

The Line

A Film by Nancy Schwartzman

[TRANSCRIPT]

Mom: My darling daughter, my guess is that he's not an unusually violent man and that given the circumstances he doesn't think he did anything wrong. That's what I'm afraid you will find hurtful. Are you prepared to hear that from him? Are you prepared to hear him try to blame you? In our country we have come a long way, no means no and a woman out alone is not an invitation, a woman has control over her body and her choices. I don't think the rest of the world yet goes along. I love you and take care of yourself. Love, Mom

Nancy: I keep wondering if I should go back and meet with him face to face.

I grew up in a quiet Philadelphia suburb in your garden variety American Jewish family. When my mother was my age, women were supposed to be virgins when they got married. Sex was for making babies with your husband. But I got a different sort of sexual éducation. And I watched it religiously.

By the time I was 18, I was ready to leave my parents house, and I was ready to have lots of sex. I moved to New York City. In college, we were into drugs, politics and booty calls. I played varsity tennis, studied art history and partied. I marched against rape and called myself a slut. Lil Kim was my favorite rapper and I discovered feminist porn. My friends and I did a lot of white powdery drugs and danced with the go-go boys in Times Square. I was the group photographer, trying hard to be Nan Goldin.

Things got really bad. I started having an affair with my professor. I landed my dream job in film and then got fired. Drugs were a problem off and on, and my roommate's boyfriend jumped off of the 59th Street bridge. My life was spinning out of control. I wanted to start over. I heard about a great job opening in Jerusalem, so I took a chance and moved there.

Living in Jerusalem, was a different story. Women covered their bodies when they went outside, and if I chose not to, it was uncomfortable. I learned that sexuality radiates out of a woman's hair, her eyes, every part of a woman's body was potentially erotic, and anything exposed was a potential invitation. Part of me liked it, being covered. It reminded me that my body was sacred, and shouldn't be shared with just anyone.

I discovered belly dancing – a way to be sexy, but also modest. My teacher, Miriam, was young and religious.

Miriam: In the Mizrahi world and the Sephardi world and the Arabic world, a woman is supposed to go out in simple clothes and not put on a lot of make up and then when she comes home she's supposed to put on her beautiful clothes, her sexy clothes and put on lipstick and make up and be beautiful for what? For her husband to make romantic feeling.

Nancy: There was something beautiful about saving yourself for the one you love. Miriam got married. Following religious tradition, she married a man she barely knew and had never touched. She felt like he was the one for her. Maybe that's what I was looking for?

I met Etai. We really connected, we'd stay up all night talking, we'd take trips to the desert. I fell in love. I thought he was the one. But Etai fell in love with someone else. I was crushed.

A few weeks later at a party, I flirted with a guy I knew from work. I was so lonely. I thought it would help me get over Etai. I went home with him. But things took an unexpected turn.

Wasn't it enough what we did? Why did he take more? You're so stupid. So stupid. Who's going to understand?

The eyes. Oh my god, that next morning, I couldn't stand the eyes. They leered. They could see it. I felt weak, vulnerable, dirty, like anyone could take advantage of me.

I had to go to work the next day. He came up to me in front of a group of people, like he was testing the waters. I could tell he wanted me to say everything was ok and that what happened would stay between us. I told him to never speak to me again. He looked nervous.

I quit my job, I left Jerusalem, and moved back to New York. Back at home. It felt like my friends had all moved on. And I had to start from scratch, I felt like such a failure.

Person 1: I don't know what to think, like I'm your friend, I feel like I've had a lot of those kind situations too, you what I mean? But, they weren't rape.

Person 2: Just because it hurts, doesn't mean it was forced.

Person 3: I mean you have two people saying different things, and you were both drinking.

Person 4: I can't imagine forcing anyone into sex if they don't want it. But I got to tell ya I feel kinda uncomfortable you telling me this, I mean you have a great ass.

Person 5: There are girls out there, that the way that he acted, they would not perceive it as aggressively as you did. The important thing is how you felt, how you perceived it, and how do you feel about it?

