



CHAPTER 3:

KATIE FEIFER

The first thing you notice about Katie Feifer is her abundant, reddish-brown, never-been straightened shock of curls. “Tell Katie to send me one eighth of her beautiful hair,” laughed a mutual friend recently. “She’ll never miss it and it will do me a world of good!”

She was raised in Oak Park, a suburb outside of Chicago, an only child born when her mom was in her forties. She describes her home as “Absolutely loving – my parents, and especially my dad, spoiled me rotten. He made me feel that the sun rose and set on me. And I bought into the belief that I could do no wrong.” If there is a case to be made for the notion that behind every strong and smart woman is a doting father, Katie Feifer might be Exhibit A.

After attending a small, private liberal arts college she landed her first job, in the research department at one of the world’s largest advertising agencies. Katie remembers her mother, a proud feminist, warning her not let on that she could type because “the company” would have Katie doing the work of a secretary. She didn’t do much typing. Eight short years and six promotions later, she became the youngest Vice President in the company’s history. “In research I had a career that used all my skills: part sociology, part psychology, part diplomacy, part sales,” says Katie. At the age of 31, author Lisa Birnbach profiled Katie in “Going to Work,” a bestselling book about interesting companies and the equally interesting people who work in them. “I was embarrassed about it at the time, but I kind of liked it,” laughs Katie now. “I was a middle-class suburban kid, born to a Zionist-Socialist mom and a liberal Democrat dad who didn’t trust the system, and somehow I landed this great corporate job. I felt completely unflappable, totally accomplished. I loved my work. I loved my friends. With the money I was making, I bought a new house in Oak Park, a suburb just outside of Chicago. OK, so my love life sucked – it was a big mess that could be a book in itself. But overall, I had a really good life.”

That good life changed on the evening of September 15, 1988, when a member of a work crew painting Katie’s home rang her doorbell and told her he had left a sweater inside her home earlier in the day. He was all of seventeen, “A skinny white kid, if I had to describe him,” notes Katie, “But look, I was a woman living alone, so it never occurred to me to even consider letting him in. So I told him no, and that I was going to have to call his boss to confirm his story. And I shut the door, which I remember gave me some feeling of relief. But when I went to phone his boss, he broke into the house. And this time he had a knife. And it was weird because the whole thing had shifted, he was the one telling me what to do and believe me when there is a knife involved you are going to do what you are told to do. After he raped me he left me tied and gagged in the basement – I felt so much panic when he did that, I am a very verbal person and losing my voice was horrible. And that was it. I felt like I had died, but I lived. My whole life just changed.”



Katie managed to free herself and call 911. A male detective and a female beat officer arrived and called an ambulance before taking down some basic information about the attack. Later that night, after being released from the hospital, Katie returned to the police station to give a more detailed statement to the same male detective who had been there. He had been made the lead officer on the case. When asked about her experience with the police, Katie says, "Every contact I had with that lead officer was positive. Every one. He was great, supportive, my knight in shining armor. He made me feel safe immediately after the attack, and he made me feel safe later. I remember that a day after the rape, I received a flower delivery that freaked me out – any sort of delivery person, anyone ringing my doorbell, was terrifying after the rape – and he came back to my house to reassure me that everything was OK. He acted like it was the most normal thing in the world for a woman to be hysterical because someone was trying to send her flowers. Here's the thing: He never doubted me, never made me think it was my fault. He just seemed to get it, to know what I was going through emotionally. To me, this one man was the police and he was perfect."

That these are words rarely spoken by other rape survivors is not lost on Katie. She knows that in this aspect, her story is all too rare. She also knows that this single moment – that first time that she voiced the words "I was raped" to the officers who met her at the scene of the crime – was in fact a defining moment, one that set in motion an openness that she believes was at the core of whatever healing she has experienced in the years since. "I had a horrible thing happen but the thing about it was people believed me. And that was everything to me. I did not have to live with the horror of being doubted, and that started with the very first officers on the scene, who left me with no doubt that they knew that every word I was saying was true. Something about my upbringing, maybe my mom's feminism, gave me an immediate sense that I should not be ashamed. But the responses of the police reinforced that openness. I think that if I was not believed the very first time I told the officers what had happened to me, I might not have been able to be open again."

Thanks in large part to the description Katie gave, the police were able to catch her rapist within hours of her assault. She identified him in a lineup that very same night. He confessed, was arrested and was put in jail before Katie went home. Ultimately, in a plea negotiation, he was sentenced to 15 years for the rape. He served only 7. "You have to understand, he was 17, he looked nothing like a criminal, it was 1988, and they thought this was the best they could do," Katie says now. Since even today, the average sentence served by convicted rapists in this country is still less than five and a half years, there is a regrettable logic to the decision.

