

Chapter 3: The Torn Robe (or, why it hurts so bad)

Move-in day at the University of Richmond couldn't come soon enough. I had managed to avoid Jason for the rest of the summer, screening phone calls and making up excuses about "having to clean the toilets" just so I didn't have to see him again. I was convinced that a fresh start was precisely what I needed. But, four hours of driving distance and a new dorm room didn't save me from running into someone who knew all about my past: me. When I looked in the mirror, I was still there. And I was still hurting. I decided that my only option was to avoid future abuse. I decided to build a strict religious hedge around my life, determined to return to God and avoid all semblance of men and sensuality. Rules and regulations would protect me from my vulnerable poetic and artsy side. After all, hadn't it been my whimsical nature that had attracted me to Jason in the first place?

Within the first week of college, I found two southern Christian girls who supported my passion and sweetly agreed to my severe rules: no kissing guys until our wedding days, no listening to any music unless it was "Christian" – *really* "Christian." We would pray for an hour a day and choose verses for each other to memorize. They imitated my fervor and I imitated their southern accent, believing that I sounded sweeter – more Christian – that way. I made some private rules for myself that limited my diet to fruits and vegetables, limited my friendships to Christians, and limited my play time to zero minutes a day. I was thin as a rail on the inside and out. Sure, I was sweet and my Bible was well-worn, but I was dying. It took two desperate phone calls – one from my mother and one from my doctor – to wake me up and say, "Laura, what are you doing? Who have you become?"

Trying to heed their concern but not willing to get real with them quite yet, I threw away my rules and explored another option: the party scene. I figured if all of my rules hadn't helped, perhaps uninhibited pleasure would at least numb the pain. But there, it

was very difficult for me to be myself... whoever that was. I felt like I was constantly conflicted: scheming about how to dance with the seemingly-wholesome guy from Bio 101 and how to get away from the Psych 211 creep; wanting to drink but knowing it would make me puke afterwards; wanting to look sexy in my tight black pants but hating the liberty some guys took with their hands.

I quickly discovered my defense weapon: sarcasm. When I wanted to get away from some guy, I'd coat a hurtful comment with sarcasm, smile innocently, and watch as he stumbled away. When I wanted to get *with* some guy, I'd artistically combine some of my deep thoughts with a tinge of sarcasm for an impressive entrance. Most guys, I learned, couldn't resist. I guess the tight black pants helped, too.

I didn't care much about anyone's background or interests: I was convinced that my college relationships were strictly temporary. Instead of engaging in personal conversations with other people, I often controlled the conversations by keeping things witty, sarcastic, and entrenched in lies. "Just kidding," I'd say sweetly after a twenty-minute-long lie about being related to the guy who directed *The Sting*, smile, and saunter off before anyone could see through me. I surrounded myself with people who made me feel good about myself and avoided those who threatened my guarded exterior.

Let's say you and I met up at a fraternity party one Friday night. Years have passed since kindergarten. You might have recognized my face and my blond curly hair, but you'd have said to yourself, "That can't be her! She used to be so sweet... so passionate about God... so tenderhearted. What's happened to her?"

It wasn't until I had completed grad school and married Ryan that I mustered up the courage to find the answer to your question. In my search, I came across a story in 2 Samuel 13 that has helped me to make sense of what happened to me. Here's my retelling of the story of Tamar and Amnon.



Tamar was a stunningly beautiful princess; the daughter of the King. She lived with her sisters in a huge palace. The sisters shopped together every Thursday afternoon, watched chick flicks on the weekends, and discussed the novels that they were reading in school. Each sister wore a gorgeous robe that was so priceless and beautiful that even if the sisters were hanging out at a coffee shop downtown, everyone knew that they were the King's daughters. The robes symbolized royalty and purity.

Of all the sisters, Tamar was the most kindhearted; her robe sparkled with light pink gems that matched the color of her smiling lips. Tamar was the kind of young woman who didn't mind lending her favorite jade choker to her older sister for the evening. Or, if she sat next to a stranger who needed a friendly smile, she wouldn't mind giving one away. It's no wonder that all of the guys had secret crushes on Tamar and competed for her attention.

Even Tamar's brother, Amnon, thought that she was incredibly beautiful. He began to think about her disrespectfully, though, as if she were a centerfold model instead of his royal sister. He became so consumed by his desire for her that he lost sleep and couldn't focus on anything else but her. His daydreams about her were vile and they distorted everything that he saw, making him irritable and detached.

