

## Along the footpath

She never saw it coming.

First light, six o'clock on a Sunday morning, she ran with her head down. The boyfriend was on her mind. How long was it now? Two months? They'd met during the first week at varsity. No time to assess the market, but she'd gone for it anyway and was the envy of her friends; going out with a first-team rugby player, six foot two, built and good-looking. Introduced at a Rag Royalty function, with all the rugby players and the beauty queens in attendance. She'd even met his parents.

Left, right, left, right; she was in a good rhythm.

Despite his physical presence, he was quiet; dare she say it, dull. The night before, she'd excused herself early, bored with stories of the day's game, boys chugging beer, his ex-girlfriend's gang huddling in a group and eyeing her out, rugby groupies pretending to be interested. She'd fancied an evening out clubbing with her friends – but settled for an early night and a run with her friend Katie the next morning.

Except that Katie had car trouble. So she ran alone.

Even in running kit, Terri Phillips was attractive: a fresh-faced nymph with peachy skin; straight blonde hair tied tightly against her face, pony bobbing from the back of a dark-blue cap; tanned legs finished with fluffy socks in a pair of white tackies.

She bounced along the cement footpath on the misty slope of Table Mountain, past the university campus, in the direction of Newlands forest. Eyes down, iPod pumping, wondering about her love life...

Smack! She ran straight into someone travelling in the opposite direction.

'Sorry, sorry...'

She was still looking down, her head almost against the shoulder of the person she'd collided with. A man with a red jersey. She stepped aside, but his arm folded around her back and held her tightly.

'Hey,' she said.

She tried to lift her hands to push him away; his hands slid down and grasped her wrists.

'Hey!'

The panic had not yet arrived. It was a friend, someone playing a trick on her. It had to be. The earpieces from the iPod fell from her head.

More hands came from behind now, covering her mouth and eyes. Too late to scream. The terror struck, a frenzy of warning signals erupting from her brain. She wrestled violently, twisting, a fly in a web, the sound of her own muffled yell venting the surge of her fear.

The man in front pushed her backwards, away from the road, towards the forest. She tensed her legs, trying to root herself to the spot, trying to sit down, but she suddenly felt them lifted up off the ground. She struggled desperately, nails clawing, frantically trying to free herself.

A scarf was tied around her head, covering her eyes, blinding her. A third person? She went limp; this was every woman's fear.

The trio carried her deeper into the forest where the early-morning light struggled to break through. When she wriggled, the hands on her body intensified their grips until she ceased. She became still, paralysed with fear; the footfalls on the undergrowth and her own hard breath the only sounds.

After what seemed like ages, her assailants came to a stop, lowered her to the ground, a bed of pine needles, arms still pinioning her.

She heard a voice for the first time, over her, soft but forceful. 'Listen. Don't scream. If you do, I'll hurt you. Follow my instructions exactly and you'll be fine. Do you understand?'

Terri nodded. The voice was familiar; no-one she recognised, but the type of person she might associate with. A reasonable

voice. The hand came away from her mouth.

‘What are you going to do to me?’ she whispered.

‘Don’t talk. Don’t make a noise. I won’t hurt you. But no noise. Do you understand?’

Again Terri nodded. The remaining arms released her; she clutched her knees to her body.

‘Okay now do exactly what I say and, before you know it, we’ll let you go.’

She heard footsteps moving away from her, one person, but the presence of her other captors remained close. She could feel hot breath in her face.

‘Take off your pants and pass them to me.’

Terri went cold. The glimmer of trust that had been created evaporated in an instant.

‘Remember: just do as I say.’

‘Is this a trick?’

A hand closed on her throat, tightly enough to answer the question.

‘You’re going to rape me,’ she said loudly and a slap stung her cheek.

‘I said no talking! If you cooperate, we won’t hurt you. Now do exactly what I say or there will be consequences.’

She started to reply, but a hand cupped quickly over her mouth.

‘No words, you hear! Nothing! You’ve got no choice. Now take off your pants and give them to me.’

Terri was wearing a little white vest and short blue running pants. She wanted to tell the man that she wasn’t wearing panties, but his hand blocked her mouth.

Why was this happening to her?

‘I’m not going to ask you again. Fucking take them off.’