Nancy: At a certain point the confusion about what happened was as painful as the event itself. During this time, my friend Netanya was attacked and raped by a stranger in Brooklyn.

Netanya: I walked in and everything was totally normal and then he like grabbed me from behind and covered my mouth and it was like my whole reality just changed. It makes me scared, you know? Makes me scared. What's underneath that is I'm terrified so that's scary that I have still have that terror. I have a file that I call Event where I've kept things about the assault. These are all the different cards, counselors, and officers – negative for HIV 1 and HIV 2. These things were like, these things were so helpful. I remember like re-reading these when I was like really confused. This is probably the most scariest thing I have in here, which is the police sketch that was done.

Nancy: After spending time with Netanya, I wanted to know what kind of options I had. Netanya's case was clear cut – it was a stranger on a dark street. My situation was less defined. We were in bed already. I went to see a lawyer.

Karen: You gotta put up. You have to prove it. You are the one who is under the spot light.

Nancy: So if you were single and dating, let's say, and you had an experience that was in your mind rape – or a violation...

Karen: Would I go to the police? No. Because I don't think the criminal justice system really solves things. I guess if I thought that this person might hurt another person, then maybe I would.

Nancy: This time I went to an attorney who specializes in sexual assault. I read about him in Cosmo.

Brett Sokolow: The jury system actually permits a rape prone society. Using a jury to figure out a sex crime is the wrong system. I don't know that I have the answer to what's a better system, but asking 12 witnesses essentially who weren't there, who didn't take part, to unravel this is near impossible. If you have done anything that places you in a position of vulnerability, that makes you something less than a perfect victim, is what I like to call it, you're doomed. You're not going to have a successful prosecution. If you drank, if you flirted, if you had sex with somebody before, I mean you literally have to have this profile of a perfect victim.

If I asked you for sex, and you said yes, would I now have permission to do anything to you sexually That I can think of? And believe me, there's a lot I can think of, and the answer is no. And so the idea is very intuitive if you think of it that way, that consent to one sexual activity isn't consent to every other form.

Nancy: A friend told me about a former NFL Quarterback who was now educating young men about masculinity and respecting women.

Don McPherson: That's how sex is presented to boys. It's not about intimacy. It's not something that is intimate, egalitarian, that is loving. It's something that we do to the other.

Spring Break Guy: 75% of the bitches down here are using alcohol as an excuse to fuck, 25% are just whores, I mean you know, what can I say?

Don McPherson: Understanding that we raise women to survive in a rape culture, because we raise women to know these things, yet we do nothing to talk to men about not raping...but we do talk to women about how to protect themselves, which is further why we place the blame on women when something happens. Well didn't you know not to do that? Didn't you know not to wear that dress? Or didn't you know not walk down that street at that hour of the night?

Nancy: Here's what happened. A co-worker and I flirted at a party and I decided to go home with him. We had a few drinks. He undressed me on the couch and then we went to the bedroom. We started having sex. We were having sex, but then he turned me over, held me down and sodomized me.

I didn't say no, and I didn't say stop – the words – but I screamed. And he went (thrust) came, and pulled out and then left me crying, I was crying. And then he said, oh, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm always doing bad things, I'm sorry, I'm sorry and then he turned on the light and showed me pictures of his son.

That night I tried to sleep. I was in his bed. He started snoring next me. I was disgusted, how could he fall asleep after I had been screaming and crying. That's when I woke him up and asked him to drive me home.

What would I get out of talking to him? Do I talk to him? Do I go to the police? I wanted to make sure that what happened to me won't happen again.

I went to see women who write up a contract before having sex with men. They're professional negotiators who draw clear boundaries. Everything is agreed on before they get started. They're not lawyers, they're prostitutes.

Alexis: I always do whatever we agree on, that's what I do, exactly what I do. But then he wanted to finger my asshole and lick my asshole and this whole other thing, and so I told him...you need to give me your credit card, Well you gotta give me your credit card, because that's not what we agreed to, so I'm like if you want to make another agreement, let's do that.