Eventually, Jonadab, one of Amnon's scoundrel friends, asked Amnon why he was so worn-out and volatile. In a hushed voice, Amnon told Jonadab about his frustration: here he was, infatuated with Tamar, but he couldn't sleep with her because she was his sister. Jonadab laughed out loud at Amnon's secret, "HA! What's the big deal? You're a prince. You have every right to sleep with whomever you want. Just act like you're sick and tell your dad to send Tamar up to make you dinner. Then, you can do whatever you want with her."

And so, Amnon lay in bed and pretended to be sick. That night, when his father came to see him, Amnon asked if Tamar could make some bread for him and feed it to him in his room. Tamar came and baked a loaf of bread for her brother, concerned about

his health since he was so exhausted that he couldn't get out of bed. She brought the bread over to Amnon, trying not to disturb him.

Suddenly, Amnon sat up in bed and roared loudly, "Everyone, get out of here!" The servants scurried away obediently. Tamar was disturbed by his anger and looked around in confusion. "Tamar, you stay here. Bring the bread to me," Amnon growled. As Tamar timidly approached his bedside, and held a piece of the bread out towards him, Amnon grabbed her arm and pulled her close to his body. "Have sex with me, Tamar," he breathed hotly against her face.

"No! Don't!" Tamar cried as Amnon brutally forced her onto the bed. Her face hit the headboard; a sharp sting flushed across her face. Tamar winced in pain and disgrace as Amnon fumbled to unbutton her royal robe. She pleaded with him as he continued to push himself against her, "Please don't force me, Amnon! Children of the King should not do these things! I will be worthless - never pure again! And you will always be known as a rapist. At least speak to father... maybe he would allow you to marry me so that we would not be so disgraced." But Amnon had fantasized about this moment for far too long and he didn't care about what Tamar thought or what was right.

When Amnon was finished raping Tamar, he was filled with utter hatred for her. He shoved her away and spat in her face as he roared, "Get out of here, you whore! Get out!" Tamar was frightened by his sudden hatred and she refused to go. In her country, a young woman's virginity was the most valuable thing that she had; in fact, a woman who was not a virgin might never marry nor receive the comforts of a home or a family. Because Amnon had raped her, Tamar would only have a future if he provided it for her. But, he quickly called a servant and demanded that Tamar be drug from the room: "Take this woman out of here and lock the door!" he commanded.

The servant shoved Tamar into the hallway and locked the door as Tamar leaned against the wall, weeping. The servant silently led

her into a vacant room and left her there, crying in despair. She wrapped her arms around her legs and pulled her body in tight. Her hair had been loosened from its braid and now hung in her face, sticking to her wet cheeks. Then, with a loud cry, she tore her beautiful robe. She took some ashes from the fireplace and placed them on her head and walked home, weeping aloud as she went.

None of the servants at the palace or the people on the street tried to comfort her. No one asked what was wrong, though they certainly stared at the princess and whispered about the ashes on her head and the torn robe that was billowing in the warm evening breeze as she stumbled down the street.

She went to her other brother Absalom's house to seek comfort, but Absalom said, "Did Amnon rape you? Look, Tamar, don't tell anyone about this because he's your brother and people will speak poorly about the family. It's no big deal... just forget about the whole thing. You can stay with me, okay?" But Tamar couldn't forget about the whole thing and she lived with Absalom in desolation for the rest of her life.



What I hate about this story is that Tamar did what was right by obeying her father and baking bread for her "ill" brother, and yet she suffered. She was even willing to satisfy Amnon's physical desires by marrying him. But there was no happy ending for her. She lived the rest of her life in desolation. The first time I read this story, I paged frantically through the rest of the book and flipped to the index of names, searching for the rest of the story. *Surely we find out that God swooped down, shot Amnon, and rescued Tamar...* But we don't. Tamar's personal story ends there: in desolation. I guess I so fervently want to find redemption in Tamar's story because I want to find redemption in my own story. I have spent a lot of time with this story, asking God to show me how I have been responding to sexual sin and how I might experience a more hopeful ending than Tamar's.

