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An Unshakeable Delusion

The Guardian, February 7th, 2004

It was an allegation that had the nation agog. Nadine Milroy-Sloan accused Neil and Christine Hamilton, a couple already notorious in a quite different context, of sexually assaulting her at a flat in Ilford. Her claim turned out to be entirely false and she's been jailed for three years. Yet she is unwavering. Dea Birkett talks to her to try to find an explanation for the whole calamity

Sunday May 6 2001, 19.38. The room is anonymous. There's just a padded vinyl chair, an examining table, a small white drugs cabinet and a large number of plastic speculums. The Haven, in south-east London, is a 24/7 centre for victims of sexual assault.

The examination is from head to toe. The doctor, a female specialist in forensic gynaecology, examines the alleged victim's face, hair and mouth for haemorrhages from oral sex. She looks under her fingernails. She checks all over for bruising and scratches. Each mark must be measured and described; she finds a tender area on her scalp and abrasions on the back of her left hand and on her right thigh. There's a clock, so the doctor can accurately time her observation of every item. It's very important to be meticulous. Allegations of serious crimes are being made.

Swabs are taken from inside and outside the genital area, very carefully. Samples of blood, urine and saliva are collected. At 20.45, the doctor observes "slightly swollen eyelids and mildly injected (red) conjunctivae (the very thin covering of the white of the eye), consistent with recent and ongoing crying".

In the drugs cabinet are painkillers, drugs for

tetanus and hepatitis B, and prophylaxis to help prevent HIV infection. The young woman is offered - and accepts - all of these. Three hours after arriving at the Haven, she is taken with her aunt and a police constable back to Peckham police station, then home.

Two years later, Friday June 13 2003. It's the same young woman, crying again. She's at Middlesex Guildhall crown court, directly opposite the Houses of Parliament. Neat and petite in a light grey trouser suit, diamond stud earrings, and with her blond bob pushed behind her ears, she seems too small for the dock in which she stands. She's 29, but looks far younger; you'd never guess she is a mother of four.

Nadine Milroy-Sloan had gone to the Haven after she claimed she had been raped by Barry Lehaney, 61, and seriously sexually and indecently assaulted by the former Tory minister Neil Hamilton and his wife Christine, in Lehaney's flat - allegations that proved to be false. Milroy-Sloan, once the accuser, became the accused. After a six-week trial at the Old Bailey, she was found guilty of perverting the course of justice on two counts.

A month later, she is here at the crown court for sentencing. A slight scuffle erupts at the back of the courtroom as the offender's solicitor insists that her husband, Terence Squires, be allowed in. Milroy-Sloan mouths to Terry, "I'll be OK", even though she doesn't look it. Judge Simon Smith declares, "It's becoming all too easy for people to sell false allegations against well-known people, or about well-known people, to the press, and courts have got to deal firmly with it." He sentences her to three years in jail - more than the recommended sentence for killing someone through dangerous driving. It's the toughest sentence ever passed on a woman who has made a false accusation of rape; previous cases have resulted in probation or a few months in jail.

It is generally accepted in Britain, and quoted in Home Office reports, that 2% of all rape and sex allegations are false, the same percentage as for

other crimes. This is based on a 30-year-old study in New York, which was brought to public attention by Susan Brownmiller in her ground-breaking book *Against Our Will*. Brownmiller reported that false accusations dropped from 15% to 2% in New York City when police began using female officers to interview complainants, for the simple reason that "women believe the word of other women. Men do not." Since then, further research has thrown up wildly varying results: a study tracking sexual assault allegations in Ontario, Canada, found 5.7% to be false; a US air force study, *False Rape Allegation In The Military Community*, put the figure at 60%; the FBI claims that false reporting of forcible sexual assault stands at 8%, four times higher than other crimes. One of the difficulties is that each study defines false rape claims differently. Many include instances where allegations of rape were made but the case dropped before reaching court. Only the Canadian study excludes all cases except those that are actively proven to be false.

When a rape allegation is proved false, it receives disproportionate attention, and women who make the allegation attract particular odium. The associated, relatively minor charges - perverting the course of justice and wasting police time - would not normally receive national press coverage. But false rape makes headlines, of which "Rape claim was pack of lies" is typical. In addition, each well-publicised false rape allegation is seen as part of a far larger trend - when the case collapsed against a man accused of raping a 16-year-old girl after Teesside police discovered that she had made earlier false claims, the judge called for a register of women who make false rape allegations, similar to the sex offenders register.

