

Victims – a short play by Richard Kay

Three chairs, SR, DSC and SL facing the audience

Her – 30s/40s, sat in the middle chair

Younger Her – 20s, stage right chair, living the memory (without fully acting it out)

Older Her – 50s, upstage, watching

Him – stood behind Younger Her with his back to the audience. Becomes all male characters.

Older Her: *(Indicating Her)* So here I sit, in a church in Burlington, North Carolina, not far from where I was assaulted, waiting to meet the man who, with my help....with my strength and resolve...served 11 years in jail for that assault.

Her: My father always used to say you are so stubborn! You *will* not lose an argument! And I do think that part of my personality was what kicked in that night. I remember thinking I *will* look at you and I *will* pay attention and I *will* remember everything I can because if there is a way for me to live I will make sure you're caught and I will watch you suffer, I will watch you burn in hell. That was what I think really got me through that assault and allowed me to live and carried me forward into the days that followed.

Younger Her: *(out front)* Who is that? Who's there? *(Screams)*

Him: *(Back to audience)* Shut up or I'll kill you.

Younger Her: No! You can have my credit card, you can have my wallet, you can have anything in my apartment you can have my car.

Him: I don't want your money.

Pause

Her: What happened in my brain was this overwhelming desire to survive. I wanted to live, I wanted to see the sun come up one more time. I did *not* want to die and I sure as heck wasn't going to die in that bed. If there was a way to survive, I would figure it out.

So, I made myself look at him. And he would look away but there would be that moment where I could say; pencil thin moustache, brown eyes, short

close crop hair, is there a scar, is there a tattoo. Pay attention to the stuff you can't change, you know. Pay attention to the stuff you can't change.

Him: Relax I'm not going to hurt you.

Her: See I needed to recognise every single feature about him. What is his voice, does he have an accent, did he have a piercing, did he have a missing tooth, what did his hair look like, what were the shape of his eyes, his mouth, his nose, everything about his face became paramount to my surviving. I would burn it in my brain, I would etch it in my memory.

Younger Her: Please....I'm afraid of knives, if you could just get off of me, just for a second.

Younger Her stands

Her: Up until this point I'd only been on my back. I had to stand close enough. I needed to know how tall he was, I needed to know how much he weighed, I needed to know what he was wearing, you need to pay attention, you know, did he have long arms....

Younger Her: Can I just please get a drink of water?

Him: Yeah, hurry up. Make me a Seagrams, we can have a party.

Her: And I took off running.

Younger Her walks and sits in chair stage left.

Man: Hey!

Her: I knew he was behind me; I saw him over my shoulder. I'm thinking I got to get to light.

Panicked breath. Younger Her sits.

Calmer, more matter of fact.

Her (ctd.): I was taken to the hospital to have a rape kit done. That's where I learned he had gone to another woman's house a mile down the road and had raped her and she was in the same hospital. They began to collect the semen, the pubic hair, the nail clippings, saliva. My body was now a crime scene. Evidence was left on me and in me, it was very important to collect this.

Pause

It's hard to describe the hatred, the anger, the rage that I felt towards this person. What he'd done to me. What he'd done to her. I would have killed him myself if I could have. It was all consuming.

I was on a mission. We had to find this person. And I *wanted* to help.

Younger Her Moves to chair SR. Him turns to face audience, becomes police officer placing photographs in front of Younger Her.

Her (ctd.): Looking back now when I look at the composite sketch up against the man who raped me, its brilliant. Then, six photographs of people they believe to be suspects. My job's to find him.

Him: Don't feel compelled, take your time. The suspect may or may not be in there.

Her: I took my time. I really wanted to be sure.

Younger Her: That's him. Ronald Cotton.

Him: Are you 100% sure?

Younger Her: Yes. 100% sure, positive. That's the man.

Him: Good job. That's who we thought it was.

Younger Her moves to stand behind chair, beside Him, observing a Physical line up

Her: Then the Physical line up, a week later. The only thing between me and the line-up was a table and I was terrified. Terrified. Because now he sees me in the light and if I don't find him, he walks and if he walks, he *will* kill me.

Him: *(Out front)* Step forward, speak and step back.

Younger Her: Number 5. Absolutely positive.

Him: That's the same person that you picked out in the photo line-up.

Her: Bingo! I did it right. I did it right.

The courtroom was two weeks of my life. Two days I've got to recount every humiliating, vulgar, disgusting thing he did to me, in front of people, in front of my Dad, in front of my Mother and I can remember hating everybody. I hated the public defender, I hated Ronald Cotton, I hated Ronald Cotton's family, I hated anybody who liked him, I hated anybody who was trying to save him. I...hated...them all. Then finally....

Him: *(with champagne)* A toast. To the judicial system.

Younger Her: To the system!

Her: It was the first time I could breathe, I think.

Him walks over to Older Her to be a second suspect

1987, two years later, the court overturned the decision because the second victim had not made an ID. This time we had to try both cases together and I remember thinking “Oh god she’s going to screw this whole thing up”. He had been claiming this man by the name of Bobby Poole had apparently confessed to his cellmate that he had committed these crimes. Yeah right! And they actually brought him into this trial...

Older Her: Do you recognise this man?

Younger Her: No, I’ve never seen this man in my life.

Older Her: Is the man in the court room who raped you?

Younger Her: Yes your honour, *(pointing out)* it’s Ronald Cotton.

