatedly there was nothing sinister about it. Battered as I was, I made sure my statement read 'Young black boy', adding, 'I got the impression the black boy did only want cigarettes and seemed genuinely pleased when I gave them to him' so there could be no mistake.

But as drinking in pubs had a subtext in the first trial, so an implied danger was to be read into the presence of a black male on the street in the small hours. So the 'boy' became a man, and the friendly approach a threat.

I said he didn't 'stop me', he asked for a fag and I liked him, which is why I gave him two. He reminded me of half the boys I was at school with. Nothing dodgy about him at all.

'But from where he was standing, he could see the front door to your flat?'

I said he wasn't looking at the door, he was looking at the cigarettes.

'But looking over your shoulder, he could see your front door?'

For the second time in my life I found myself defending a young man I'd met only fleetingly. But he was the last contact with my old life, and to have him associated with another man's violence seemed terribly wrong.

I insisted he wasn't looking at the door, and was asked to pick up the board in my witness pack with the blown-up photos of my old street and point to where we were standing. I did so.

'So... he could see your front door, then?'

I denied it, and Droopy continued. Maybe he doubled back? I pointed at the boards. No. He went that way. Eventually Droopy ended the black-man questions, but in a manner suggesting the matter was still open.

Then on to the attempted rape. In the first trial, Muttley had avoided grisly questions, but Droopy had no such qualms. How many times, he asked, did my attacker stick his tongue into my mouth? How deep? Did I bite him hard?

I said yes, and mimed biting, involuntarily saying 'fucker' (as in 'Take that, fucker'). Christine snorted behind me, and the ticker type man committed it to court record.

He said if I bit him that hard there must've been blood, and asked me where it went. I said, bluntly: probably down my throat, which is why I needed an Aids test. He drew my attention to a line in my statement and asked me what I meant: 'I had blood on the right side of my face. I do not think it was mine.'

I said it meant when the statement was taken I didn't think it was my blood, but I'm not a forensic expert so I couldn't say.

He wouldn't let it go. How much blood was there? Was I sure it all went down my throat? Wasn't it possible the blood on my face was his?

Even at the time I thought: it's a good thing I'm not very sensitive. I repeated that I wasn't a forensic expert, but thought it highly likely the blood on my face was my blood (I was tempted to add that I was fairly sure the blood on the walls was mine, too, but didn't).

'Then why did you say at the time you didn't think it was yours?'

I said at the time I didn't know my nose was broken in two places and would need extensive surgery years later. I irritatedly mimed wiping my nose to demonstrate how easy it would've been to spread my blood across my face unwittingly. For the first time I noticed the jury and they were wincing.

Droopy tried a new tack. A police officer had written into his notes that I'd said my attacker had a cockney accent and, pressured to admit I'd said this, I said I had no memory of either his accent or telling anyone he was a cockney.

Surely, he said, as a writer I must be 'good at accents'?

I asked what 'good at accents' meant, and we went round and round until I pointed out he was saying: 'Shut the fuck up, you bitch, or I'll kill you' while punching me in the face. It wasn't a conversation. At no point did I go, Oh! Is that a hint of something?

He continued. 'On the night of the accident...' I waited for him to catch himself and glanced at the judge, but he was busy writing something. I leant into the mike and cut across: 'It wasn't an accident,' I pointed out firmly.

'I didn't say "accident", I said "incident",' he replied sharply.

A murmur of 'Oh no you didn't' crept around the court, and the judge looked up.

Droopy made a weak joke and apologised to the judge and then to me. Of course he didn't mean 'accident', of course of course. I just smiled. Yeah, now you're being sensitive.

Finally, after having testified for more than 90 minutes I'd been attacked by a white man, Droopy closed with the defence's final question. 'Are you sure it wasn't a black man?'

An old Paul Merton joke flashed into my mind. 'I dunno, I only saw his face', but I said no, absolutely not, 100 per cent certain. He was white, definitely not a black man, no.

I was released from court.

I spent the evening phoning friends, then had one of those weekends when everybody thinks someone else is looking after you and leaves you alone. It was lovely. Feeling the need for a distraction, I reached for an old friend from childhood, *The Code of the Woosters* (the one where Gussie hands out the school prizes), and as with all my favourite books I sat down and read it as slowly as possible.

