

PTSD from Military Sexual Trauma

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I wish my chain of command could have felt my fear and loneliness as I stared at their office building in the distance. I wanted my first sergeant to feel the pain and bruises that I wore underneath my flack vest. I hated them and was determined not to cry in front of them. I wanted to go home, but I had to finish my deployment. My attacker was charged with breaking and entering.

I'll never forget the day my shop sergeant informed me that he would be my new leader. He asked me if I had a problem. I stood there as everything kept spinning, and I felt the heat from the Iraqi sun burning with the burden.

Our chaplain sat on a stool in front of me as he came to speak to me after the rape. Deep down I wanted to believe someone cared enough to ask how I was doing. I asked the chaplain why it felt like hell. He said because God had condemned that entire part of the world. I often wonder if God condemns the places occupied by a devil that thrives to destroy the livelihood of unsuspecting soldiers. *Does every foxhole have a demon waiting inside?*

My demon from Balad, Iraq, nearly ten years ago has followed me around since. He was dark-haired and pudgy in the middle.

His bulbous figure plagued my dreams, looming over me every night—during every waking moment. I could not get rid of him; the shock was wearing off, forcing me to deal with my rape before I was ready. After my numbness faded, the prickling reminded me that I was still alive. I started to feel the pain and wanted to die. The pain took over my mind and body, and all I could feel was an overwhelming suffocation. I tried desperately to make it stop, but it was a fight I could not win.

I constantly thought about being violated and how my body was no longer my own. A greedy man with no regard for life had stolen the only thing that was truly mine. I could not understand why I had failed to kill him. I wanted so desperately to go back to that night and reach for my weapon. Over and over I thought about what I would have done differently. Each time I remembered that I had not defended myself. I sat in agony, waiting for the pain to subside. Sometimes I would stand in a hot shower for hours until I could not feel my skin anymore. I wanted the numbness back.

My nightmares began immediately when I came home to the states. Closing my eyes would transport me back to my room in Iraq—with him standing over me. I could smell his rancid breath in my face when he said that there was no reason to be afraid. I woke up in the mornings rushing to the bathroom to vomit; his disgusting breath lingered in my nostrils as I expelled what little food was left in my stomach. I threw up so much my mouth burned for hours afterward. I got to a point where I could not eat anything. Even the smell of food made me sick. I lost so much weight that it hurt to lie on my stomach in bed. I finally started

sleeping with a pillow under my stomach to keep my hipbones from digging into the springs of my old army mattress.

I spent one day a week in extensive trauma therapy, and it was the only place that I could let out my feelings. Most of the time I sat rocking back and forth as waves of nausea washed over me, my knuckles digging into the arm of the chair. When it was time to leave the counselor's office, I'd have to force my fingers apart and hold them straight or they would cramp and curl back up. I tried to listen to the professionals' suggestions for a diet that would ease the vomiting. Bananas, applesauce, tea, and toast were the only things I could eat for months. When my stomach pains became overbearing, I would open a bottle of wine and drink myself into a stupor. I never took the time to use a corkscrew, and I would dig at the cork with my knife until I could shove the cork into the bottle. The wine always had a woody taste from the bits of cork floating around.

I went to work every day, but I could only function if I had taken my medications. Meds for depression and anxiety, insomnia, and nightmares were my breakfast. I choked them down with whatever wine was left in the mornings and headed to work. I missed my physical training routinely due to severe vomiting and diarrhea. My platoon sergeant looking for me in the bathroom was irrelevant; the pills allowed me the numbness again.

The sea of green uniforms caused hypervigilance when at work. Each time someone walked by me in uniform, I looked for my attacker's face. My heart would speed up and I would start sweating heavily. I tried to stay alone indoors to escape the people

in green. Each face under a beret could be my attacker. The fear of running into him made me sick, my hands shaking so bad that I could barely hold on to the cigarettes that were my only comfort.

I would forget to turn off the lights in my car and find a dead battery. I would leave cigarettes in my hand until I felt the cherry burning in between my fingers. Forgetting the small things made my symptoms worse. I could be attacked again at any moment. I started becoming obsessed with locking and unlocking doors and windows until I could guarantee that they were all secured. I would lie on my barracks room floor and watch people's feet as they moved back and forth waiting for the sound of someone breaking into my room in the middle of the night.

I didn't see my attacker when I got home from deployment. He was transferred to a unit near his home of record and that made my life a little easier. When I transferred to a new unit, I had to tell the chain of command why I was in counseling. They deserved an explanation about why I was going to miss work, and I was in the middle of being chaptered out of the army. My supervisor from Iraq went to my new unit with me. My new platoon sergeant and captain asked her if she had known about the rape in Iraq. I stood in my commander's office waiting for a denial, but she simply acknowledged she knew. After months of verbal abuse from her about how weak I was, making me feel less of a soldier for accepting care from mental health, I learned she knew what had happened to me. I had never told anyone in my last unit. In fact, the therapist, my new platoon sergeant, and new commander were the only people I had told.