Her: I felt how dare you. How dare you question me. How dare you paint me as someone who could possibly have forgotten what my rapist looked like; I mean the one person you would never forget. How dare you. You don’t forget that kind of thing.

Now, three years later, the second victim says she was just afraid and can remember now it was Ronald Cotton.

Relief

Him returns to stand with Younger Her

People in prison are guilty. Innocent people don’t go to prison.

Him: To the judicial system.

Younger Her: Again.

Him: Hopefully now you can finally move on.

Her: The phrase moving on is one of these things, people say that. You don’t move on; you move around stuff. It’s always part of who you are. Ronald Cotton was now a permanent picture in my brain. He was every nightmare I ever had.

Pause

Older Her: It was now the Spring of ‘95. I’d married, had children. I got a call from the police.

Him joins Her CS, Her stands

Him: *(To Her)* Ronald still claims he's innocent. Now, we know he's not, but he's wanting this DNA test done. The court may rule that he indeed can have one done and.....

Her: Sure, run the DNA test. Because it's going to say what I've said all along. That Ronald Cotton is a monster. He's the worst of humanity. He deserves to be where he is, he deserves to suffer.

Older Her: The DNA test was run, and by June of '95 they came to my house and said....

Him: We were wrong. It's not Ronald Cotton's DNA. It belongs to Bobby Poole.

Her sits slowly

Younger Her: Talk about failure. I've failed everybody

Older Her: It was like someone had just taken my life and, like, turned it upside down. I'd never felt any shame from being a rape victim. I'd done nothing to deserve what happened to me, no woman has ever done anything to deserve sexual assault, but this was the first time that I had felt paralyzing, debilitating, suffocating guilt and shame. I had been a victim for 11 years. I knew how to be a rape victim; I'd done it. Ronald had been the bad person for 11 years and now, all of a sudden, our roles were switched. I had done it. I had been the person who had put him in prison for 11 years and it was..... my fault. Now he's the victim and I'm the offender. I didn't know how to be the offender I didn't know how to process that. I literally was swallowed in a black hole.

Him moves to stand behind Her's chair, back to the audience

Her: He hates me, he's angry, he wants revenge, he wants to hurt me. I took 11 years of this man's life; he's going to take something from me.

Him: I know she's sorry. I'd still like to hear it from her.

Older Her: So here I sit, in a church in Burlington, North Carolina, not far from where I was assaulted, waiting to meet the man who, thanks to me, served 11 years in jail for that assault.

Her: I don't even know what to say to him. What am I going to say? I'm sorry, I mean how lame is that? What do I call him? Mr Cotton? Ronald Cotton? I mean I don't even know what...

Older Her: Before I knew it, he was in the doorway.

Him turns, comes into the scene from behind her chair and stands looking at Her. Her tries to stand but cannot, looks at Him then sobs into her hands.

Pause

Her: If I spent every minute of every hour of every day for the rest of my life telling you I'm sorry it wouldn't come close to how my heart feels. Can you ever forgive me?

Older Her: Then he did the one thing that in my head I'd never imagined.

Him leans down, takes Her hand, cries

Him: Jennifer, I forgave you years ago. I'm not angry at you.

When you pointed at me. In the courtroom. It felt like someone pushing a knife through me. But I don't want you to be frightened of me. I will never hurt you. I want you to be happy and I want you to have a good life.

Her: This is what Grace and Mercy is all about, this is what they teach you in church that none of us ever get. But....how?

I used to pray every day of my life through those 11 years that you would die. That you would be raped in prison and that someone would kill you in prison. That was my prayer to God. And now here's this man who with Grace and Mercy just forgives me? How?

Him: There was no reason to hold on to anger and bitterness. It was only going to destroy my life. If I indeed was going to have to serve the rest of my life in prison, if I was going to die in prison, I had to find a way to live and I couldn't live in anger. I couldn't do that. So, I found a way to forgive.

Her: Just like that?

Him: In a moment. Literally. In a moment. One night in 1987 I see a vision in my cell. A woman with blond hair. No face, just this... thing. I saw it as you and I

prayed, I asked God, to take it off of me. To let me forgive you so I could somehow move forward. From that day on my time got so much easier.

Older Her: Parts of me that had been broken so long it was like...I could feel them fusing again. Ronald gave me back my life that day. My heart physically started to heal.

Younger Her: In real life there isn't necessarily a happy ending. Just shared pain. We were both victims of a flawed system, of Bobby Poole. Ron released me. That the one person who I had prayed to die could be the one person who would teach me to live!

Her: I forgave Bobby Poole before I forgave myself. Because I watched Ronald forgive me and I wanted that same kind of peace.

Forgiving was not excusing, condoning, justifying, any of it. It was for *me*. Because I wanted to be free. It was me letting go of the power and the rage and the control that that night had had on me. I wanted to be like Ron. I wanted to be peaceful and experience joy and happiness and you can't do that if you hate.

Older Her: This was a tragedy. All involved are looking at what we can do to reform. But you know the reality is, if that case was done again today and you had me on the witness stand and I pointed out Ronald Cotton, Ronald Cotton would go down.

My teacher. My guide. One of my best friends. Ronald Cotton.

Him joins Older Her to hold hands

Him: What face do you see now? In your nightmares. Whose face is it now?

Older Her: Now? Now there is no face.