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I Was Raped As a Teenager and It Affects Me Every Day

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This is what it's like to live with PTSD after an assault.

I was raped by a stranger in 1978 in a Manhattan subway station one morning on my way to school, when I was sixteen, in tenth grade. My rapist attacked me from behind, silencing me with a choke hold. He dragged me from the uptown C platform into an open public bathroom, punched me in the face, forced me to perform fellatio until he ejaculated, and left me bloodied and bruised.

Over thirty-five years later, I exist within the aftermath of that trauma because I live with post-traumatic stress disorder. When I hear news of the latest terrorist attack, natural disaster, or horrific sex crime, I am usually less interested in the details of the violence visited upon the victims. What I do want to know is, What will happen to the survivors when the damage is done? How will they live in the aftermath of the trauma?

Stranger-rape like mine is rare. Only 14% of rape survivors in the US don't know their rapists. Media today focuses on the narratives of the 86% who were raped by someone they know and on the surrounding context: *Was he a celebrity? Which campus? Did she say yes before she said no?*

I never wanted anyone to think my rape was about these cultural qualifications, that it was less than the violent assault that it was. When I eventually talked about what I'd lived through, I wanted people to know how vicious and horrific it was. I deserved credit for surviving.

From the moment I ran for help afterward, everyone believed what I said. They nodded, wrote in notebooks and asked what happened next without ever implying "if." My mom, still in her bathrobe, not having left for work, listened with a frozen face to the police who brought me home. My dad, in our home for the first time since the divorce, retreated into his professional journalist mode and scribbled in his own notebook alongside the policemen, as I described what happened. They all believed me—from the token booth clerk to the first responding transit police officer, to those officers who drove me home, to my parents, to the detectives from the special victims squad, especially the female detective, my real-life Detective Olivia Benson. She stood by me at the lineup when I identified my attacker, after he was arrested for assaulting another woman. They found my transit pass in his pocket. It was stained with my blood from when he punched me, my metal braces ripping my lips.

The Assistant District Attorney believed me, as did the twenty-four members of the grand jury who handed down the indictment. Giving testimony to the grand jury, the ADA and the court reporter—who kept asking me to speak up—helped me reclaim control. I never wavered in my brave determination to report, identify and testify against my attacker. He took a plea deal and there was no trial.

For decades I didn't tell other people beyond that first circle of family and law enforcement what had happened to me because I didn't want to be defined by the assault; didn't want it to be the event that broke me or the terror that I survived. But in fact it was the survival—the manner in which I lived afterward—that did become the all-defining thing about me.

After my initial display of grit, I wobbled, skipping classes, hanging with others, trying to forget something terrible. I emptied out amphetamine capsules so I could snort their contents, washing the bitter taste down with vodka and grapefruit juice. The tapeworm of PTSD slowly took hold inside me, even before it was officially included in psychology's official diagnostic manual, the DSM-III, in 1980.

For years I lived in a war-zone world with patches of repair that didn't always hold. I experienced all the symptoms of a trauma disorder. I had flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, disruptive dreams. I avoided getting close to people, felt negative, never planned for the future. I masked those dark feelings and numbed myself with anything I could find, cut myself off from people, was angry, irritable, had sudden aggressive impulses, drank, got scared, drank, panicked, drank, felt anxious, felt erased.

Sometimes all it took to rattle me was too much coffee or someone's bag grazing my back on a crowded subway car. Someone might shout in my face or I'd wear a sweater that was too tight around my neck or twenty people would jump out of the dark, yelling "Happy Birthday!" and I'd freak.

On bad days, if I was confronted with perceived danger that my system calculated I could neither fight nor flee, I became paralyzed. I went numb and disconnected. I had panic attacks and freezes that reminded me that I had been there before, triggering the sense that I was still trapped in that horrible set of past minutes. The attack felt like it was still happening, on continuous repeat.

I aligned my experience of the world with my jittery sense of self by watching things get blown up on violent TV shows, anything with a clock and people racing against it. I watched gun violence and spies running around doing spy things. It worked as a kind of sideways exposure therapy. My go-to meds were *Flashpoint*, *MI:5* (binges worked well here) and Sons of Anarchy. I also watched *Black Hawk Down* as needed. The violence felt familiar and calmed me.

I went to parties, traveled and hung out with friends, but it was always difficult. A friend commented that I didn't like people. I corrected her, saying I didn't like strangers, although a trauma disorder could make everyone seem like a stranger. I once went to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, temporarily sober—it wouldn't last. I walked through the chaotic crowds, following tradition and baring my breasts and yelling, "Throw me some beads, Mister." I lost my friends in the crowd and had a panic attack that dropped me to my knees in an empty shop where I had

found a quiet place to breathe.

I never really dated, settling for the occasional hookup. I felt safer alone, yet being physically touched was healing. Loving and being loved would make me feel safe, yet getting to that moment required a series of dangerous emergencies I wasn't sure I could conquer.

When people I'd known forever would reminisce, I often covered when I couldn't remember the past. The original attack and the re-living of the violence disrupted my ability to form memories consistently. David J. Morris, in his 2015 book, *The Evil Hours: A Biography of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,* wrote, "PTSD is often thought of as being a syndrome of remembering things too well…over-recording events that are best left forgotten. In fact, in the case of…dissociation during a traumatic event, the opposite may be true." My brain was so busy just trying to survive that my sense of time was distorted. I lost time, the trauma making years vanish the way it made me disappear.

Mediation and yoga helped me, but I also needed an expert trauma specialist. A psychiatrist and medicine saved my life. Talk therapy worked well for me and a half an Ativan went a long way on bad days as well. My doctor's prescription was to go to the gym. Burning off my pain and panic in a spin class was often the best medicine to complement whichever maintenance med we were trying. I went through several fragile and frightening adventures of titrating onto and off of numerous drugs until I found the one that worked for me. Stopping drinking over two years ago has also helped, although now I feel all the feelings the booze was masking, and sometimes that overwhelms me.

Now 54, living in Brooklyn, I live my life with PTSD. I wake up in the morning and go to work. I go to the movies and cook dinner. I go to graduate school and I talk to my best friend on the phone. I get hypervigilant on a packed subway car and my manic, mercurial co-workers can sometimes startle me, prompting a time-out in a secluded spot until I'm sure I'm breathing again.

My sense of when I need self-care is improving every week. I have more days than I used to when I believe that I have the tools to be close to someone without be scared or wanting to run. On those days I can imagine falling in love and sustaining a relationship.

I'm now able to slow down more often and live in the world as it is, not through the dark lens of PTSD. I will always live in the aftermath of violence, but I work hard every day to make repairs.