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**Rape and robbery of a county's sense of security
Comment**

by Norris West The Baltimore Sun

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THE RED turtleneck was tiny. Perhaps a size 7 or 8, a tad bigger than toddler size.

The shirt belonged to a young child whose eyes should only see innocent things, whose thoughts should be pure. Yet the girl's turtleneck was a piece of evidence in a heinous crime that is too repulsive and ghastly for anyone to experience, young or old.

Howard County Assistant State's Attorney Janine Rice pulled the small shirt from a brown paper bag marked with the number 4575-4 for identification. Other numbered bags in a courtroom in Carroll County contained blood samples, DNA evidence and clothing from a man accused of rape.

Ms. Rice held the shirt by the shoulders. She displayed it to a police detective who collected evidence after a 15-year-old girl was raped last March outside the Howard County Library's branch in downtown Columbia.

The prosecutor asked the detective if the shirt was the one he plucked from a wooded area near the library. It was, the detective replied. The assailant forced his victim and her 8-year-old sister to disrobe during the attack. He forced himself on the older girl and then stole two gold rings and an earring from her. The younger girl was untouched, but she too was a victim of this grisly act.

The sisters fled the library crime scene, with thorn-pricked skin and twigs in their hair, to refuge at Toby's Dinner Theatre. They left the shirt behind, along with the 15-year-old's book bag, bra and underwear.

The rape victim was wearing only socks when the sisters reached Toby's. The only other piece of clothing she had was a jacket, which she held in front of her when a gentle actor at the theater took her in.

This is one of the more repugnant and unsettling crimes in Howard County in recent years. Two girls traumatized by a cowardly man who victimizes children. Who knows if their nightmare will end?

That some fiend committed a sex crime outside the library is infuriating. Worse is the age of the victim. Even worse is the reality that the victim's 7-year-old sister, who went to the library wearing that red turtleneck, will carry the image of her sister getting raped forever.

We can only imagine how this little girl must have felt as she suffered through that evening of evil. She surely was frightened. And she must have felt helpless to stop the criminal act.

Almost a year later, the small child, who now is eight, took the witness stand in Carroll County Circuit Court, where the case was moved due to pretrial publicity. This time, she was handled with kid gloves. She spent only several minutes before Howard Circuit Judge Diane O. Leasure and the jury. The victim's testimony lasted longer, but as she talked, the teen, now 16, clutched a small stuffed tiger.

The teen-ager testified that she and her sister waited on a bench outside the library for her mother when a man approached and offered them a ride. She spoke with confidence as she told the jury how her assailant threatened to shoot her at one point and threatened to rape her sister at another.

Timothy Bryan Chase, a 28-year-old Columbia man who worked as a janitor at Howard County General Hospital, is charged with the crime.

Neither girl could positively identify Mr. Chase in court, but a tower of circumstantial evidence is stacked against him.

He became a suspect when a relative steered police his way. When police arrived at his home, his wife surrendered key evidence -- two gold rings and an earring. The teen-ager later identified them as the jewelry that was taken from her on that night last March. The wife, who has since declined to say more, told police that her husband had taken them from a woman.

The jury will not hear the wife's testimony or see a signed statement she gave police.

But four of Mr. Chase's former co-workers at the hospital, one describing herself as a friend, testified that he tried to sell them gold rings days after the rape. One thought the jewelry sale peculiar; Mr. Chase had never sold jewelry there before.

Jurors will have to sift through the brown bags of evidence, dueling DNA experts and other testimony before reaching a verdict.

The jury, by the way, is all white. The defendant is black, at times the only black person in the courtroom. And although many a U.S. Supreme Court case has addressed the issue of race and juries, race should not be a factor here. This case is not about civil rights. I hope it never masquerades as such. It is about the most base incivility.

Regardless of their verdict, this ugly act has changed Howard County. Until this happened, there was no need to worry about keeping up your guard at a public place like the library. Parents had a safe haven where they did not have to think twice about leaving their children.

That sense of security is gone.

It is obvious what price the teen victim paid. As for her sister, the girl's tiny shirt was found, but her youth seems forever lost.

Norris West is The Sun's editorial writer in Howard County.

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