

“I lied about being raped”

You might hate me already. Who lies about something as awful as rape? But I'm not asking for sympathy. I realize it's hard to understand why, during one late-night phone conversation when I was 18, I told a terrible lie. I pretended I had been sexually assaulted by a stranger, a fiction that shook my college campus and ultimately threw my life into chaos. The first thing you need to know is that nobody went to jail. I never intended to hurt anyone. The second thing you need to know is that everything I'm about to say now—I swear—is true.

The whole mess began at a party one autumn night during my first year at DePaul University's Theatre School in Chicago. It was a typical theater-major gathering: People were either having so much fun they were screaming, or were so depressed they were sobbing. As you might expect at a drama school, the students were over-the-top, emoting all the time. I wasn't much different. Back in high school I'd always been "the funny one" or "the talented one." I suddenly had to share the spotlight, and frankly, I was none too pleased about it. I was also insecure about my weight—I was one of about three chubby girls in the entire drama program—and desperate to have someone find me attractive. That's why shortly after school started I'd hooked up with another student, George*, whom I liked only because he said I was cute; the first night we met, we had unmemorable sex in the parking lot of a bank.

Unfortunately I was hung up on another guy, Jeff. And at this party, Jeff was more interested in sobbing on the shoulder of our friend Nina than in falling in love with me. At the end of the night,

I watched them leave together. He ran away crying, she chased him crying—and I cried watching them go. All in all, a *great* party.

At that point in time, the tiniest of rejections could set me off—and I felt like I'd been wrenched in two. At 2 A.M. I found myself dialing my close friend (and ex-boyfriend) Rob, who still lived back in my hometown, Indianapolis. God knows why I chose him to talk to; a cynical guy, he wasn't known for being a pick-me-up, but at least he knew me. I was feeling so depressed and dark—certain that Jeff's brush-off was just a sign of greater disappointments yet to come: I wasn't going to be a successful actress; I wasn't going to find a soulmate. I was mired in that intense, enveloping melancholy you can feel only at 18. But at first, on the phone, I tried to play it down. Sitting in the doorway of—ironically enough—Nina's room, I simply told Rob I was having a bad night.

He wasn't all that receptive. "Please, Lauren," he said, "You just got there."

"No, it's more than that," I stammered. "I can't seem to..."

By Lauren Weedman Photographs by Coral Von Zumwalt

“I told the police that the guy who attacked me wasn't white

connect with people...I don't know. It's hard." Rob, I wanted to say, everything's falling apart and nobody likes me.

"Lauren, you always do this." He sighed.

"No, this time really is different," I said. I needed to make him understand this pit I was falling into. I needed him to empathize. "I'm too fat," I blurted out.

"Oh, please, you act like you're 300 pounds or something," Rob said, obviously irritated. "Stop obsessing. Go volunteer in a soup kitchen. Read a newspaper..."

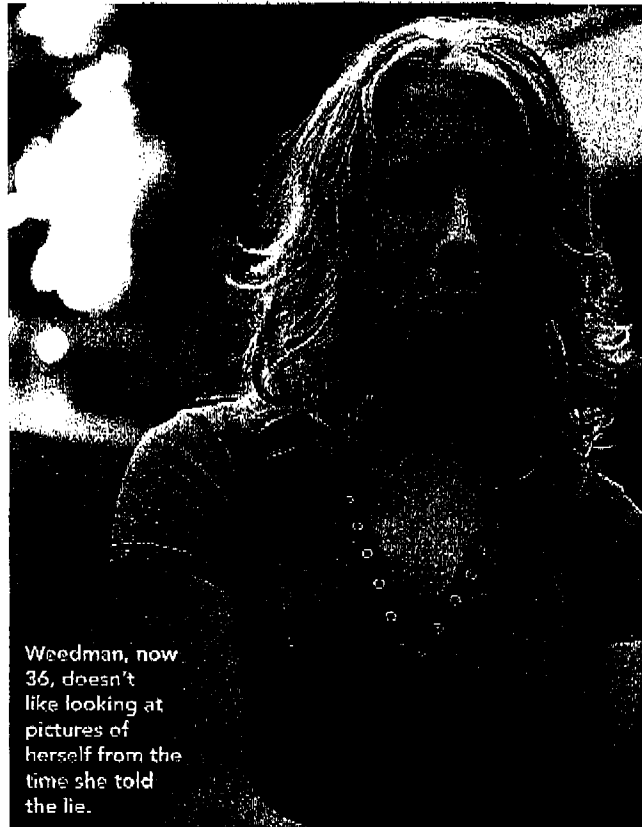
I've watched four-year-olds lose their minds when a birthday party comes to an end—throwing themselves on the ground, screaming and crying until they can't breathe. Whenever I see that behavior, I think, man, I've been there. It was that kind of moment on the phone with Rob. I felt I simply *had* to get his attention. I took a deep breath and told him I'd been mugged on the street. He was unimpressed.

"Why were you wandering alone in the middle of the night?" he asked.