Long before sentencing, Milroy-Sloan's claims had been held up as an example of the sort of lies greedy women tell when it comes to rape. On August 20 2001, while the Hamiltons and Lehaney were still being investigated by police, she was described by one newspaper as "the manipulative Miss Milroy-Sloan". On the day her trial opened at

the Old Bailey, another newspaper ran a picture of her, captioned "Fantasist". Neil Hamilton called her "a gold-digging little slut". When she was found guilty, calls were made in parliament to grant anonymity to all those accused of serious sexual assault.

Nadine Milroy-Sloan describes the early spring of 2001 as the best time of her life. "I'd got my life together at last and was doing a job I really enjoyed. I had a career." After leaving her Catholic convent at 16 with seven GCSEs ("at C grade and above"), she'd had a series of jobs, from cook on the ferries to barmaid at Butlins, before eventually enrolling at Grimsby College for a catering course in September 2000. It was a work-based qualification, which involved teaching practice, and Milroy-Sloan liked to call herself a "college lecturer". She was living in a rented house in Grimsby, around the corner from her parents, Doreen and Martin Checksfield, and her elder half-brother Robert and his family. When interviewed by police, Robert said, "I didn't pay much attention to her, as she had a tendency to exaggerate." Her eldest child, Samantha, 10, lived with Doreen, while her youngest, Tommy, two, stayed with her. Her two middle children - Summer, four, and James, six - were with their father, Scott Sloan, in Skegness. He had won custody of them when the marriage broke up in 1998.

Milroy-Sloan had bought a computer for her course, and late at night, after her work was done, would enter chatrooms. Matchmaker.com was her favourite; she found the sexual repartee funny. She describes how she and a girlfriend used to down a few drinks, log on and have a laugh. The messages they sent detailed all sorts of exploits, from three-in-a-bed to lesbian sex. "I'm not always a very nice person. I'm no angel," Milroy-Sloan says. Although she didn't know it, one of the people she shared these fantasies with was a pensioner who lived in a flat in Ilford, Essex. His name was Barry Lehaney.

Lehaney was a veteran chatroom surfer. He used matchmaker.com under a number of pseudonyms,

including Lady Joan Hamilton, Lord James Hamilton and Sir Barry, who he said was the Lord and Lady's chauffeur. (Later, Lehaney said he had thought of the name because he had a relative called Hamilton.) Milroy-Sloan talked to "Lady" and "Lord Hamilton" on a regular basis from her address sexybabe@tesco.net, and was soon exchanging phone numbers and postal addresses with them. Lehaney, posing as the fictional, aristocratic Hamiltons, sent her pornographic pictures by email and through the post, and even mailed her a vibrator.

Up in her terrace house in Grimsby, Milroy-Sloan thought she was in touch with a ring of rich and powerful people who engaged in kinky sex. One of the women Lehaney sent her pictures of was fair-haired; she began to think it was someone she had seen before on television and in the newspapers. Confused about their first names, and thinking such prominent people must be titled, the thought formed that she was really chatting with Christine and Neil Hamilton.

Milroy-Sloan, living on benefits, admits that she saw the opportunity to sell a story. But she says it was her uncle, Tony Iles-Blackmore, who first suggested approaching the publicist Max Clifford. On May 1, she took a coach down to London to see her 87-year-old grandmother at her home in Bermondsey. Two days later, Milroy-Sloan went with her uncle and his son to see Clifford in his Bond Street offices. Milroy-Sloan, overdramatically anxious about being recognised, borrowed a pair of sunglasses and a baseball cap from her aunt.

According to Milroy-Sloan, Clifford was encouraging. She says he told her that she could earn six-figure sums if her story stood up - a vast amount to her. She just needed proof. Clifford said, "On this occasion I did what I always do - asked her whether she had any way to prove the allegations that she was making." These allegations did not involve criminal acts, simply internet chat.