Every second of pain I suffered from my rape was overcome with fierce anger. I burned from the inside out and I wanted to kill everyone that sat back and watched me suffer. If she knew of the rape then my former chain of command had to have known as well. I hated all of them. Each day I went to work and had to see that woman. I thought about how to kill her. Nothing seemed evil enough for me and I was not willing to give another second of my future to an institution that treated one of its own so poorly. I worked diligently to complete the therapy required for my chapter and prayed daily that they would grant the paperwork necessary to send me on my way.

The light was how it started. When I did not respond to the pounding on my door, he walked around to the back and shined his flashlight on me through the window to see if I was there. I lay in bed motionless, as if paralyzed, hoping that the monster stalking me outside would go away. I was not that lucky. Within minutes I heard something slide through the crease in the door and open the lock. It was an identification card. I had used one myself to open the door to my room in Iraq when I forgot my keys. I often wonder what made me think he would go away. I was naïve to think that a predator would turn away from its prey. I am positive he stalked me for a long time before attacking. My predator waited in the sand watching me for hours and I was never aware.

During the attack I kept my breathing even, hoping that he would have a change of conscience and leave. The feeling of hands

over my mouth and around my throat forced my eyes open. His teeth biting into my skin took the psychological pain away. My rifle was within reach nestled against my bedside table, but I could not force myself to grab it. My mind was slipping away and it was easier to let the darkness engulf me. I couldn't decide if I was too nice or perhaps my smile or the way I walk was the lure that drew me in. Maybe my uniform concealed enough to be appealing to a man that dreamed of forcefully stripping a woman of everything she had. The vulnerability must have been a beacon shining in my eyes every time he saw me flounder in my new surroundings. A flush from the heat betraying my misery was enough to evoke a reaction from the demon inside him.

Ten years later I have rituals to help ease the panic attacks. I heat up a pot of water on the stove until it is boiling rapidly, then I lean over it and force my eyes open to absorb as much moisture as possible. The constant crying leaves my eyes dry as the desert where the cause of my pain originated. Each teardrop spills over into my drowning heart that will not stop beating. In the night I often ask God why he keeps me here. I cannot seem to find a reason to continue suffering. At night I lie awake for hours staring at a black ceiling, listening to my husband breathe in and out as he sleeps restfully. Sometimes I burn with anger because I am sleep deprived and the rest of the house sleeps. I flip through a variety of applications on my smart phone that I use as sleep aids. Sleep hypnosis therapy helps me drift in and out of consciousness, but the light from a passing car shines through my window and I am instantly awake and alert.

When lights flash through my window at night, I feel constriction around my throat. A snake wraps tighter and tighter with every intake of breath. I want to quit breathing, but I do not want the beast to win. I count quietly: one, two, three, four, five . . . Then, I think of five things I can feel. My toes touching the blanket, my fingers along the side of my pajama pants, the dryness of my eyes, the air from the ceiling fan moving hairs across my forehead, and the rise and fall of my stomach as I breathe. I think about five things I can hear: passing cars on the highway, my husband breathing, my cat playing with something in the hallway, the rustling of my daughter turning over in her sleep, and the beating of my heart. I think about five things I can see: the light on the other side of the window, the blinking of my smoke detector, the blades of the fan spinning, the edge of the blanket by my nose, and the faint outline of white paint bordering the bathroom door.

After going through this mantra, I move on to four things I can feel, four things I can hear, and four things I can see. Then I go to three, then two, and then one. If my panic has not subsided, I start tapping various points on my body with my fingers. I tap my forehead five times, my arms five times, my sternum five times, my thighs five times, and the inside of my wrists five times. Then, I move down to four times, three times, two times on down to the final tap. Once I am calm, I check the windows and doors to check the locks. I lie back down in bed and then I cannot remember if I locked the doors and windows. So, I get back up and check the doors and the windows. I unlock each one and lock them back several times before I tug on the doors with all of my weight and

pull up on the windows as hard as I can to ensure they do not budge. I go back to bed and cannot remember if I locked the doors and windows. Finally, I take a spray bottle of fragrance and spritz each knob and handle when I'm finished tugging on the locks. Once I go to bed, I cannot remember if I sprayed the lavender or the mint, so I get back up and unlock the doors and windows, tug on everything, and then spray the scent that I cannot smell on the locks.

I run back and forth from the bathroom to my bed like a little kid avoiding the monster that lurks beneath. I run because I cannot see what looms around me. My mind imagines my attacker behind every door and every window. I cannot sleep with the doors ajar because I imagine his eyes staring at me through the crack waiting for his next attack. After all of the curtains are pulled tight, I desperately cling to the tired feeling behind my eyes in hopes that it will take root and allow me to fall asleep.

