

Why I Cry for Little Girls

JULIA RABOY, BATES COLLEGE

I like working with little kids, and since I have been old enough to be employable, my main source of income has been from childcare: camp counselor, babysitter, nursery school “teacher,” etc. I find the presence of young kids refreshing. It’s so much more enjoyable to be around people who want only to love and be loved, to be happy and kind and at peace, than to spend time with jaded, aging adolescents. I remember being a young kid and wanting to grow up to be just like my female camp counselors and babysitters. I looked up to older girls as though they were the pinnacle of perfection. Now that I am the camp counselor and babysitter, I know there are little eyes on me all the time, watching me with wonder and amazement. To these girls today, I am everything they want to be when they grow up. They absorb every word I say as if I were the only other person on earth, and try to emulate my every move. In their presence I become an utterly infallible being, placed on a pedestal by these tiny humans, so high that I’m afraid to look down. The funny thing is, though, now that I’m here, I wish I could be just like them again. I long for the days when I was blissfully unaware of how badly people could hurt each other. I wish I didn’t understand the unadulterated cruelty that permeates the depths of human existence. I know things that would break these girls’ worlds into a thousand tiny shards of devastation, and yet, I don’t want to extinguish their youthful fervor for life and all things good. So, I attempt to foster a symbiotic relationship with the children who find themselves in my care, answering their never ending questions honestly and to the best of my ability while trying simultaneously to deconstruct the violence of reality by showing them a world based on what I wish I could unlearn, in hopes that my lessons imprint somewhere deep in their subconscious, and can, at least in a small way, challenge the future of humanity. But since I was raped a few months ago, I can’t seem to do it anymore.

I wish I could say it wasn’t true, because to admit it feels like a submission to weakness, but my rapist took something from me; something that I can never get back. Something

big, and although I can't put into words exactly what that "something" is, its absence is painfully impossible to ignore. The thing is, people "like me" don't get raped. Not people who have dedicated enormous amounts of time and energy, through both academics and extracurriculars, to combatting sexual assault, certainly not to gender studies majors in their third year of college. And yet, here I am, baffled by my own stupidity. Why didn't I act in the moment, why didn't I see the signs, and why did it take me weeks to realize what had actually happened? What the hell do I do now?

I came home from college for winter break at Thanksgiving, and it had only been about a month since I was raped. As I was left alone to sit with my thoughts, I realized I needed a distraction, so when the opportunity to babysit for a local family with two toddler aged girls came my way, I grabbed it. I expected the job to be easy, the kids were in my key demographic: I know preschoolers. And for all intents and purposes, it was easy: the girls were easy going, great kids. But the entire time I spent at their house, I wanted to cry. I wanted to break down and sob like a baby. I couldn't help it. I tried so, so hard to be a happy, fun playmate for the girls, but every second we spent together was excruciating. As soon as I got back in the car, I lost all control, and without my permission tears came waterfalling down my face. And I'd cry all the way home. I grew so angry with myself. I felt like the ultimate loser, and a complete and total fraud. There I was, letting my rapist win, giving into a power that I let take control, and feeling sorry for myself at the same time. I soon realized, though, that I was not crying for myself. I was crying for the little girls.

When they are young, we tell little girls that they are special, beautiful, incredible little people who deserve the world—because they are, and they do. We tell them they can be anything they want, that they are loved, that no one will ever want to hurt them. We may mean these things, and want, desperately, for them to be true. But they're lies and empty promises. Fifteen years ago, I was the little girl who loved and wanted to be loved, who was happy and kind and at peace. Now, after spending barely two decades on this planet, I feel lied to. I feel cheated. I look at these little girls, and I know that I am lying to them, too. The world will not be kind to them. They will soon learn that they are walking targets. The love and kindness and reassurance we give them won't matter when someone else tries to

claim their body and break their spirit. No amount of giddy happiness or foolish promises will matter when someone takes them by the hand, only to turn around and hurt them on purpose, and teach them to understand a violence they never knew existed. Yet we keep telling these lies over and over again, knowing they are not true. These girls don't deserve to be lied to, and they don't deserve the future has already been laid out for them. And neither did I.

We, as a culture, community, collective, or whatever you fancy, have failed little girls. We continue to fail them everyday. We send them off into the world with false hope and unrealistic expectations. If there is one thing I wish for these little girls who have looked up to me over the years, it is for them to grow up to be nothing like me. The person they see on the imaginary pedestal is a fraud, an idealistic version of a me that doesn't actually exist. She is a me that was taught to mindlessly reproduce the lies that have become the bane of her existence; lies which are nothing but paternalistic exertions of false protectionism. I didn't, and I don't need protecting. I needed honesty. But how do you tell a bright eyed four-year-old that the world she was born into is far more gruesome than she could ever imagine? How do you tell her that what she thinks and what she wants isn't going to matter because to someone, she is just a body and flesh ripe to be taken advantage of? You can't. We can't keep telling lies, but we can't shatter hearts and tell the truth. So, maybe, it's time to change our truth: because there are too many little girls drowning in a sea of lies, and I, for one, don't have enough tears left to cry. □