Milroy-Sloan admits that she arranged to see

Lehaney to gather evidence. She hoped he would phone the Hamiltons in her presence, and perhaps she could tape conversations with them in which they might make the same sort of sexually explicit comments she believed she'd been receiving from them by email. She text-messaged Lehaney to send her some "juicy pics of Lady Hamilton and you", and let him know she was in London. Lehaney offered to take her for lunch on Saturday, and she agreed. She took a number 25 bus from Oxford Circus to Ilford.

Lehaney was delighted. "It's not often I have young female company these days," he said. He drove to collect her from the bus stop in his dark blue Ford Granada, and they went for a pub lunch. Milroy-Sloan asked him where Lord and Lady Hamilton lived, and Lehaney, not wishing to disappoint her and discredit himself, waved in the general direction of some big houses and said, "Over there."

Lehaney clearly wanted to impress the attractive young woman; in his evidence he said that he drove her back into central London for a tour of the sights - Trafalgar Square, Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament. Despite having been born in Dulwich and raised in London for her first few years, Milroy-Sloan was a stranger in the capital; Lehaney thought it very funny that she didn't know Big Ben was attached to the Houses of Parliament. He says they drove back out to Ilford, stopping at Tesco to buy some food and wine for supper, then returned to his flat and watched Trigger Happy TV.

Lehaney said he offered her the sofa, but she said she'd prefer to sleep in his bed, where they just cuddled. When they awoke the next morning, he said, Milroy-Sloan, completely of her own accord, began to masturbate him. Later, it would be argued that she did this deliberately to gather forensic evidence against him.

Milroy-Sloan provided a different version of her weekend: when they returned from Tesco, "I went into the lounge, he went into the kitchen and

brought me a glass of red wine. I remember thinking, 'This is so strong', because I just felt so woozy." With hindsight, she claimed that her drink had been spiked with Rohypnol, known as the date rape drug. Later, when the police searched the flat, they found a strip of Rohypnol. Lehaney said that it had been planted there.

Then, Milroy-Sloan says, there was a knock at the door, "and in came a rather attractive young man and these two people. She came in and shook my hand, and said, 'You're the person we've been speaking to.' I recognised her immediately. I began drinking again, and I remember thinking, 'I'm just completely and utterly drunk.' " The three people, says Milroy-Sloan, were a man called Andrew and "Lord and Lady Hamilton" - or, as she imagined, Christine and Neil Hamilton.

Next, Milroy-Sloan said, the conversation turned sexual. She was asked if she had sensitive nipples, and if she liked having sex with women. Milroy-Sloan says she begged to go home, but they wouldn't let her go. When her uncle called her on her mobile, they switched it off. Lehaney - in her account - pushed her on to a big rug on the floor and began to rape her; Andrew and Lord Hamilton stood over her masturbating, while Lady Hamilton, bedecked in a blue dress, attempted to straddle her for oral sex. The next morning, Lehaney drove her back to her grandmother's in Bermondsey.

"I just felt like I'd been hit by a train. I can remember going to my nan's and just walking around her flat for ages in a total daze. She was still in bed. I ran myself a bath. I spoke on the phone to my uncle." Each of the many times she retells these moments over the next two years - to police, reporters, the jury - she does so in almost exactly the same words.

That day, she began to keep a diary in her rounded schoolgirl hand: the first entry reads like a script, as if she were enacting the tragedy of a young and misunderstood woman. "Finding it difficult to cope. One minute I'm crying, the next coping, the next crying ... Nothing seems real any

more." She makes a litany of emotions - embarrassment, anger, guilt, fear, loneliness - and rhetorical declarations: "Why won't anyone help me?" "Can't fight this on my own." There is no sense of a deceit being constructed, but there is something strangely distant in her outpourings. It's as if she can only pretend to be herself.

Her uncle Tony called the police, who came and took her and her aunt, Gillian Iles-Blackmore, to the Haven. "It's the most humiliating thing a woman has to go through after being raped. To have your body violated, then have to lie on a bench, place your feet in stirrups while they take swabs," says Milroy-Sloan. While she was being examined, her aunt Gill handed her mobile phone to the police constable who had escorted them, saying that her husband Tony wanted to talk to him. "I spoke to a male on the phone who I believe to be Mr Blackmore," the constable recorded in his notes. "He said, 'That fellow Max Clifford telephoned me about an hour ago. I told him nothing, I said we weren't going to pursue it.'"