I didn't answer. Then, almost without thinking, I blurted out, "Rob, I was raped."

Silence. "Oh my God," he said. Now he was listening. But I felt the first little twinges of panic. Why the hell did I say that, I thought nervously. That's going a little too far. I'm only going to use that with him.

When I got off the phone, I turned around and Nina's roommate was standing behind me, weeping. "Lauren, you've been raped?" she gasped. She'd overheard everything I'd said. I realized what a huge mistake I'd made, and already it felt as if it were too late to do anything about it. I stared down at the ratty dorm carpet. I probably looked like I was filled with shame, and I was, but not for the reasons Nina's roommate would've thought. I wished I could rewind time: to have spent the night writing in my journal, to have had rebound sex with George, or to have gone out drinking and woken up with, at worst, a hangover. But what was I going to say now? "Oh, um, no, I just made that up?" She'd tell people how horrible I was; I would be a pariah on campus. So I kept my mouth shut and nodded yes—without lifting my head so she could see my face.



Weedman, now 36, doesn't like looking at pictures of herself from the time she told the lie.

The next morning when I woke up, I felt better—for about five seconds. I had a plan: I'd go to Nina and tell the truth. I'd spin my "rape" confession as a crazy party anecdote—hopefully before her roommate told her anything at all. No such luck. Everyone from the party soon showed up at my door. People were hysterical, crying and comforting one another and hugging me.

"I can't believe this. It's my worst nightmare," Nina told me, distraught.

"Me too," I mumbled truthfully. I was in such a complete state of shock I'm sure it really did look as though I'd been beaten up. But of course my agreement confirmed that the rumor was true. It began to dawn on me that I'd crossed a line and it would be very hard to recant my story.

My friends wrapped me in blankets on a couch in the kitchen area as they made me breakfast. I watched them frying up eggs, trying to lighten the mood with jokes about their lack of cooking skills. They all told me how much they cared about me, how much it hurt them to know that I'd been hurt. I barely said a word. The love and attention I'd craved for so long was being directed toward me—but it was all based on a lie.

Sitting there with friends cuddled up beside me, I'd never felt more alone.

Playing the part

Over the next few days, I never brought up the subject of the "rape" myself, but I didn't have to. Students in my classes and my dorm kept asking me questions like "What street were you on?" and "How did your parents react?" I'd make up complicated answers. I invented entire scenarios. I'd tell people how my parents—who were still unaware of the story—had pleaded with me to leave school, and how I had told them that I wasn't going to give my attacker the power to change my life. I was a tough, empowered survivor refusing to be a victim.

George too heard the rumors that I'd been attacked, and one evening he came to see me. He was really shaken up. He told me how guilty, sad and confused he felt. He also admitted that he didn't think he could handle see-

ing me anymore because of the rape. Sure, I was lying, but I was still outraged that he would break up with me over such a thing. He was, however, willing to have breakup sex, and we did—a development that seemed to shock him and me both.

Meanwhile, the story of my rape kept spreading. About a week later my dorm's residential assistant called me into her room. She'd heard about my attack through the grapevine and wanted to let me know she was there for me. "A few girls have come to me because they're worried about you," she told me. She'd already set up an appointment for me at the student mental health center. I quickly said I would go. It never occurred to me to tell the R.A. the truth. I didn't want to see the concern in her eyes turn to disdain. Besides, this crisis had proved to be an excellent distraction from the depression and misery I otherwise felt so much of the time. Only in retrospect do I realize that I'd actually started to enjoy some of the special attention I was getting.

When I got to the center, I expected to walk into a room with just a couch and a kind, nurturing therapist. Instead, the door opened to also reveal two uniformed police

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Thanks to me, this innocent man knew how it felt to be treated like a violent criminal.

As they pushed the guy around to show me what he looked like in profile, I could barely breathe. I wanted it to be over as quickly as possible—for everyone. I said, “No. That’s not him. None of them.”

The detective standing at my side kept telling me, “Just wait. Let us bring him up so you can get a look at him.”

When they finally pushed him up to the glass, he was crying. He looked terrified.

“No,” I said sharply. “That’s not him. I’m 100 percent sure. And I need to use the restroom.”

The detective nodded. “OK,” he said. “But don’t worry, Lauren, we’ll find him.”

I went into the bathroom and sobbed.

I think about that lineup all the time. I’m sure their suspect was worrying, what if she decides it’s me? Once he stopped crying, maybe he got angry. Maybe part of his heart shut down that day. I blame myself for that.

Later, in my dorm room, I tried to figure out how I’d managed to do so much damage. I glowered at my reflection in the mirror and forced myself to say the words over and over: “You lied, you lied, you lied.”

The moment I came clean

I left school at the end of the year because my parents thought I was being irresponsible with money. I was devastated, but I didn’t fight the decision. I figured that on some sort of karmic level, it was happening because of what I’d done.