Bertie did the business, and on Monday my friend Reg came over with a documentary about Jackie Robinson. As we were watching, Donna phoned. The prosecution had finished and I could now be told what the jury knew and what the police had known from the start.

Strachan was a convicted rapist. He'd broken in and raped a woman in her corridor. The jury could be told of his conviction because of new 'bad character' legislation (this was the cause of all the legal arguments). As for 'made him look good', it was nothing to do with sick kiddies or acts of charity. No, in the world of the criminal scumbag, claiming you're 'just a burglar' qualifies as looking good. Muttley had made a police officer reveal on the stand that Strachan had been convicted of three burglaries in Scotland, but this had already been ruled inadmissible because he'd also indecently assaulted the women living there. Why he wasn't prosecuted for this is a mystery and I've been told everything from 'It's a different legal system' to, more worryingly, 'We've lost the files.' Suggesting he was 'just a burglar' was misleading so the jury had to be dismissed.

I never thought I'd be pleased to hear someone was a rapist, but I was overjoyed - he was going down. Donna counselled caution. All the defence had to do was convince three jury members of reasonable doubt and he'd walk. You never can tell.

I got off the phone feeling brave for the first time. I'd always hated it when people called me brave because I felt it implied women who didn't fight back were somehow cowards, which completely misses the point. I also knew my survival had more to do with dumb luck than character: those few seconds where I played dead wasn't strategy - I simply did the next thing that occurred to me. Plus, I'd always been privately ashamed at losing my voice. Now I felt I'd got it back. I wish I'd thought more about the first victim, but I was happy and relieved. Reg gave me a bear hug and we went back to Jackie Robinson's hell-life.

On Tuesday I sat at home while the defence set out their stall. Strachan's legal-aid solicitor said he'd advised him to give a 'no comment' interview, then Strachan took the stand.

So how did his fingerprint get into my bedroom? He claimed he was the burglar who'd stolen the toolbox. When asked what type of tools were taken (they were specialised), he said he 'couldn't remember'. If he'd been in my bedroom, why didn't he take the money in plain view? He said he 'must have missed it'. Lastly he was asked to give a date when he'd burgled my flat. He gave a date, and it was pointed out to him he was in prison at the time.

And that was the defence's case. After summing up ('The black guy done it'), the jury was sent out to deliberate.

On Wednesday I waited. Court starts at 10am, and by 12.30 I'd heard nothing, one o'clock nothing. I was getting concerned, when my buzzer went. It was Donna. 'Guilty,' she said, beaming. 'Twelve nil.'

Thirteen years after the attack, 14 months after the police arrived at my door, it had taken a jury of 12 men and women less than 20 minutes to unanimously find him guilty. I bounced around the flat delirious that it was over, over.

Sentencing was set for July, in two months' time. After the high of the verdict I returned to earth with a crash after discovering that, having had a coach and horses driven through my life, I was entitled to £88.50 expenses in total - you get nothing for loss of earnings - and that to claim it I had to fill in a four-page double-sided form (it didn't have a box for 'Kiss my arse' so I didn't bother). Following a dismal meeting with my accountant, I thought it best to put the trial out of mind and get back to work.

The World Cup came and went and so did the first sentencing date (cancelled two days before). A week later, the next date was cancelled too, again at 48 hours' notice. With the judge going on holiday, a new date would be set in four weeks' time. August passed and a new date was set, 11 September. When that was cancelled, too, I noticed even the police were starting to sound embarrassed. Whether it was because the probation service failed to complete a report, or the prison service failed to release him to see a

doctor, or the defence made a last-minute request for more time ceased to matter. It was the institutional equivalent of 'the dog ate my homework'.

I was tired of being upset and bored of hearing myself complain. Misery doesn't love company - it sucks the life out of it. When an Arsenal fan drove into the back of me on Hornsey Lane (he was admiring the new stadium), it genuinely made a refreshing change.

Finally, we had a date, 18 September, that held. Punch drunk on anticlimax, I began to prepare myself (again) for seeing Strachan. I had no idea how I'd react or what it would mean to me.

Andy asked me to write a letter to the judge, describing how Strachan pleading not guilty and forcing a trial had affected me.

On the 18th, the police collected us and drove to court. Andy took my letter to the judge while 'our' barrister made the customary flying visit, and I became aware of how desperately I wanted this over with.

