

I would like to begin by acknowledging my privilege to share my story today. It is important for me to share my journey with trauma and mental health, as well as how it has impacted my life.

April 17th - It all started with that night. That night that turned my life upside down. That night where a stranger took control of my life. After a busy but productive day, I laid in bed listening to a meditation app to calm my mind. While starting to drift off, I was abruptly awakened and paused the app when I heard something in the hallway. I laid in bed frozen with my heart pounding while I listened to footsteps slowly creak down my hallway towards my room. I remember feeling my gut sink, wishing this was some sick prank, but deep down inside I just felt doom.

I watched my door slowly creak open while a masked stranger, covered head to toe, including gloves, entered my room. As he approached me, I screamed and felt helpless knowing no one was going to hear me. He attacked me. He suffocated me with one hand gripped over my mouth and the other forcefully choking my neck. I fought back, but as he suffocated and choked me I began to feel lightheaded and my vision began tunneling in. I could no longer fight back and I gave in. It was in that moment where for the first time in my life, I accepted to myself that I was going to die. I remember thoughts running through my head thinking about all the possibilities - death, kidnapping, and sex trafficking were among many.

Once I caught my breath, I plead for my life and livelihood - in shock, repeating the phrase "don't hurt me" like a broken record. It was that night where I was forced to be violated and do whatever he said in fear of my life. The fear did not end there. After, he grabbed my neck, forced me to the bathroom and back to my room. He then forced me face down on my bed and yelled at me to not look back. As I lay there on my bed, my heart pounded. I was terrified. That was the second time that night I thought I was going to die - I half expected a bullet through the back of my head. But instead, he fled.

I share these details not to be dramatic or for pity, but because the pure terror of the night as well as my feelings, are not what permeates through in police reports. These are my most terrifying moments of my life to date and I am haunted by these memories. This is trauma. I now live my life as a trauma survivor and it is rare that a day passes where I have been free of its effects.

Many people who learn about the incident tend to focus on the first degree sexual assault. The sexual assault was traumatic in itself - and it is gross, disgusting, and violating - but what is even more traumatic for myself, and what I struggle with on a daily basis is how he shattered my perceptions of safety and threatened my life and livelihood.

A home is supposed to be a safe place - a place where you feel secure and free from attack. I used to feel that way. Now I look at homes and can only see the countless ways someone could break and enter. I bought my house, in part, to feel settled. Prior to moving to Nebraska, I moved five times in one year due to natural disasters and jobs - I was tired of moving and feeling unsettled. I felt safe, settled, and content in my home, but he stole that from me. He

also stole my home from me - I sold it after the incident, as I would never be able to spend another night in that place. Now, I feel like I am back where I started: in lingo. I moved into a studio apartment, which is a nice and lovely place, but a reminder that he stole my feelings of freedom. And by that I mean - I am not sure I will ever be able to live in a house again. As of now I don't even want to live in a one bedroom because I am scared of going asleep and not knowing what is on the other side of that wall.

Sleep is also a struggle for me now. Since that night, I have yet to have one unmedicated night of sleep. I continue to have nightmares - both nightmares specific to that night and nightmares where I am followed by a stranger. Often times I lay in my bed trying to fall asleep while replays of that night run through my mind - and that's why I continue to medicate my sleep. In addition, noises during these evening hours can send a rush of adrenaline through my body. On countless occasions I have convinced myself that someone is scaling the side of my apartment building, when in reality it is just wind or rain drops. Because of reactions like these, I have to work on retraining my brain to decipher what is actually real and logical versus how I feel, and often have to tell myself, "I am safe now."

I will probably never get the answer of *why* and *how*. Did he see me out while I was running or walking my dog? Did I ever encounter him? Did I give him a neighborly nod or did I ignore him? Was he stalking me? How long had he been watching me? I have stopped asking myself these questions, as they do no good. However, it has impacted how I interact with strangers. Now when I run or walk my dog I sometimes feel hyper alert and I over analyze passing by strangers. I ask myself the same types of questions. Did they look at me? Were they watching me? Can they figure out where I live?

I used to feel free - I used to travel across Europe by myself, and right now that feels impossible. I feel like I have a constant burden. I like to explain it to people that it feels like there is a balloon in your brain that is now filled full with air, leaving less space for everything else. I continue to feel stuck and suffocated here. I moved to Nebraska for my PhD. Some days I find it hard to continue - hard to finish what I came here for. I oftentimes have a hard time thinking and concentrating, and am frequently overwhelmed. My reactions to stress now are less than ideal and it doesn't take much for me to feel stress. These are symptoms of trauma.

It's a daily grind. My life is now a roller coaster, with no baseline, and without feelings of normalcy. I often feel disconnected from life. I have been through what seems like the lowest of lows. I have experienced times where I couldn't see past the next 10 minutes. There were times where my own thoughts scared and shamed me - times where I didn't want to be alive, but at the same time I didn't want to be dead either. I have to remind myself that I am thankful to be alive, especially on those days I don't feel alive.

Though these intense feelings have alleviated, I continue to experience triggers. Some of them I am able to acknowledge their presence and move forward, while others affect my entire day. For example, during the end meditation in an evening yoga class I was triggered. I associated meditating in the dark studio with the noise in my hallway I heard while listening to the

mediation app the night of my incident. I couldn't get my mind to stop replaying that night. The more I tried, the more intense it felt. I laid there numb with tears silently streaming down my face. In another example, on a cold day I wore a neck gaiter while running. It pressed against my throat just enough to bring up emotions and flashbacks of being suffocated. I quickly stopped, took the neck gaiter off, and put all of my energy into my run.

Though these changes and effects on my life are immensely frustrating, I have found ways to cope. I am relearning how to live, think, and enjoy life again. I am learning more about what brings me joy in life and I am now more deliberate about filling my life with those things. I have gotten into yoga, which has helped me improve my mindfulness and incorporate deep breathing into my daily life. Moreover, I have met people, who I would not have met otherwise, that continue to inspire me with their journey. I've experienced kindness from strangers. I've started to recognize the humanity in people that shines through hate and wrongdoing in our society. Overall, I continue to grieve for the old me, the old me that felt free spirited. Though I don't feel myself, and I'm not sure I will ever return to that state, and I take it day by day to reestablish what it means to be me.

I am thankful to be alive and I am thankful for abundant support. I am thankful that I had the resources to move and the resources to see a mental health professional. I am thankful my nurse, Nykia, who let me hold her hand that night in the emergency room while I cried. I am thankful for Detective Crouch for not only putting her heart and soul into the investigation, but also for her kind and calming demeanor. I am thankful for my friends and family who are here today as well as those who have supported me and kept me going in difficult times. And lastly, to my perpetrator. Maybe someday I will find the space in my heart to forgive you, but not now and not in the near future.