

Behind the Scenes:

A Reason for Hope

After I finished *A Healing Justice*, I was thinking about what story to write next. The time between novels is stressful for me because hanging in limbo is scary, and I'm never sure if I'll find my right direction again. But thanks to several friends, the idea for *A Reason for Hope* came to me.

Over tea one afternoon, a friend told me about a yoga workshop she'd attended with a woman who'd gone out for coffee with a man she'd met online. A well-spoken, attractive attorney, he'd dazzled her, and she eagerly accepted his invitation to dinner at his house. A tragic mistake. That night he drugged and sexually assaulted her, an extremely rare occurrence in our low-crime small town.

A few weeks later, I brought up that woman's plight at dinner with two of my best friends, Amy and Carol. For the first time I can remember, the three of us talked about assault. To our amazement, we discovered that we'd all been assaulted in one way or another, but even as close as we were, we'd never discussed it with each other.

In her college dorm, Amy had been the victim of what's called a "completed rape." Carol had once gotten into her car, and a man had risen from the back seat and put a knife to her throat, clearly intending to rape her. Though she escaped, years later her two daughters did not. Both were raped.

And I? Fortunately, my worst experience was “attempted rape,” but it had happened to me several horrifying times. In high school on a peaceful Sunday afternoon, for instance, I was walking home from my best friend’s house in our safe middleclass neighborhood, and three scruffy, evil-looking men drove up beside me. One jumped out of their rusty, beat-up car and yanked me by the arm toward the back seat. Too stunned to yell, I fought like a tigress and freed myself, but he kept lunging at me.

As I ran in panicked zigzags, he chased me across a lawn. He kept grabbing my ponytail—and then he grabbed *me*. As I kicked and clawed again to free myself, my mind flashed on my neighbor Bobby whom I’d just seen playing basketball with friends in his driveway up the hill. Screaming, I ran toward them, and they came running. My assailant tore back to the beat-up car, and he and the others sped away.

I have often thought of what might have happened to me if Bobby hadn’t been there. I could never have outrun or fought off three men. Trembling like a leaf in a stiff wind, I finally got home, called my best friend, and told her what had happened. But I never told my parents or anyone else about that day. I simply swallowed my terror and went on—until years later at dinner with Amy and Carol.

Why had I kept silent for so long? I’m still not sure. Perhaps at the time I thought that no one would believe or support me, and in those days, victims of sexual assault, whether completed or attempted, were stigmatized. Women were ashamed, as if we’d done something wrong. Of course, we hadn’t. Still, we kept our traumas to ourselves. I find the secrecy amazing when in the U.S.

today, an estimated one in five women have been the victims of attempted or completed sexual assault. It's a common experience.

After that dinner, I decided that women's self-imposed silence was wrong—and it came to me that I should write about it and perhaps get conversations going. My hope is that assault survivors can come out of hiding and share their experiences with each other. *A Reason for Hope* is my attempt to shine light on a shadowy subject. It's time.