We went in and sat with Reg to my left. I noticed Droopy was there and then suddenly, with no fanfare, the door to the dock swung open and Strachan shuffled in and sat down. The judge came in, sat down and we were off.

From the moment Droopy opened his mouth I knew it wasn't going to happen. A report had been delivered late or something. My body felt heavy, as I listened to Droopy's legal righteous indignation, his client couldn't possibly be sentenced like this... Andy shook his head with disbelief, and the judge capped it all by granting the delay, saying that as I'd waited 13 years for justice, he was sure I 'wouldn't mind waiting another 28 days or so'.

In my letter I'd said the last 18 months had seen my income halved, I was back on anti-depressants, started smoking and hadn't had a holiday in two years. What in the above would lead anyone to think I 'wouldn't mind'? I was staggered, and a part of me gave up.

When the call went out, 'All Rise!' I found myself just sitting there. The court didn't respect me, so why should I respect the court?

Outside, Andy explained the causes for the delay, but I walked off and stood in a patch of September sunlight. Blanketed by my friends' sympathy I asked to be driven home.

I went a bit mad that night, and was shocked the next morning to find I'd woken up crying. I was starting to crave oblivion and realised it was caring that was killing me. So I did my best to stop. It took another couple of days of raging and whining, but eventually I reached a comforting state of near disinterest.

When a new sentencing date was set for six weeks' time, I wasn't sure I was going to go. But to my surprise the judge asked the police to pass on an apology to me, and let it be known he was determined it should happen on the 30th. It was moved to the 31st,

Halloween. Donna picked up Amanda and me and we drove past shops displaying
Scream masks and pumpkins, arriving at court with minutes to spare.

I was introduced to our latest barrister, then we were led in. The door to the dock swung
open and Strachan walked in.

I was shocked. He'd put on weight, a good stone since I'd last seen him, and my body
physically recoiled. It recognised the man that attacked me in a way it hadn't before. It
was in his shoulders, neck and jawline. I didn't stare, and he didn't look at me once.

The judge was up to speed with the paperwork, so our barrister had little to do. Which
left Droopy to make Strachan's case for mitigation - drugs and alcohol made him do it,
and now he was a Catholic he was all better. Letters were produced from priests, imams
and prison wardens saying what a perfect prisoner he was. He claimed Strachan,
'saddened' about how his life was going, had 'completely reformed himself'.

I was very good and said nothing (I'd promised Andy). It was only when Droopy claimed
Strachan had made 'reparation as best he can' that I went 'Ha!' And, as Bertie would
say, I meant it to sting.

Droopy argued that, as Strachan had received only six years for his previous rape and
two years for a sexual assault on an 11-year-old girl (which ran concurrently), the judge
couldn't possibly give him more here - especially as his attack on me was 'not as ghastly
as it might be'. He also said Strachan had had 'an agony' over the trials and waiting for
sentence.

There was a break while the judge thought things over, during which time our barrister
showed me Strachan's letter to the judge. Without admitting guilt, he extended me 'his
deepest sympathies' for the 'horrific incident' and said working at the ambulance call
centre (which is where he was arrested) was the best job he'd ever had. I was unmoved.

The judge returned. He said my impact statement made for 'grim reading'. Despite
conceding that it had not been proved that Strachan was still a danger to women, he
said the 'dreadful crime' warranted a 'determined' sentence of 11 years.

There was no banging of gavels, no 'Do you have anything to say to the court?' - he just
kept on talking. Strachan looked pale and I was delighted if confused. Was that it? Was
that the sentence? The court was asked to rise. Strachan exchanged glances with his
brother before being led away.

Outside it became clear that 11 years was a terrific result. I felt tired but vindicated.
Happy would be pushing it. But I was especially thrilled for Andy, who'd worked on the
case for more than two years. 'Of course he'll appeal,' he said. 'They always do.'

Having come to the end of this tortuous journey, I'm happy to report that the police were
perfect, the forensics team flawless, and even the judge did his job. But as business
seems to be the lingua franca of the government, I'd point out to John Reid that if the
English legal system was a company, it wouldn't just go bankrupt, its customer base

would burn it to the ground. Now, when I look at that one-in-20 statistic I'm not appalled, I'm amazed. Wow, that high?

Now if you'll forgive me, I really do have work to do.

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