" At 8.05am the next morning, bank holiday Monday, police went to Lehaney's flat and arrested him. He has always denied rape and no charges have been brought.

Women make false accusations of rape for a number of different reasons, including revenge, guilt, shame, the concealment of an affair, extortion and to test a husband's love. Sometimes, it is little more than a desperate attempt to win sympathy and attention. One of the few academics to study women who falsely accuse is Keith Soothill, professor of social research at Lancaster University. He says, "Women tend to make false allegations to get themselves out of trouble rather than to get men into trouble. They lie when they feel constrained, when they're in a tight spot."

Eighteen-year-old Wendy McClung had just such reasons: she made a false claim of rape to avoid having a row with her parents after spending the night with 30-year-old Stuart Nicol, for whom she babysat. In February 2000, she was put on probation for nine months. Thirty-four-year-old Deborah White claimed she was sexually assaulted

with a pool cue and raped by two men in a Bristol pub where she worked as a stripper; confronted by security videos, she admitted making it up to explain away bruises to her husband. She was jailed for three months. "The whole thing gets out of hand and there just isn't the opportunity for the woman to bail out," says Soothill. "The process begins to take over."

Research also suggests that 69% of false accusers have a psychiatric history. Milroy-Sloan's psychiatric report for court stated that she "has a history of emotional and behavioural disturbance, including previous episodes of self-harm, threatening behaviour and substance misuse". The report concluded that she was fit to stand trial, with a proviso: "However, it is likely that a degree of personality disturbance is having an impact on the manner in which she presents an account of various events in the face of conflicting evidence," and added, "She remains at risk of further self-harm when faced with stressful life events."

Nadine Milroy-Sloan has a troubled past. She remembers her childhood as unhappy. She was her parents' only child, but had four half-siblings from her father's first marriage. According to her, this always caused tensions in the family, and she found her relationship with her mother "difficult ... there's never been any love in it". It was a family in which silences were sought; in her witness statement to the police, her mother says, "I did not want to know the graphic details of the rape, so I have never asked Nadine and she has never told me. That's how I prefer it." Her father also said, "As her dad, I certainly didn't want to know about it ... we did not then, and never have since, talk about what happened."

Since she was a teenager, Milroy-Sloan has had bouts of excessive drinking and admits to occasional amphetamine and cocaine use. When she was 17, she was arrested and charged with assault after a fight with a girl outside a pub. At 19, she was charged with burglary from a chalet at Butlins, where she worked. The following year, 1995, she received a conditional discharge for

using threatening, abusive or insulting words after an argument with her husband. In October 2001, she got into a fight with an assistant at a chip shop in Cleethorpes, threw her food at her, and on her way out assaulted a fellow customer who happened to be standing there.

But Milroy-Sloan can also be great fun. She is lovely to look at, and men and women have always been attracted to her. She is articulate and funny; friends frequently describe her as "bubbly". Yet, all her life, she has also found it easy to make enemies - even her GP struck her off his list. She now says that her mother stood by her only until she could cash the cheque for selling her story, and then abandoned her. She says that her two former husbands have turned against her.

Scott Sloan, her second husband, told a newspaper, "I thought she was a lovely little thing when I first met her ... There's a side to her like a child that makes you want to hold her and tell her everything's going to be all right. She seems so vulnerable, she is like a little lost girl. But there's another side to her which is unbelievable and so horrible, so awful. I think she needs psychiatric help."

Police were aware of Milroy-Sloan's disturbed history and previous record. Humberside had a file of her allegations, including domestic violence, which they believed were false. Perhaps it was these suspicions, and the seeming outlandishness of her claims, that led to a 10-day delay between her reporting the alleged attack and a full statement being taken from her. Perhaps this, too, is why the interrogating police officer was coldly procedural. Even as Milroy-Sloan sobbed, no words of solace were offered. By this time, she was so confused about the couple that she was calling the alleged female assailant not Lady Joan, but Caroline Hamilton. Interviewed again two weeks later, on May 30, she steadfastly stuck to her story - there is no doubt she continued to believe it.

She sensed, however, that she wasn't being believed. She became increasingly distressed by

what she perceived to be the police dragging their feet, and she complained daily to her diary that they were not listening to her. On August 1 she took an overdose of Nurofen, paracetamol and decongestants, washed down with vodka. She wrote in her diary, "I vomited them all up. Every time I was sick I was crying. I didn't want to be sick. I wanted it to work."