Terri was paralysed. She couldn’t do it. She knew what would be next.

‘If you don’t, I’ll just tear them off.’ The tone had regained its composure, but the threat was no less frightening.

Terri lifted her bottom off the ground and slowly slipped her

running shorts down to her ankles. The hand detached from her mouth and whipped her shorts over her shoes. She whimpered, streams of tears running down her face, her hands quickly covering her groin.

‘Mmm. Good girl. Now do the same with your vest.’

‘Please...’ She could feel eyes on her body; she wanted an explanation. But the hand clamped firmly over her mouth. The whimper turned to sobs. A second hand grabbed firmly at her throat.

‘Do it!’

She pulled the vest over her head, hands instantly returning to cover herself as it was yanked away. She was now naked, barring a sports bra, her socks and shoes.

‘Now the bra...’

She had no choice. As she unclipped the fastener, hands gripped the cups at the front and snatched the bra from her body. She instinctively covered herself again, an arm across her breasts, a hand between her legs.

‘Now, put your hands behind your head.’

‘You’re going to rape me,’ Terri whispered shakily.

‘Oh I’d love to show you a good time, princess.’ She felt a hand run down her cheek. ‘But you’ll be fine. Just do as I say.’

She gasped as her arms were pulled roughly from behind, away from their protective zones. Even through her fear, she was aware of her exposed breasts, embarrassed by her nakedness.

‘Hands behind your head! I’ll keep my side of the bargain. You’ll see.’

She shook uncontrollably, elbows pointing forward, hands quivering behind her head; breath coming in short gasping sobs.

‘Now, count to a hundred, sitting like you are, hands behind your head. Don’t move. Don’t call out. If you do, there’ll be trouble. When you reach one hundred, you can take off the blindfold. Not before. You’ll find your clothes nearby. Dress yourself and go back to wherever you came from. Don’t try look for us. You understand?’

She nodded consent, confused and disbelieving. Why was this

happening?

She heard the man behind her rise, then the man in front, the voice. Their footsteps trampled away across the dry undergrowth, each step a crackle, moving away, back towards the highway.

Terri counted slowly, ears tuned, each sound and scent amplified by her blindness, expecting the sudden reappearance of her tormentors. She shifted her seat on the bed of pine needles, resisting the temptation to get up and bolt for safety, resisting the temptation even to remove her hands from her head. What would be waiting for her when she took off the blindfold?

The footsteps disappeared gradually until complete silence enveloped her, the sound of her shallow breathing and her thumping heart was all that remained. It was surreal. She was alone, naked, blindfolded, counting to a hundred. Was this a joke?

When she reached the count, she removed the blindfold, a torn piece of checked material, and looked around nervously. Somewhere in the Newlands forest on a blanket of pine needles, she sat, naked bar her socks and shoes. She covered her breasts again, hugging herself for warmth, her hands lodged in her armpits.

There was no-one in sight. She rose tentatively to her feet. Red welts ringed her wrists; raised bangles of broken skin. Her white vest lay crumpled inside out on the ground, next to the iPod, still in its holder. She stumbled over to them, clutching; adjusted the vest and quickly pulled it over her head; picked up the iPod, scanned nervously back and forth, expecting her assailants to materialise at any second and the nightmare to resume.

Where were her pants? Her instinct told her to sprint down towards the road and safety, but her modesty declined. Find the pants! Besides, the footsteps had departed in that direction – perhaps they were waiting for her to ambush again. For a moment she appeared posed, her hands cupped over her crotch, shielding her nudity from the forest.

‘What on earth?’ She shook her head, raised a hand to her forehead.

Silence rung through the forest, the lack of movement strangely reassuring. All that remained of her attack and her attackers were

rough indentations in the pine needles. She turned around, dusting off the dirt and pine needles that remained stuck to her naked bottom, started scouting around for the rest of her clothes. Her cap lay at the foot of a tree. She picked it up then, looking up, spotted her blue shorts suspended from a branch, several metres off the ground. How to get them? She jumped up, but they remained out of reach. A few half-hearted leaps before she abandoned the cause, examining her surroundings in search of a stick.