I noticed that scripture describes Tamar as a beautiful princess

who wore a richly ornamented robe – given to her by her father – that symbolized her royalty and purity. A *robe of identity* like this isn't just a physical garment: instead, it represents a person's spirit – her beliefs, personality, behaviors, and thoughts. Tamar's robe served as a constant reminder – for herself and others – about her heritage, her worth, and her hope in a virtuous future. She must have worn it with great confidence. As she lived the rest of her life at Absalom's house, I bet Tamar thought fondly of her robe of identity – who she was before the rape. It got me thinking about my robe of identity – who I was before the abuse.

So, as a newly married young woman, I took my journal and Bible with me to Barnes and Noble, found a prime real-estate seat by the front window, and thought these things through. I asked God if He created me with a "robe of identity" and what it looked like... not how I remembered things or how they showed up in our family photo albums, but what He – my Father – actually intended when He created me and how He changed me the day I chose to believe in Jesus Christ.

He showed me that the robe of identity that He gave me as a child who believed in Jesus was one laced with royalty, purity, passion for Him, and tender-heartedness. No part of "Little Laura" was an accident. No part of my life was over-looked. God even heard all of the secret dialogues that took place in my head as I stared out the bus window at the cornfields whizzing by. He wasn't embarrassed by my nerdy passion for Him. On the contrary, when I'd race up the aisle to the alter, He was genuinely pleased. He actually rejoiced when I awkwardly befriended a new kid or played with my younger sister. He showed me that my kindness was evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence in my life, a kind of "fruit" produced by His influence on me. I sketched a robe in my notebook and jotted down some of my childhood qualities. As I wrote each one, I remembered the sweetness of being *me with God*.

Then I got to thinking about my friend, Ruby, who is an eccentric designer with a fantastic eye for fashion and an even more fantastic eye for a bargain. As good as she looks, she's not a fashion snob;

on the contrary, she's one of the easiest people to talk to. When we travel together, I laugh the entire time because she can make a joke out of practically anything. Usually, I discover that I'm laughing at my own expense, like the time I almost accidentally hit a business man in the bum with my handbag or when the security guards at the airport made me take my jacket off even though I had been planning on it being my *shirt* for the day. Ruby always says, "Never take yourself seriously. Take God seriously, not yourself."

Ruby and her husband, Charlton, have this really cool ministry in praying for people who are at their wits' end. They meet in a quiet place and ask God to identify how the person has been hurt or what God wants to tell them. Sometimes, God reminds the person of something that hurt her when she was a child. Usually, it's something seemingly small that grew into a destructive adult-sized habit or mindset. Usually, it's based on a lie that the person began believing as a child. Ruby asks God to reveal the truth about the person through Scripture: Who did God create that person to be? Meanwhile, Charlton sits, hunched over a piece of paper, waiting to hear the Scripture that God reveals. As Scripture is read, Charlton sketches a picture of the person's true, God-given identity. When he hands the picture over at the end of the prayer meeting, mouths drop and broad smiles appear as the person admires the sketch. Sometimes, it's been years since she has seen herself through God's eyes. Often, it's the first time.

After praying with Charlton and Ruby, our friend Thea, who was in a tailspin after her husband's adulterous affair, looked wide-eyed at Charlton's drawing and said, "Can I get that made into a T-shirt?" Inspired by one of the Scriptures, Charlton had written, "Clean and White..." across the top. Something inside of Thea said, "That's right! I remember now! That's me!" For the first time in years, she wanted people to see her. She couldn't stop staring at the sketch of a little girl with ponytails, just happy to be alive, accepting God's love and forgiveness. After reading Tamar's story, I believe that Thea was looking upon her robe of identity.

I flipped through my Bible, looking for more on this idea of

a *robe of identity*. Was I simply romanticizing this concept of a distinct God-given identity or was this something that was actually backed-up in Scripture? The last thing I wanted was to get myself off on a dead-end tangent that resulted in the formation of the Bathrobe-Wearing Cult of America that encourages participants to wear child-sized robes, moan about their beloved childhood and drink Kool-Aid out of sippy-cups. In my search, I was surprised to find dozens of times in Scripture that God uses clothing to symbolize our inner identity. I came across Psalm 139: 13 that says that God *knits* each person together in her mother's womb, blessing each of us with a unique spirit and a unique future. Regardless of our belief in Him, God blesses us with distinct gifts – different types of intelligences, beauties, and charisma. That's what I call our *robe of identity*. We pop into this world wearing nothing but our birthday suits and robes of identity.