My big lie dogged me, though, even after leaving college. I was so angry at myself that it became hard to keep a relationship. And I was so used to being perceived as a victim by that point—in spite of myself, I’d found the attention at college ultimately seductive and addictive—that I wasn’t ready to leave the story behind. I kept lying, even to new guys I met. Initially I’d come across as a confident girl who despite having gone through a terrible trauma really had her stuff together. I was good at projecting that image: In just seven years, I became engaged three times. But each time it fell apart once my self-loathing, always just below the surface, started creeping up. After what I’d done, I couldn’t believe that it was OK for me to be happy. So I sabotaged myself. He doesn’t *really* want to be engaged to me, I’d think. If he knew who I was, he wouldn’t love me. I’d fly into rages, collapse in tears over the slightest thing and use my “rape” as an excuse for the intensity of my emotions.

One of my ill-fated relationships took me

all the way to Amsterdam, a city where my fiancé wanted to live. He and I broke up within a year of moving there, but I loved it and decided to stay there to act with local English-speaking theater companies. I even helped other expatriates ease into their new lives, explaining the difference between a phone bill and gas bill and helping them buy bread in Dutch. I relished Amsterdam because, unlike the U.S., none of my friends there had heard about my so-called rape. I felt free for the first time, and that sense of liberation far outweighed my need to be treated like a victim. After five years of living there, I decided that the only way I could return to the States was to tell the truth.

Around Christmas in 1994, I flew to Chicago to see Rachel. I was afraid to level with her, but I felt compelled to do so anyway. She had always been nothing but honest and real with me and had changed my life with her strength and spirit. She trusted me, and I had lied about something that had caused her immense pain. I knew I couldn’t wait any longer, but for the entirety of the first day I was there, I felt queasy, looking for the right moment.

As she cooked us dinner, I dropped the news. “I have to tell you something, Rachel,” I said. “Something I’ve never told anyone in my life but I have to tell you.” I tried to calm my shaking voice. Rachel didn’t say anything; she just nodded for me to continue.

I began with my breakdown at the party, how left out I’d felt early on at school and my deep-seated feelings of unworthiness. I told her about calling Rob, saying I was raped...and finally I said the words “I lied.” Then I told her the entire story. I’d never heard myself say the whole saga out loud before, and I felt flooded with sadness—sadness that it had taken me so long to tell her the truth, and sadness for the next moment, in which I was sure she would ask me to leave her house and never speak to me again. That didn’t happen. Instead, she looked at me kindly and said, “Lauren, you *were* raped. You raped yourself.”

I was overwhelmed. Somehow she knew how much I’d tormented myself, and she wasn’t going to pile on more guilt. She didn’t even seem angry, just concerned for me. In the years that followed that talk, Rachel and I drifted apart as our lives took different directions, but I’ll never forget how she gave me permission to start forgiving myself.

Over time I owned up to my lie with other people in my life, too. Not everyone reacted so well—a woman in my writers’ group told me I was a terrible, disturbed person. Rob, with whom this mess all started, just responded, “Wow, you’re kidding.” Perhaps the least dramatic confession was

the one I made to my parents—who apparently had suspected as much all along.

“We knew you lied. Of course we did,” my mother told me. “No matter what our relationship was back then, if something like that had actually happened, the first person you would have called is your mother.”

I wanted to disagree, but I couldn’t. Because she was right. If I’d actually been raped, hers was the first number I would have dialed.

Creating an honest life

The lie still follows me to this day. The story I told about something that didn’t happen has shaped my identity more than nearly anything that really did happen. As an actor, I became committed to telling uncomfortable, stark human truths; I launched a successful career doing autobiographical one-woman shows based solely on my reputation for telling it like it is. And in my personal life, the story of my lie became something of a litmus test, a way I could tell if a relationship would work out. I knew I would ultimately marry my husband, because I told him everything on our first date. In the end our marriage didn’t work out, but he was the first guy to convince me that I could be honest about having done something awful without losing his respect or love.

I keep thinking I’ve come out for the last time—I’ve told the people who were hardest to tell, even people who didn’t really need to know. But here I am telling the truth—again. Why do I keep confessing? So no one can think of me as a victim anymore.

I leaned on victimhood the way an alcoholic uses drinking. I invoked it with friends or family members when I was nervous or couldn’t handle reality. It was in my back pocket in dating situations; instead of saying, “I don’t like to be touched there because I hate my body,” I’d say, “I can’t be touched right now—because of what happened.” But lying repeatedly also kept me isolated, and I don’t want to go back to that lonely place.

In the last few years I’ve performed in theater productions and on TV. And yet I am still a little unnerved by the girl who told that lie. I don’t like looking at pictures of myself from that time—chunky and sad, with blue eyeshadow up to my brows. They seem to me like my “before” pictures from a makeover in a magazine...before I told the truth. There are moments when I’m afraid that girl is still me. The rest of the time, I’m simply trying to create an “after.” ☺

Lauren Weedman has appeared on The Daily Show With Jon Stewart and VH1’s Best Week Ever. She is currently touring in her one-woman show, Wreckage.