The silence was broken by a sound from higher up the mountain, a crunching of steps on the forest path, an imminent danger. Terri froze, body rigid, terror returning like a dark cloud blotting out the sun. She sank down to a huddle, legs folded, dreading a new onslaught, more terrified than before. She closed her eyes. If she couldn't see, it wouldn't happen. The footsteps came closer and then stopped. She braced herself.

'Are you okay?'

A new voice this time.

Terri remained rigid, head bowed, eyes tightly shut, fists clenched. To the new arrival, she looked as though she were meditating. Then he noticed she wore no pants. How embarrassing – was she peeing? Perhaps he should continue with his run?

But he didn't.

'Is everything okay?' he repeated. This voice was soft and non-threatening, but she couldn't allow herself to look up. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

Terri opened her eyes and looked up, her face pale, eyes red. Relief instant, she started to sob.

'What happened to you?' The jogger knelt on his haunches and placed an arm gently around her shoulder. He touched her swollen wrist, his hands soft and cool.

'Have you been... raped?' The horror word.

Terri shook her head, hugging her knees tightly.

'Are you hurt?'

Again she shook her head.

'Can you get my pants?' Terri asked, pointing to a branch. His eyes followed her indication. He stood and walked towards the

tree, scratching the back of his head. He was her age, maybe a couple of years older. Average height, probably a student, like her. He looked embarrassed.

He jumped up and tried to flick the pants off the branch but they were snagged on some smaller branches and he lacked the height to dislodge them. He turned around and shrugged his shoulders.

‘I need to find a stick.’ He looked about, but no suitable tool existed. He glanced back at her, still seated, knees folded up under her chin, watching him, a traumatised child waiting for a parent to come to the rescue.

‘If I give you a leg up, you should be able to reach them.’

She stared at him, not moving.

‘I’m naked.’ Through her sobs, she managed to laugh at the thought of her predicament.

‘I noticed. Look, not a time to be modest,’ he replied, trying to take control. ‘Come, I can give you my pants if you really want.’

She pondered her dilemma, upper teeth on lower lip.

‘I won’t look, promise,’ he said, cupping his hand against his nearest eye, his discomfort lightening her embarrassment.

‘Oh, what the hell.’ Terri stood up, making a token effort to shield her nudity. The jogger stooped down to his haunches and linked his hands as a foothold.

‘No looking,’ she said, as she stepped her right foot in, locking her legs and holding the top of his head for balance. With his averted face pressed in to her thigh, he slowly raised himself to full height.

‘You okay?’ she asked, holding on to his head.

He grunted.

She accepted an upturned hand as support, glancing below and behind her in a sudden flash of modesty and imagining how bizarre it must look – a bare-bottomed girl, balancing precariously on the shoulders of a stranger, like a circus trapeze artist preparing for a stunt. Thank god, no-one was watching.

He edged under the branch and she reached up to unhitch the shorts.

‘Got it.’

He crouched down for her to dismount and then turned away as she quickly pulled on her pants.

‘My god,’ she said, turning to him. ‘What just happened to me?’

‘I don’t know. I was just running..’

The fear returned in an instant: ‘They may still be here!’

‘Who?’

Her eyes darted in all directions.

‘Look, just relax now. Tell me what happened?’

No answer.

‘You’re safe, okay. What’s your name? I’m Alistair Morgan. Are you at UCT?’

UCT – University of Cape Town – familiar. A spark of composure returned. She looked at him. He, too, was vaguely familiar: good-looking, boyish features, friendly blue eyes. He wore a white T-shirt and black running shorts that looked shiny and new.

‘We must get away, out of the forest. Maybe they’ll come back.’ Terri’s gaze shifted nervously. Confused, irrational.

‘Uh, who are they?’

No reply. She advanced a few steps and scanned the surroundings.

‘What’re you looking for?’

She ran her hand across her chest and continued to glance around. ‘Nothing.’

Where was her bra?

She turned to him and gripped his wrist tightly. ‘Please stay with me. Promise you won’t leave me.’

‘I won’t leave you, I promise.’ He reached out to her and held her tightly against his chest; the shudder of her sobs sent a tremor through his body.

‘Let’s get you back home. Where do you stay? In res?’

With his arm protectively draped across her shoulder, he shepherded her towards the path, and back down to the road.

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