The sad part is that despite the good gifts that God weaves into our being, we are born with a sinful inclination to despise Him and selfishly make ourselves into mini-gods; we get all enchanted with the gifts instead of the Giver. When that happens, the robes of identity that He gives us aren't used for their original design – to worship God – but for our own purposes – to worship ourselves, even to worship satan. But when we accept God's grace and choose to believe in Jesus Christ, God transforms us into new people, weaving our robes of identity to portray us as people who are forgiven, redeemed, and becoming more and more like Jesus Christ.

We are told to wear these renewed robes every day. Romans 13:14 says that we are to *clothe ourselves* with Jesus Christ; Colossians 3:12 says that we are to *clothe ourselves* with godly qualities like mercy, kindness, and forgiveness. As our unique gifts are used to worship God, our robes of identity shimmer with beauty and meaningfulness. I wonder if this was what Jesus was talking about when he promised that our Father in Heaven would clothe us just as He clothes the wildflowers.

I put down my pencil, closed my journal, and walked over to

the café for a break. "I'd like a tall Chai Latte. In a to-go cup, please." *Nothing's worse than the chance of a lipstick mark on a mug* I reminded myself. Besides, Ryan and I were convinced that customers receive more Chai Latte in a to-go cup than in a mug, and I still had a couple hours of thinking to do.

As the steamer hissed and mugs clinked together, I thought about how beautiful Tamar must have been before Amnon raped her. *Young, hopeful, regal*. When I imagined what she looked like after the rape -- living "in desolation" -- she warped into an old woman with sunken cheeks and straggly hair; the kind of old woman who never lifts her head to look up at you, but only rolls her eyeballs up and glowers with anger. *How can one painful experience have that much power?* I thought as I distractedly paid for my drink and headed back to my chair. As I sat back down and picked up my journal, I couldn't help but ask myself, *did I turn into that desolate old woman, too?*

I sipped my drink as I remembered a day-in-the-life of my not-so-delightful sophomore year in college, two years after I was abused.



I rolled over in bed and picked up the beige receiver.

"Hello?" I mumbled, feeling my stomach turn with the reality of daylight.

"Hi, Lar, it's Lita. How are you? You had a pretty rough night and I wanted to make sure everything was okay."

"Um, yeah, I'm fine. What time is it?" I asked and propped my body up so I could squint my eyes at the alarm clock. Eleven: fifteen. I had missed my Organic Chemistry lecture and would be 15 minutes late to my Feminist Theories class. Great. This wasn't the first time I had missed class due to a hangover. "Yeah, I'm fine, Lita. Thanks for calling. I'll see you this afternoon." I clunked the phone down on my nightstand, rolled back onto my pillow and stared at my ceiling. Living alone in a tiny fourth floor dorm room probably wasn't the best idea for me this year. I appreciated the

independence, but I feared that if Lita ever forgot to check in on me, I might die up there and no one would know for weeks. I crawled out of bed, picked up my shower caddy and a towel and trudged down the hall to the bathroom. This year, I felt perpetually tired. Everything I did seemed to give me a hangover.

I was in such a sad state that I couldn't even take care of my goldfish, Phoenix. Every day, I'd shut my eyes as I passed by my windowsill fishbowl for fear that Phoenix was dead. Because I was so depressed, a dead goldfish was the last thing I needed. Once in a while, I'd call Lita and ask her to come over and see if Phoenix was belly up or belly down. Inevitably, today, Phoenix was belly up. Later in the afternoon, Lita came over and gently scooped him into the toilet, cleaned out the fishbowl and placed it back on the windowsill. The empty bowl stayed there for the rest of the year. I couldn't muster up the energy to stash it in my closet.

