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# A question of rape

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*A note from Susan: This is the first really intimate essay I wrote, six months before I began the column. It appeared in the Sunday magazine, now defunct. It has since been reprinted in law textbooks; one law student tracked me down at home to argue about it.*

We were alone beneath the stars, high in the mountains, miles from the nearest light, our sleeping bags unrolled on the ground, weary from a long drive and anticipating sleep.

Or so I thought.

We were not lovers, merely acquaintances. We worked together. We respected each other. He owned a few acres in the mountains, and I admired that back-to-the-land streak in anyone. So we agreed to make this weekend camping trip together to his patch of earth.

A few days earlier, oh so briefly, I thought about saying something. Issuing a "don't-get-any-ideas" warning. But I didn't. I thought he'd feel insulted.

He did not worry so much about my feelings.

For hours on that starlit night he pestered me. Stroked me. Whispered to me first, then argued, then whined: "Oh, come on. You'll love it. Why'd you come up here with me then? Just once. It's such a beautiful night. You'll enjoy it, really. Come on. Please?"

I didn't scream, because there was no one to hear. I didn't fight, because there was nowhere to run. It was his car, and he had the keys. Instead, I curled up. I buried my head against my chest while he touched me. I slapped blindly at his touches, as if I were batting away mosquitos.

Because this happened more than a decade ago, I can't remember with precision how long he continued. Like William Kennedy Smith, I wore no watch that night.

All I know is that he went on forever. Unrelenting. Finally, weary and weepy, I gave up. I remember the sting of my tears rolling down my cheeks and into my ears as I lay on my back and he moaned.

Then, I fell instantly into sleep, as if from the top of a mountain.

Our weekend ended early, because I was sullen and that made him angry. There was nothing to say on the long ride home.

I never called what happened that night "rape." I still don't.

But it wasn't bliss, either.

I wonder why it has no name. Because it happens all the time: Men push. We submit.

No violence, no shouting, no cries of "rape" afterwards. Just sadness and defeat.

How many of us women have watched this sort of thing happen to us, as if we were outside our bodies, in the 30 years since a confluence of factors made sexual interaction easier, at least practically speaking?

That night in the mountains I surrendered for one reason: I was tired and wanted to escape.

But we surrender for reasons besides fatigue.

- Duty: Some women may feel an obligation to reward men who've been particularly kind, or patient, or ardent. Other women may feel an obligation to be a good-and-ready wife.
- Ambiguity: Part of us wants sex, the other part is wary. And as the train is moving toward the station, so to speak, we're still not sure. We may surrender at the same moment that we conclude, "No, this is stupid."

Some men claim not to understand this. But most women know there is a vast geography of shifting sentiment between Yes and No.

- Hope: Sometimes we surrender because our disinterest might turn into delight. A friend calls this the "No-but-I- could-be-convinced" approach.

Sometimes it works. Often it doesn't, and we wonder why we gave in. We make these excuses for our surrenders, but that's no consolation for the vanquished.

Years after that night in the mountains, I'm surprised to find how angry I am about it. Angrier than I was then. At both him and me, and the games people play.

Now, wiser and less polite, I would not whimper but shout! Not for help, but for my own integrity -- to let him know how I felt about his boorish presumptions.

I would surrender only if he held me down and forced me to. And then I could call it rape.