When asked about her experience with the criminal justice system, Katie says that it was largely positive. "The States Attorney who prosecuted my rape was wonderful, kind, nice to me. My phone calls were returned. My questions were answered. I was consulted about accepting that plea negotiation instead of taking the case to trial, and I agreed to it before they did anything. I was treated with dignity."



I ask Katie about her life in the weeks and months after the assault, and her story – despite the validations of a system that more often than not seems to invalidate rape victims – converges with those of many women. “I kept my job but I wasn’t very functional at work,” notes Katie, “I took time off, left early, and sometimes just sat in my office not working. I couldn’t sleep. I was going to stay in my home – I mean, I had just bought that house – but nights were so difficult. So my next-door neighbors would let me come over to their home every night, at 10 or 11, and I’d sleep there. The next morning, after having coffee with them, I’d head home and get ready for work. Looking back, it was an amazing thing that they did. They were so good to me.”

“For a while, I thought I would have to quit my job. I had been this huge achiever and it wasn’t happening anymore. The therapist I was seeing helped me understand that I was used to being competent and powerful on the job but I had felt so powerless in being raped that I was trying desperately to resolve that dissonance by proving that I also wasn’t powerful at work. And believe me, I wasn’t. But I kept telling myself that I had to accept that everything I was feeling was a normal reaction to a totally abnormal trauma, and that it was OK. And that did help, because I did not feel ‘normal’. I went through a stage of being obsessed with true crime books, reading them until 3 or 4 in the morning. I had never been that interested in these books before but I felt a total identification with other crime victims. I was terrified when I saw young white guys, alone or in groups. It made going to the mall, walking down certain streets, so scary for me. I had a bizarre fear, when I was stopped in rush hour traffic, that a person in the car next to me was going to shoot me, that I was going to die in the next minute. So my morning commute was a nightmare of tension for me.”

“I cried all the time, privately and publicly. And you have to understand, I was the kind of woman people thought was strong. I did think briefly of suicide, it was incredibly difficult to keep going with so much anxiety, but my therapist helped me through it. Her office and our sessions were an oasis for me, I needed that place to go every week to talk. I broke up with my boyfriend of 12 years – it was a relationship that probably should have ended 11 years before and the rape brought it to a head. I think that rape does that. Whatever is not working in your life really doesn’t work after you’ve been attacked.” What else? “Well, I ate a lot of chocolate!” Katie says with a laugh.

Katie remembers, vividly, the day a coworker told her that she, too, had been raped. “She didn’t say much, but somehow just knowing that she had gone through this made talking to her natural and easy, and she became someone I could go to. Even early on, there was so much power in sharing, especially with other women who had been raped. I remember when one day I went sobbing into her cubicle because I couldn’t work. She just said ‘Katie, go home. Lie on your couch with a blanket over you and come back when you can. It’s okay to do that. Don’t try to tough it out.’ Just having permission to bail on that one shitty day gave me what I needed.”



It is those acts of kindness that had the biggest effect on Katie, and her clear memories of the smallest gestures underscore their transformative power. She remembers the CEO of her company, who gave her a key to the corporate garage and her own parking space, a privilege usually reserved for top executives; the boss who offered to bus in enough people to fill the courtroom to support Katie on the day that her rapist was sentenced; the husband of a friend, who offered to come over to wash the windows because Katie was afraid to allow anyone she didn't know work at her home. And she remembers the girlfriend who responded immediately when Katie called her, crying, from the gym because she was certain that a young, skinny white kid was following her. "She didn't ask a single question when I called. She just drove to the gym, calmed me down in the locker room and walked me to my own car. So many people, so many supportive actions. A lot of them were little things. Acceptance, compassion, kindness and thoughtfulness. That was all. And it was everything."

It was certainly enough to cement a powerful belief in the generosity of the world around her, a belief that was invaluable 15 years after her rape, when Katie received a surprising call from the Deputy District Attorney in Las Vegas. What the DDA told Katie that day still stuns and wounds her, for she heard for the first time about the life her rapist had lived since leaving prison in 1995. Older and hardened even further, he had committed a string of crimes in the Midwest, before heading across the country to Las Vegas, where he murdered the father of a 15 year-old girl.