Soothill believes a woman making an allegation such as Milroy-Sloan's can be convinced she is telling the truth. "A woman can get into a situation she doesn't understand and then try and make sense of it somehow by constructing a story," he says. "As people probe you, you fit in other features, make it tighter. You get more and more convinced. You begin to think it must have happened like that." Evidence to the contrary only bolsters your false belief. "The more the world is against you," says Soothill, "the more the paranoia sets in. She'll say, 'Well, nobody ever believes me!' Then she produces the very situation where that is the case. So the paranoia continues and develops. That's the cycle she's in."

Milroy-Sloan interpreted attempts to persuade her that the Hamiltons were not in Lehaney's flat as a conspiracy to shut her up. She claims to have received telephone threats to drop her allegations. She installed a panic button in her house. In her diary entry for May 24 2001, she wrote: "Someone somewhere along the line is trying everything to stop this investigation." Seeing Neil Hamilton as an influential establishment figure, she puts forward an elaborate theory involving politicians, vice rings, rent boys, tax fraud and all sorts of powerful people who will lie to protect their friend.

On August 10, a phone call gave her fresh hope. She wrote in her diary: "At 6pm today Max Clifford rang me and said, 'Do you know why I'm phoning?' I said no. I was told to switch on the TV and he would ring back. The Hamiltons had been arrested. It was all over the news. Mum rang and I told her to switch on the TV. We both watched it either end of the phone. I cried. It was such a relief, but so frightening. I picked up the kids, put

Tom in his pram, carried Summer and went round to my mum's. I left the house as it was. I knew I only had a few hours until the press came."

Neil and Christine Hamilton voluntarily attended Barkingside police station in east London at 3pm on Friday August 10. The police said that they had approached them twice before, asking if they could provide an alibi for the day in question, and they had refused to cooperate. The Hamiltons deny any such approaches were ever made. They did, however, know that such accusations were being made against them. Christine had earlier joked with friends at a dinner party, "If we were going to go to a sex party, we would go to one in Kensington or Chelsea - we wouldn't go to one in Essex."

The police arranged for the Hamiltons to be taken to a little-used police station to avoid publicity. But the couple arrived with a TV crew led by presenter Louis Theroux, who had been following them for his BBC2 documentary *When Louis Met The Hamiltons*. Neil was questioned first, for three hours, followed by Christine for 93 minutes, a relatively short time for someone arrested under suspicion of a serious crime. Rather than leaving by the back door, they chose to deliver a startling statement on the front steps of the police station to the substantial gathering of reporters. Their solicitor, Michael Coleman, revealed full, lurid details of all the sexual acts the Hamiltons were alleged by Milroy-Sloan to have committed, including Christine forcing her to have oral sex. It was an unprecedented move by someone arrested for sexual assault. So was the Hamiltons' reaction: two days later, at another impromptu press conference outside their Battersea flat, Christine pirouetted on the pavement in orange shoes, pink trousers and a red jacket, declaring, "I am wearing my normal clashing reds and pinks. I am not a blue lady", referring to the claim that she was wearing a blue dress during the alleged attack.

The papers were saturated with the story of the disgraced former Tory minister and the "cunning liar". A Sunday tabloid, which had been pursuing

her vigorously, published Milroy-Sloan's story under the name of "Miss A". Her former husbands, her uncle and other members of her family and friends all did newspaper deals. Christine Hamilton sold her story for an estimated £35,000. "Once it was out," she said, "we did the most to keep it going, as then it was the only way to get them to back down. We were absolutely determined to use the media to protest our innocence as loudly and often as we could."

Milroy-Sloan still enjoyed the anonymity granted to all those who allege rape, a measure that Neil Hamilton had voted for when he was an MP. She was in a very low mental state: she had been prescribed antidepressants and tablets to help her sleep. In the meantime, there were continual offers from reporters to break her cover. One week later, she eventually succumbed, selling her story to the News Of The World for £45,000. She received £5,000; £16,500 would go to her mother and the balance, after legal fees had been met, held in trust for her children. "I just want people to see me as I am, not the monster I've been made out to be ... I've been the victim and I should be treated like the victim, not the person who has committed the crime," she said. But the price for selling her story was high: Milroy-Sloan was now known as the woman who had accused the Hamiltons.