I dressed up for class in flattering grey pants and a tight sea-blue t-shirt. The University of Richmond was known for its visual appeal, but even the gorgeous landscaping paled in comparison to the gorgeous girls who flipped their long sleek hair over their shoulders and tugged on tight-fitting clothes. I put on a smile that said *everything is fine* and fought to keep my heavy eyelids open during class. In between classes, I bought a salad and two peanut-honey bars for lunch, ate alone in my room, and threw it all up afterwards. I stared into the mirror, looking for myself. All I could see was my pale face and thinning hair that was falling out in clumps. I turned away from the mirror and jiggled the mouse on my computer. The screen saver faded away and I checked my email. *Ah, more dramatic poetry from Ross... and an invitation to the Sigma Chi horse races... "Happy hour begins at 10 a.m."* he wrote. *10 in the morning?* I sighed. *Was there no end to the insanity?* I closed the window, deciding to reply later. Ross was just another guy who was in the process of pressuring me into a serious relationship even though I was trying my hardest to discourage him without having to say "no."

I really could have used some sort of outlet -- writing, talking,

painting -- but my emotions seemed buried far too deep inside. Even my journal seemed distant. My friends seemed distant. My parents seemed light-years away even though they would call with great concern for me. I couldn't seem to talk about anything meaningful on the phone – those pinholes in the receiver seemed too tiny to transmit the indescribable feelings that weighed on me so heavily.

Days like this turned into months that turned into years: a blur of numb, grey, empty moments that helped me to deny how hurt I really was. Some mornings, I'd lie in bed or stand in the shower for hours, wondering why I should go on with the day. I could rarely think of a convincing reason.



My college years were full of junky memories that just didn't seem to line up with who I had been in the past. Even I used to ask, "Who is that girl?" Finishing the last sip of my Chai Latte, I leaned back in the armchair, pulled my Bible onto my lap, and turned back to 2 Samuel to check in with Tamar's story. *Is there anything to learn about the ugly afterwards? Why does sexual sin end in such desolation?* My heart sank as I read the answer for myself: immediately following the rape, Tamar tore her robe. In Tamar's culture, people would tear their clothes when they were grieved by death. Amnon's sexual sin had, in a way, killed Tamar. Tamar reacted to the rape as if she had died. She tore her robe because she no longer felt like royalty and she certainly didn't believe that she was pure. *That's exactly what I did!* I gasped aloud, shocked to see the similarity. *After Jason abused me, I tore my robe of identity!* The desolation that I

God's Big Idea: God created sex in marriage as a reflection of Jesus Christ's intimate love for all people who believe in Him for their salvation. In *And the Bride Wore White*, my friend Dannah reveals that the covenant of sex is an unbreakable bond between a man and women, must be sealed in blood, and is an if-then agreement. God intends for us to keep the covenant so that we can enjoy the blessings of baby-making, the fullest extent of physical pleasure, and the honor of protecting the dearest spiritual portrait given to humans!

experienced afterwards was directly related to me behaving as if I had died, as if I didn't have a God-given robe of identity: my college years were such a mess because I walked into my 10 x 10 freshman dorm room as a seriously wounded, identity-nude girl who never imagined that things could have been any different. Sexual sin had destroyed me. When Scripture explains that sexual sin somehow hurts us in a deeper, more personal way than any other sin, it's right (1 Corinthians 6:18).

After some more thought, I realized that every sexual perversion in my life, including my own choices, had caused me to tear my robe in some way. I turned back to the page in my journal where I had written down some of my secret memories and jotted down the ways in which I had torn my robe after each experience:

- Kindergarten:** *Shannon "clues me in": I tore the innocence out of my robe*
- Seventh Grade:** *"Muffie": I tore the tender-heartedness out of my robe*
- Senior Year:** *Abuse: I tore the hope out of my robe*

I learned the hard way that sex is such a vital element of God's plan of redemption that any experiences or thoughts that aren't inspired by God's idea of sex are sinful and harmful to us. All perversions of sex cause us to doubt our identity and forget our Creator. In a culture stuffed to the gills with sexual perversion – a multi-billion dollar porn industry, rampant child abuse, college party scenes, and countless romance novels -- so many of us are behaving as if we are dead. We have torn our robes in despair. Sexual sin is destroying us.

No wonder you wouldn't have recognized me at that college party; I had destroyed my robe of identity and was walking around in grave clothes... grave clothes that God never intended for me to wear. Instead of tender-heartedness, purity, and passion for God, I was wearing sarcasm, humanism, and quick fixes. It was as if I was walking around in some dead guy's skivvies.

✎ Get your hands on ✎

Eva Cassidy's "You've Changed"

Waterdeep's "Hush"

Sarah Groves' "Like a Skin"

Barlow Girl's "I Need You To Love Me"

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