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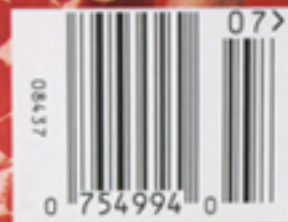
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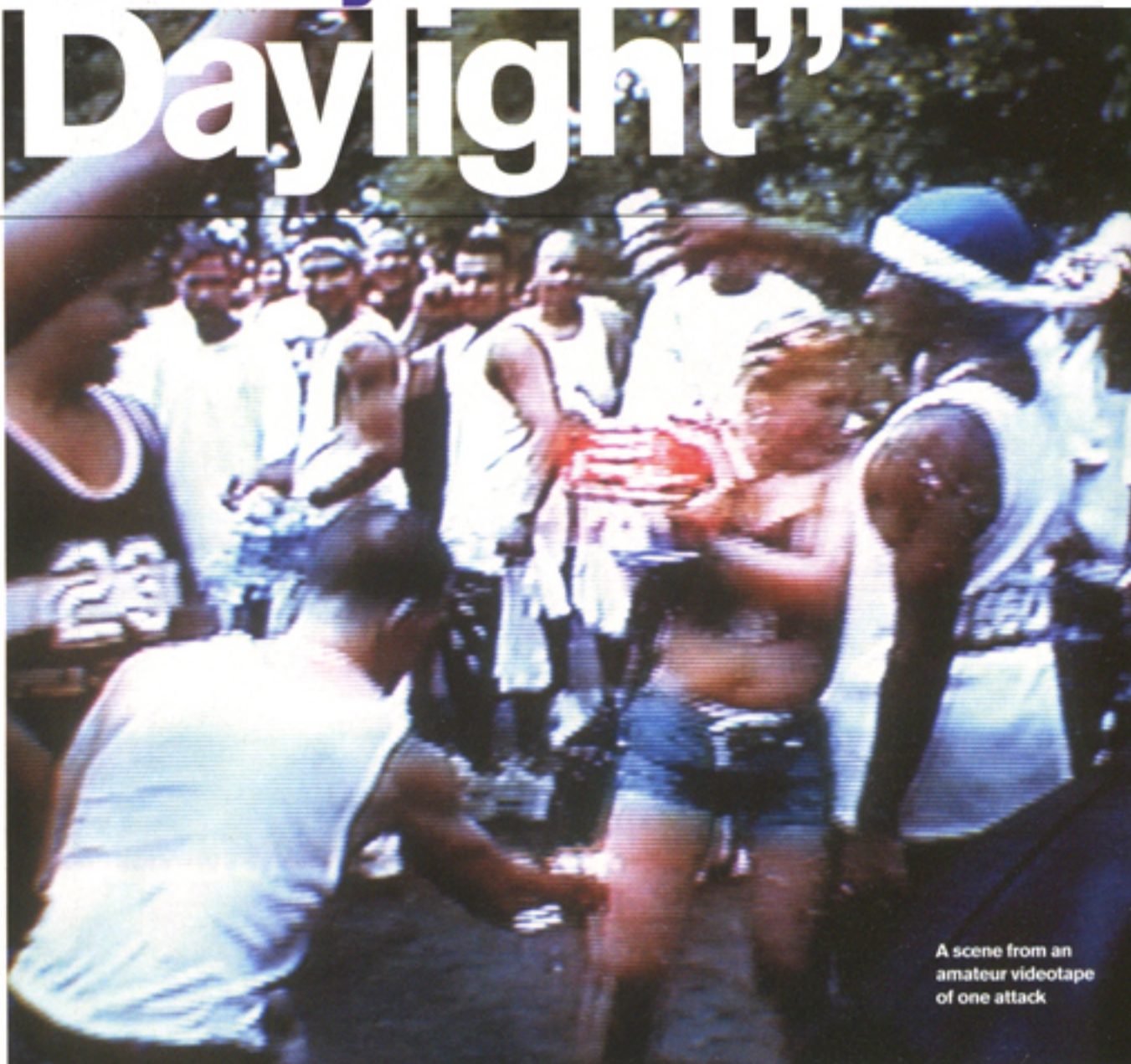
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# “I Was Sexually Assaulted in Broad Daylight”

ONE DAY LAST SUMMER, CLOSE TO 60 WOMEN WERE STRIPPED AND GROPED BY PACKS OF MEN AS NEW YORK CITY POLICE DID NOTHING. IN THIS GLAMOUR EXCLUSIVE, TWO OF THE VICTIMS REVEAL HOW HARD IT WAS TO BRING THE ATTACKERS TO JUSTICE.

by **Johanna Berkman**  
with additional reporting by  
Caroline Bollinger



A scene from an amateur videotape of one attack

**O**N A WARM SPRING NIGHT EARLIER this year, 23-year-old Khalilah Wynder and her 29-year-old fiancé sat toasting each other with wine in a small waterside restaurant in the Bronx. To the casual observer, it would have been hard to imagine that the day before, Wynder had bravely taken the witness stand to speak out about what it had been like to be a victim in one of the most notorious sex crimes in New York City history.