Very quickly, it became apparent that the Hamiltons had a cast-iron alibi. That Saturday evening, they were holding a candlelit dinner party for four friends at their Battersea flat. On the menu, along with baked fish and champagne, was a speciality of Christine's that was to become infamous - jellied Bloody Marys. Earlier, they had been shopping on King's Road in Chelsea, stopping at Waitrose. They dropped off their purchases at their flat before popping out for a quick drink at Claridge's with six other people. Their mobile phone records and receipts supported these movements.

On August 28, two and a half weeks after the Hamiltons' arrest, police announced that they

would be taking no further action against them. The following day, the Hamiltons launched libel proceedings against Milroy-Sloan. (The action was later dropped, but Milroy-Sloan, still wary, declared herself bankrupt.)

She continued to hope that Lehaney would be charged with rape, until she heard otherwise from the Crown Prosecution Service in November 2001. "I put my stereo on full, kicked the doors, punched the walls and smashed everything I could. I sat in a pile of mess and cried," she wrote in her diary. The CPS letter read, "The Metropolitan police has already decided that Neil and Christine Hamilton could not have been involved in any attack on you. It is therefore unlikely that a jury could be sure that you are correct about the other events that you have described." There was another problem with her evidence: she had said Lehaney had knelt down to rape her. Lehaney suffers from arthritis and is unable to kneel.

When I visited Milroy-Sloan that late November, she was shaking with grief and anger. A giant television sang out while two-year-old Tommy slept, sunk into a highchair in his Thomas the Tank Engine socks. It was an empty rented home, with few personal touches apart from a scattering of family photographs. At that time, Milroy-Sloan's mother was still her staunchest supporter: "I'd like to go down with a pair of garden shears to the scumbag," she said.

Milroy-Sloan herself said, "It's a cover-up, I'm sure of it." She continued to pursue her case, even to the point of ringing up London cab firms to get timings from Claridge's to Ilford, in the forlorn hope of proving that the Hamiltons could have gone there before entertaining their guests with jellied Bloody Marys. It was futile: in January 2002, Milroy-Sloan was arrested on suspicion of perverting the course of justice and for stealing property from the home of Barry Lehaney - jewellery, sleeping pills and £100 in cash. (The theft charges were dropped.)

Given the bizarre details of Milroy-Sloan's claim,

her previous convictions, her disturbed mental state and history and their cast-iron alibi, it's startling that the case against the Hamiltons proceeded as far as it did. An internal Scotland Yard inquiry found that it should have been dropped within weeks, rather than 115 days, and that the Hamiltons should never have been arrested. A more extensive inquiry has yet to report.

In the meantime, the Metropolitan police are refusing to comment, but it is difficult to find an explanation that reflects well on them. If they felt from the outset that Milroy-Sloan was spinning a story, then why did they continue to pursue the case and eventually arrest the Hamiltons? Alternatively, if, as their own guidelines require, they take seriously every accusation of sexual assault, why didn't they immediately interview the Hamiltons, rather than wait three months? The day after the Hamiltons were cleared, their solicitor made a complaint to police that the course of justice had been perverted. Five months later, Milroy-Sloan was charged.

Appropriately, as it caused much merriment, the trial of Milroy-Sloan for perverting the course of justice opened on April Fools' day. The Hamiltons have always been portrayed as buffoons, and the allegations against them reinforced every bar-room joke. The few court reporters, always irreverent, laughed openly when Lehaney admitted to taking Viagra because he "couldn't raise a gallop". Even an usher had to leave the court because she couldn't suppress her giggles. But Milroy-Sloan did not smile as she sat in the dock watching the world be amused by her misfortune. She had just one supporter, her third husband, Terry Squires, whom she had married six months earlier, after he proposed to her in McDonald's - "On my knees, in front of the whole of Grimsby!" Terry remembers.

In this trial, too, Milroy-Sloan was her own worst enemy. A week in, she made a confession: she could have made a genuine error about the Hamiltons' identity. "If I made a mistake, I'm

deeply sorry the wrong people were arrested," she said. In his summing up, Judge Smith commented, "I cannot help saying it came across to me as reluctant." He was right - in private, Milroy-Sloan claims that she was told to apologise by her solicitor in an attempt to ameliorate her sentence.