Mila: My first intuition in the negotiation was that I didn't really want to party with him, and I quoted him high, and then when he went back out and got me and he took the bait, and I didn't think he would, and I didn't know how to get out of the situation.

Nancy: Even Mila who makes a living from drawing clear sexual boundaries sometimes has trouble.

Alexis: I got to run just for a bell, just for a second, but I'll be back.

Nancy: I ended up telling Alexis my whole story.

Alexis: I can't do it from this far, I need to hold your hand. Okay, so now finish the story.

Nancy: It's basically about my fucked up judgment that I would pick this guy, and he would snap on me.

Alexis: How could you know that though?

Nancy: How could I not know that? I mean it just makes me realize how risky anything is. And then he made this interesting point – we did other things without asking. I touched you here, you licked me there, I didn't ask you.

Alexis: When you're talking about penetration, I assume you've kissed somebody before, he's kissed somebody before. He's played with a girl's boobs, you've touched a guy's cock. But he doesn't know if you've ever been fucked in the ass !

Nancy: It was a relief to share my story with someone who really understood that what happened to me was a violation. Even if I approached him that night, flirted, and went home with him, he still crossed a line.

Netanya was on her way to court. The police had found her attacker, arrested him, and put him in jail. She was preparing a letter to read to him.

Netanya: My name is Netanya Ullmann, I'm 31 and I grew up in NYC. My whole relationship to NYC changed drastically when you attacked me in October 2004. There are many ways I've healed and there are many ways I am still healing. I do not have faith or investment in the criminal justice system, but I'm glad to see what feels like justice to be served today.

Nancy: I had to confront what happened to me. He's the only one I can ask, He's the only one that was there with me. What does he think happened? The night when we were together, we were alone, and there were no witnesses. I'm bringing a camera so that it can record the truth.

Shay: Nervous?

Nancy: Yes.

Shay: Don't be!

Nancy: A little nervous. I mean, hopefully I'll be able to say what I want to say. Maybe he'll say something I didn't expect?

Man: It's really important for you to know, I'm not a bad person.

Nancy: I know I had never done that before, ever. I screamed, because it hurt a lot, and you did it again.

Man: We make love we make really hot love, and we did everything from our free will, our free love, our passion, our... we did everything... I don't want to get into details, but, but it was really cooperative, like um...

Nancy (voice over): What if I'm wrong, what if I remembered it wrong? When he was sitting across from me, looking me in the eye, he was just another human being who remembered it differently than I did. But I know what happened that night. What does it mean if he can't remember?

Man: I didn't cause you to do it, I didn't force you to do it, we did it.

Nancy: He looks uncomfortable, he's moving around in his chair, he must know what he did? Oh god I hate this part, when he leans in toward me. Why didn't he ask my permission before he did it?

Man: I'm not putting the blame on you, don't misunderstand me...

Nancy: That night, that night you raped me.

I needed to tell him he violated me, and I wanted to know why— why did that happen, why did he do it? I didn't get any answers from him, but all the same -- I felt strong. I had faced the person who scared me the most.

I've learned to be careful about who I'm intimate with, and I'm clear about what I do and don't want sexually.

The more comfortable I am in my own skin, the more present I can be to give consent, to seek pleasure and to choose a partner who respects my line – wherever it may be.

Along this journey, I found something beautiful.

I met someone and felt like I could tell him everything, I didn't feel ashamed. He's a cameraman, he even shot some of this movie.

Twenty years ago, a woman going to the police station to report a rape might have been sent home. Netanya watched as her attacker was sentenced to prison. What recourse did I have?

That night, I was unlucky. I chose to go home with someone who ignored my screams and used force. I never had the chance to say yes or no. Until I sat across from him and faced him, every man could potentially do the same thing. I'm glad I did it, not because it made my situation better, but because he might think twice the next time.

Most cases of sexual abuse fall somewhere between Netanya's and mine. How can we make sure we respect the line?

[END]