Nearly one year earlier, on Sunday, June 11, 2000, Wynder—along with nearly 60 other women and girls, New Yorkers and tourists alike—was viciously molested. But unlike most sex crimes, these unprecedented attacks were launched in broad daylight, in full view of hundreds of spectators—and more than a few police officers—right after New York City’s annual National Puerto Rican Day parade. In fact, images of the crime ultimately unspooled before millions of appalled viewers when amateur videos of the parade, and of the attacks that took place in Central Park afterward, aired on television news broadcasts across the country.

In the video footage, you see the men first, running as a pack, practically knocking each other down. Then the women: drenched in water, tube tops being pulled off over their arms, halter tops being yanked from their backs. Then the men’s voices:

“Welcome back to the caveman times!” and “Get the bitch!”

Were it not for these videos, New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani might never have been forced to acknowledge that the incident represented a grave breach in the duty of the police force. Initially, Giuliani downplayed the incident. “It is unrealistic to assume that police officers can be everywhere at all times, particularly when they are dealing with a parade,” he said. If not for women like Wynder and Josina Lawrence, a 22-year-old senior at Howard University in Washington, D.C., who saw the draining

**FIGHTING OFF THE MOB:** “I felt hands all over me—in my hair, on my breasts. I felt their hands by my pubic area; they had their fingers in there. People were just grabbing me.”

investigation through to the end, the perpetrators might never have been brought to justice. But as the women reveal in this *Glamour* interview, the attack was just the *beginning* of their problems.

The morning of the parade, Wynder, a security guard in an office building at 58th Street and Sixth Avenue, just south of Central Park and near the parade route, was consumed by one thought: She did not want to go to work. The Queens, New York, resident hates crowds, and because she’d worked the day of the parade the year

before, she knew how chaotic the neighborhood could become. Still, she didn't want to let her boss down, so she got up, tied a floor-length denim wrap skirt around her large frame, pulled on a yellow tank top, tossed her cell phone and a copy of *Jane Eyre* into her bag and headed to work.

Throughout the unseasonably hot day, Wynder brought water to the cops stationed outside her building and let them inside to use the bathroom. When she left work at 6 P.M., she tried to follow her usual path to the subway, but the entrance was barricaded and police redirected her into Central Park. It was then, just as she was crossing 59th Street, that she was approached by a short, skinny man who tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hey, Mama!" he shouted. "Can I talk to you?" "No, thank you," Wynder told him. "I have a man." The next thing she remembers is the water. "He poured water on top of my head. So I turn around, and all this other water is coming from everywhere. Before I knew it, all my hair gel was in my eyes, and people were grabbing at me, pulling my bra." Suddenly, Wynder, who by now was at the park's entrance, was on the ground. "There were guys all around me," she says. "I felt their hands and bodies all over me, but I couldn't see because there was gel in my eyes. There were 20 or 30 of them, grabbing and pulling—mainly at my breasts."

Wynder managed to hit one of the men on the head with her cell phone and break free. Running out of the park sobbing, she looked back and saw another crowd descending upon a woman. Seeing no police, Wynder trudged back to her building, where she told the officer out front directing traffic what had happened to her and what was still going on: "I'm crying. I'm hysterical. My clothes are ripped and dirty. I told him, 'They just attacked me in the park! They threw me on the ground, they groped me, they threw water on me, and I'm not the only one!'" She says the officer simply replied that he couldn't leave his post, so she suggested that he call for a unit. "I'd been helping these cops all day, and now they acted as if they didn't even know me!" She didn't see anyone radio for help, and after calling 911 and waiting about an hour, Wynder finally gave up and asked her boss to drive her home.