Convinced that Katie's testimony about her rape years earlier was key to the sentencing phase of the trial, the DDA appealed to her to testify. Frightened, but absolutely convinced that it was the thing she had to do, Katie flew to Las Vegas to again face her attacker. "I only looked at him once – when I was asked to face him and tell the court that yes, he was the man who had raped me all those years ago. And I almost literally couldn't stomach it. Not because his face reminded me of the attack. Yes, I knew it was him. But he looked different to me. The suit he was wearing, the aging – he was in his thirties – the hardness of the eyes, a grimness that wasn't there in quite the same way when he was 17. I had had fantasies about confronting him but when I had the chance, I did not want to look at him. And that made me think about what it must be like for women who are raped by men they know, what it must be like to have to live with their rapists, to work with them, to go to school with them." It is one of Katie's many moments of identification with other survivors, an identification that takes in the essential inhumanity of sexual violence in all its forms – on dates and in dorm rooms, at the hands of strangers, and even those we love – and seems to expand, rather than contract, Katie's world.

In recalling the feeling of facing her attacker after so many years, Katie says, "I was shocked at how visceral my reactions were. When I spoke of how he made me feel dead, I clutched my heart and my stomach. When I talked about being gagged, my fingers kept touching and covering my lips." It is painful to think of Katie this way: covering her own mouth, cast back, if only for that moment, into the lonely world that is silence.



But Katie, who is as free of that world as any survivor I have known, did not remain silent. She testified at length that day, and in the wake of her words – clear, unflinching, speaking truth to both power and perpetrator – her rapist, already convicted of murder, was sentenced to death. Then and now, the prosecutor on the case is certain that Katie’s testimony was what swayed the jury, convincing them that this murder was not an isolated evil, but the most recent event in a long history of brutality. “Without question, Katie’s testimony was the most powerful piece of evidence,” he now says.

Katie acknowledges her complex, though not conflicted, beliefs about the death sentence he received for committing murder. “I struggled with my feelings about the death penalty before I testified. It affected me very strongly, that feeling that I would be playing a role in having someone sentenced to die. I don’t want the state to kill its citizens, and I value life above all. It is sacred, and miraculous – every life is a gift. And I am appalled by how disproportionately the death penalty is applied to those who are poor or black. But for me, the paramount consideration is the safety of society. There is no doubt about my rapist’s guilt in that murder. And no doubt about his inability to live in society without seriously harming people. So, as abhorrent as the death penalty is, it is better than having this man or others like him, harm anyone else.”

When asked if her experience after her own rape – when the system and so many of her friends, family and colleagues had responded to her needs – had made it easier for her to answer the call to testify, Katie answers emphatically. “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!! I felt that I would do anything to help the DA because of how many people helped me. I do think it’s that simple: I wanted to pay back. I wanted to pay forward. I really believed in that.”

It has been said that “there are no small acts of kindness” but this phrase has always seemed inadequate somehow: an attempt to infuse the personal with qualities of the political, the way we convince ourselves that small actions, as opposed to larger activism, can change the world. And yet, in those moments and months after Katie Feifer was raped, a series of often small gestures (undoubtedly the result of education, training, and that most elusive of qualities, genuine compassion) came together to not only sustain Katie, but to move her forward. Years later, Katie was able to turn back, in search of a justice that would last longer than seven years, in hopes of stopping a violent man from doing again what he had done to her. Today someone, somewhere is safe and well, doing the most ordinary of things – taking out the trash, complaining to a coworker, dressing the kids, for school, safe and well – because Katie Feifer was willing to do the extraordinary.

And what of Katie now? She is the owner of her own research firm, happily married to her partner Ric, and the proud, passionate mother of Shira, an 11 year old with Katie’s same gorgeous shock of hair. She is also a volunteer rape crisis advocate. In the hours and days I’ve spent with her, in long chats about her rape and so much more, she is open about the trauma and grief of her experience, yet utterly in possession of the event. I never see her cry.



Then one day, as Katie and I share the sort of intimate conversation that emerges when two rape survivors come together in that space where real understanding flourishes, I ask her what she thinks it would have been like for her if she hadn't been heard and believed and supported so many times, by so many people. She looks down, as her hand moves near her mouth, and she is silent for a long moment. I do not remember her, before or since, ever being so silent, and when she finally looks up at me, the tears have moved past her eyes and onto her face and she is not crying, but weeping. "I don't know, Katie says slowly. " I honestly do not know what would have happened to me."

Anne Ream, copyright 2004.

Note: On December 12, 2004, we are bringing together 40 of the people who supported Katie in the wake of her attack – former coworkers, friends, family and those from the law enforcement and justice communities – for a series of candid photos that will accompany this written profile. Katie's Story is chapter three from The Voices and Faces Project, a collection of fifty written and visual rape survivor portraits scheduled for release as a book in 2006.

To find out more about The Voices and Faces Project, or to support our work, please visit our website: www.voicesandfaces.org.