



Barbara Driver and the idea of rape as something we can choose to enjoy (content note for rape)

"When rape is inevitable, lie back and enjoy it". What a thing to say, eh? There are a lot of things one can unpack about Barbara Driver's comment: that it conflates rape with bad sex; that it assumes & reinforces the belief that the psychological trauma of rape is elective; that it lets the rapist off the hook (what doesn't?)... But I just want to point out one thing about that advice that she might not realise: it doesn't work.

You see, I know it doesn't work because that's what I did. When my rapist began his attack on me, I was paralysed, mute; I froze, unable to protest in any way other than limp passivity. I couldn't say no - and after a while I believed it was too late to say no. I had no choice now; I had missed my chance to protest. So I cooperated I think, in a limited way (I'm afraid that bit of it is rather blank in my memory of that night). I lay back and let him do whatever he wanted because I thought him forcing me to have sex with him was "inevitable". I certainly didn't enjoy it - but I lay back alright.

More importantly, that night, and the next morning, and for many hazy days, traumatised months and bleak depressed years after that night, I didn't think that I was a rape victim. I didn't think I'd been raped. I didn't think *he'd raped me*. Because I lay back and enjoyed it, didn't I? I was just a slut who let this man do whatever he wanted, right? I didn't say no, did I? Good girls say no. Bad girls who enjoy sex say yes to anything. So why not let the next man do it, too? And the next, and the one after that, and more men than I can count for I don't know how many dark, vaguely remembered, alcohol and misery soaked years afterwards? I must have been enjoying it - I lay back, after all.

I lost the better part of two decades of my life to that belief that my rape was inevitable, and that because it was inevitable, I must have let it happen, which means I enjoyed it, which means it wasn't rape. It took getting involved with feminist activism and listening to many stories so very similar to my own, being told that freezing is a normal reaction, being taught about trauma and the cycle of promiscuity that often follows, before I was able to face what had happened and begin to heal.

The old fashioned view that sexual violence is inevitable not only sees men as predators and women as lacking in agency; it also lets rapists off the hook and forces victims to internalise the blame. Growing up in a patriarchy, being subjected to male sexual menace from the time we hit puberty (if we're lucky and something worse doesn't happen even earlier), we get enough messages that sex is something dirty, shameful and scary that is done to us rather than something enjoyable that we participate in. Telling women to take the ultimate expression of patriarchal domination and enjoy it is obscene in many ways - apart from anything else, it's so cruel - but also, it just doesn't work. You can lie back. But you can't enjoy it.