At about the same time, Josina Lawrence and her best friend—22-year-old Ashanna Cover, with whom she was sharing an apartment in Franklin, New Jersey, for the summer—were trying to leave the park and head home. For Lawrence, the parade was supposed to have been an antidote to an emotionally draining weekend. The Friday before had been the third anniversary of her mother's death from pancreatic cancer, and she had spent the afternoon at the cemetery. Lawrence persuaded Cover to accompany her to the parade, but by the time they got there, it was over. Rather than make the trip a total loss, they decided to wander around Central Park.

As they began to walk out of the southern end of the park at around 6:30 P.M., a man squirted Cover with a large Super



Four of the 16 men who pled guilty in the park attacks (clockwise from top left): Steven Burt, Isaias Lozano, Imanuel Nunez, Manuel Vargas

Soaker water gun while another dumped a bottle of water over her head. Before Lawrence could even try to stop them, she was next. Some 25 men surrounded her. "I couldn't find Ashanna," she recalls. "I was frantic, yelling her name, telling the guys to stop." They tugged on her halter top and pulled it down. "I felt hands all over me—in my hair, on my breasts. I felt their hands by my pubic area; they had their fingers in there. People were just grabbing me, grabbing me. 'Bitch, you know you want it!' someone screamed. 'Take it off!'"

As hard as she could, Lawrence started pushing her way out of the crowd, clutching her purse in one hand, holding her halter top up with the other. She began screaming for Cover, who seemed to have disappeared into another mob of men a few feet away. "I look around; I don't see any police," Lawrence says. "Nobody is trying to help me. This is my best friend." Lawrence made her way

into the crowd. "It felt like somebody had just put a plastic bag over my head. I could completely see everything that was going on and I could hear everything, but I couldn't breathe. I could not find her." Finally, she heard Cover screaming. *(continued on page 204)*



## You've Been Attacked—Now What?

- GO TO THE HOSPITAL.** "Even if there was no penetration, the hospital still has ways to document bruising," says Debbie Andrews, executive director of the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network in Washington, D.C. A hospital record can help ensure that your case is taken seriously by police if you decide to report the crime. If you can't get to a hospital on your own, tell the nearest police officer (or a 911 operator) that you've been assaulted and need to be taken to a doctor.
- IF YOU'VE CALLED 911 AND NO ONE HAS COME** within 15 minutes, call back, says Ron Acierno, clinical psychologist for the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston. "Often, operators *think* they've told the police to send somebody, but they haven't." If you approach an officer in person and he says he can't leave his post to help you, ask him to radio for another officer. If he's still unresponsive, get his name and badge number. "This may make him or her realize the need to take action," says Harriet Lessel, executive director of the New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault.

—CAROLINE BOLLINGER

As Lawrence pushed forward to reach her friend, one of the men in the crowd began pushing the others back. "Yo, chill! Yo, chill, chill, chill!" he shouted at his cohorts as he cleared a path for her. There, at the center of the circle, was Cover. "She was on the ground, her tank-top strap was down, and she was trying to cover her breast," Lawrence recalls. "A guy reached from behind her and grabbed it. She was still trying to hold up her top. I just grabbed her." The pair fled. Lawrence, like Wynder, says the officers she and Cover encountered were unhelpful and refused to leave their posts. Exhausted and upset, they ran into a friend of Cover's and gratefully accepted his offer of a ride home in his car.

Meanwhile, in Queens, Wynder's parents were out for the evening and her fiancé was working. Not wanting to be alone, she asked her boss to drive her to a friend's home. The girlfriend gasped when she opened the door. "She thought I'd been in a fight," Wynder explains. When Wynder's fiancé, a cable TV installer she's known since she was 15, came to pick her up later, he expressed a quiet rage at the men who attacked her—even at himself. "He said he should have come to pick me up from work, that he knew I hadn't wanted to go into Manhattan that day but he hadn't been able to get off early. I said, 'How were you supposed to know this would happen?' I didn't want him to feel it was his fault."

That night in Franklin, Cover and Lawrence stayed up late smoking, passing a small cigar back and forth between them. "We were just staring into space, wondering what we were going to do," Lawrence recalls. "I felt that this was going to end up blowing up big. And it did."