Although Judge Smith described her actions as "a cynical attempt to get money and fame" and she was widely pilloried as a money-grabbing liar ("Hamiltons' Gold-Digging Slut Gets 3 Years" splashed one tabloid), it was increasingly to her disadvantage to stick to her version of events. By the time she was arrested, it had been made clear beyond doubt that the Hamiltons could not have been in Essex, so her continued insistence that they were made her appear only more ridiculous. And her eagerness to see Lehaney prosecuted could have had no financial incentive - no newspaper would be interested in buying a story about being raped by a pensioner in an Ilford flat. The only explanation seems to be that Milroy-Sloan has convinced herself that the attacks occurred. "I know there are incidents when people sleep with somebody, then panic and make it up. I've read that myself in the papers," she says. "But I just want to clear my name. I just want people to know I wasn't lying." A psychiatric report for the court stated, "Miss Milroy-Sloan does genuinely believe that she was subjected to rape and sexual assault, irrespective of the verdict."

Milroy-Sloan is now in her third prison since conviction. She is likely to be moved again soon. She walks into the prisoners' visiting area all cheery, smiling, with lots of make-up freshly applied. She makes little waves at the other prisoners on nearby tables, sitting with their families. She herself has had few visitors; just her husband, and me. The only other person she hopes may come to see her is her half-sister Karen. She has lost contact with everyone else.

She continues to see threats against her everywhere. She says she's being "stalked", by which she means she is receiving letters in prison from strangers who don't wish her well. Though

this worries her, she seems a little proud, as if it makes her important. As if at least people have heard of Nadine Milroy-Sloan.

During my visit, her mood constantly shifts. One minute she is smiling, laughing even, then her eyes well up with tears and she struggles to finish her sentence. This particularly happens when she mentions her children: "I can't even think about them any more. I've taken down their photos. It hurts too much. It's better not to see them."

She has, she tells me, suffered yet another betrayal, and is divorcing Terry. She says he's been seeing someone else, has been trying to sell her story. She has written to Terry to let him know.

But, in fact, Terry is her one remaining ally, loyal, believing in her, and looking forward to the time when they can go to McDonald's together again. He's distraught that she is threatening to leave him, sobbing down the phone, "I love her, I love her to bits. She's my life, she's what I live for. I just wish she were here."

Milroy-Sloan was turning on Terry, as she has on others so often before. It's as if she refuses to be loved, as if she tests and taunts those who do love her until they cannot love her any more. "She poisons everyone and everything she touches," said Scott Sloan. "She is a very insecure, mixed up, unhappy girl deep down. You get the feeling she wants security, love, someone to hold her. But for some reason she can't maintain a relationship."

Terry called me again. He'd patched things up with Nadine over her mobile from prison. "She was pushing me away," he said. "She was really confused, thinking that I didn't want her." In their last conversation, she had told him that the prison authorities want her to apologise for her crime. "But she won't," he said, with pride.

Later, Milroy-Sloan wrote me a letter in her schoolgirl scrawl: "The past two years have been so traumatic, it's been an uphill struggle. Some

days it's hard to go on ... I am innocent. Naive, I accept - maybe even immature at times, and some people may not have liked me, but I never deserved to be raped. No one does. Everyone can hate me, as far as I'm concerned, but please believe me when I say, do I deserve to be raped, life destroyed and sent to prison? Does anyone?"

In fact, we have little idea what to do with women, such as Nadine Milroy-Sloan, except publicly to parade, condemn and incarcerate them. And, in the meantime, we disproportionately flaunt their false claims so that every woman's report of rape - true as well as false - is undermined. Milroy-Sloan spent her 30th birthday in prison. Shortly afterwards, Terry received an emergency call. She had tried to kill herself, again, slashing at her throat and wrists. She is in despair. She sits in her cell, mulling over and over the injustices heaped upon her. She thinks that we're neither listening to nor learning from her. And, for all her muddled and misguided reasons why this should be so, in a way, she is right.

http://www.deabirkett.com/pages/journalism_film/journalism/an_unshakeable_delusion.htm