Over the next few days, the story of the Central Park melee was the lead item in the papers and on TV, giving both Wynder and Lawrence their first real sense of the scope of the attacks. "I had no idea so many women were involved," says Wynder. "It made me feel disgusted that the police had allowed the whole thing to happen." Within a few days, both Wynder and Lawrence decided to try reporting the crime once more. Unfortunately, both were equally dissatisfied with a long day spent at the station house, where they joined several other victims for a grueling marathon of interviews and videotape watching. "Some of the women were crying," Wynder recalls. Neither Wynder nor Lawrence recognized her attackers; both say it was a month before they were shown photographs of police officers in a futile attempt to identify the ones who had ignored their pleas for help. Frustrated

by the difficulty of tracking the status of the case and by what they saw as a continuing lack of respect from some of the investigators, Lawrence and Wynder (as well as several other victims) hired attorneys.

"While an adequate job was done in policing the parade itself, a less than satisfactory job was done in policing the aftermath," admitted then-New York City police commissioner Howard Safir in a July 2000 statement. "The parade was over, so they dropped their guard a little bit," *New York Post* criminal justice editor Murray Weiss tells *Glamour*. "They thought the crowds would go home, but instead they went back into the park. And it was the end of a very long, hot day—the cops had been standing around in uniforms and bullet-proof vests since 6 A.M., so they may have become indifferent." In his statement, Safir cited the parade ending three hours earlier than expected and the majority of the incidents taking place at Central Park South—"the dividing point between two patrol boroughs"—as reasons for his commanders' lack of preparedness.

In August, Wynder attended a news conference in support of federal hate-crimes legislation. After it was over, she introduced herself to Hillary Rodham Clinton. "I just wanted to thank her" for speaking out about the park attacks, she says. The then-first lady gave her a huge hug and whispered words of encouragement in her ear—words she coyly refuses to reveal. "That was for me," she says, smiling. "It was really personal. It was something I could imagine her saying to her own daughter."

### Nine Months Later

The weeks and months following the attack took their toll. Lawrence returned to school but had to postpone graduation because of credits lost when she became too depressed to complete a series of summer courses. Wynder experienced intimacy problems with her fiancé. "I just couldn't get comfortable being touched, even when he was just comforting me," she explains shyly. After a few weeks, however, his patience won her over. "He's so sweet and breathtaking, just brave all around—how could I not!" she says happily. (The two hope to marry next year.) In January, Wynder began taking computer-programming courses, and she is now a full-time student.

Thanks to all the publicity, enough witnesses, victims and amateur videographers came forward to enable investigators to round up dozens of suspects. Of the 30 men ultimately charged with the crimes of sex abuse and/or assault and rioting the day of the parade, 16 pled guilty and received sentences of up to four years in

prison, and 11 had their charges dismissed. Three remaining men went to trial on March 2. "I was so terrified," says Lawrence of the district attorney's phone call requesting that she come to New York City to testify. "I was scared of the cross-examination, that they would badger me and be really mean." But her family and friends convinced her to go forward.

When Lawrence arrived a day early to prepare her testimony, assistant district attorney Maxine Rosenthal reassured her that it was highly unlikely that the defense attorneys would browbeat her. "She explained that they didn't want us on the stand crying," Lawrence says, "that it would be bad for their case." Before they went to court the next day, Lawrence was shown a tape of her own attack and asked to sign and date the video. She was mortified—she didn't know such a tape existed. "It was like another boulder being added to my back," she recalls. But the testimony went smoothly. "I wasn't cross-examined, but the jury was looking at me," she says. "Ashanna's mom was there and started crying. I kept telling myself, I'm not going to cry, I'm not going to cry, because I didn't want to give those guys the satisfaction." She didn't recognize any of the defendants. Neither did Wynder when it was her turn to take the witness stand.

On April 2, the jury acquitted one defendant but convicted David Garcia, 33, of 15 counts of riot, assault and sex abuse, and Abel Ortiz, 24, of 14 counts of riot and assault. Garcia will serve from two and a half to four years; Ortiz's sentencing was still pending as *Glamour* went to press.

By May 2001, at least 15 officers and civilian employees of the New York Police Department had received reprimands ranging from letters of censure and docked vacation time to disciplinary charges that could require the testimony of Lawrence and Wynder at a new series of administrative trials. Meanwhile, a dozen victims, including Wynder, Lawrence and Cover, are suing the city for failing to protect them at the parade.

"I'll get through this," Wynder vows. "I'll do it at my own pace and in my own way, but I won't quit. As long as some kind of justice is ultimately served, I think I'll be all right." Lawrence says she hopes her public stance will encourage other sexual assault victims to speak out—not only about the crime, but also about its aftermath. "I want more women to come out and tell their stories," she says. "I want them to say, 'Look, this is what happened to me, and this is what I'm dealing with.' People don't understand it, but crimes like this...they change people's lives." ©