My husband often reassures me when I become irrational. He will lock the doors with me or for me and then consistently remind me that everything has been taken care of. I frequently pick fights over small things just to keep from thinking about what is really bothering me. Arguments let me vent my anger on something in the present and I come at my husband with sharp claws. The venom that spews from my mouth hurts him, but I often find comfort in the shared pain. During these bouts of craziness, my husband sits with me until my medications take effect and I can finally go to sleep. His aid has pushed me further in my healing than a lot of trauma therapy I have been through. Even though I

often argue with him over things, I have learned that I can trust his word. He loves me and accepts my episodes as a part of the person whom he loves, and that has been the glue that has held my marriage together for so many years.

Anytime my mind is not occupied, I am more easily triggered. I get transported back to that night and can feel his weight bearing down and the hands splayed on my throat giving me the feeling of drowning. My breath goes in and out as he tightens his hold. He moves one hand from my mouth to kiss me and I feel him biting. The coppery taste of blood trickles down my tongue and I gag. My brain starts to go fuzzy from the onslaught of emotions. I quit fighting and allow my world to turn black. When I come to, I am sitting in my kitchen with a plate of food in front of me nearly a decade after the assault. The world around me starts turning again and I look at my husband and daughter, wondering if they noticed my absence.

Often, I find myself back in Iraq hearing my first sergeant telling me I am a disgrace. My nice personality is a waste and makes me a victim. Nice people are not tough and I cannot expect to be a success in the Army if I cannot man up. Everyone is ashamed of me and I cannot figure out what I've done wrong. Her scoffs and angry words fall on open ears even though it has been nearly ten years. I stare through her face as she yells, and I can feel the commander pulling my sewn-on rank off my collars. I listen to her berate me for being a whore, but my body stands as stiff as a stone gargoyle refusing to cower. The tugging of my commander's

hands nearly pulls me off of my feet, but my shop sergeant holds me steady until it is over.

I hear my husband calling to me and asking me where I am. He says that I will be in the middle of a sentence and stop talking; he asks me what I am thinking about. It is hard for me to put my flashbacks into words for him, as the act of speaking about it causes my insides to writhe. I usually fail to recollect what I was doing before the flashbacks, and I have to sit down and concentrate really hard to remember. If my husband is present, he can tell me where I left off in conversation or what I was doing. If I am alone, I accept the time I have lost and try to move on with other things that need to get done.

When I went to war my idea of the military changed. Trauma painted my world a different color and the light inside of my soul extinguished. The girl who wanted to help others became a shell. I was barely surviving, and no one seemed to notice nor care. Numbness took over and allowed my modesty to diminish. My body was still sore from the rape and my mind was fraying at the edges. I stopped thinking about daily activities and began robotically performing my duties the best that I could. When I signed out on the ledger, I would search for someone to escort me. I didn't know anyone in the unit well enough to trust them with the knowledge of my rape, so I kept it a secret. I waited for my deployment to end to get back to the states in hopes of putting it all behind me.

The day I caught a flight back to America was the first part of my saving grace. When the buses reached the unit in garrison, everyone scattered and we were given several days off. I immediately went to my assigned barracks room and lunged for the fridge that our group of Army wives had thoughtfully stocked with alcohol. When I ran out, I went to a local pub and drank myself into oblivion. After my binge ended and we processed back into the states, I caught a break. The mental health station asked if I needed to speak with someone, I said yes. They sent me a few doors down to a female civilian social worker that picked up the phone and set me up an appointment at her office. A few days later, I sat down with her and described everything that had happened to me in Iraq. She said that as a civilian her hands were tied, but that I could ask my unit for a psychological evaluation.

Before long, the dark was my friend. I stopped being friendly with other soldiers. They were blurred faces without feeling. I wanted to take white-out and smear it all over their faces just to get rid of the eyes that could not see me in the first place. I wanted their smudges to blend in with the dark canvas I was looking at daily. The abyss was closing in and I could no longer look at myself from a first-person perspective. Every day it seemed I was on the outside of my body watching myself die a slow and painful death. The lack of feeling may have saved my life, but it has continued to hinder my emotional health.

A couple of weeks after requesting a psychological evaluation, I was sitting in my first sergeant's office for the last time. I listened to how poor my performance was during Iraq, and she was

formally requesting a psychological evaluation. The reason was due to my being lethargic. She said that I smoked cigarettes all day long and stayed away from everyone in my unit. I wouldn't speak to people unless they asked me direct questions, and I was no longer an asset to the United States Army. She could tell I had injuries and there was no reason for me to continue as a soldier. I sat in the room listening to her ramble on about how I failed the Army and felt the warmth of tears falling from my eyes. My heart told me to restrain, but the more I cried, the more my vision obscured. As the tears fell, my imagination took me somewhere else: A place where there were colors and sound of waves washing the shore. Birds chirping as they flew. I watched the world happen from my dark cave next to the ocean. This became my safe place and I have held onto this image since.

The mental health department sent me through several months of intense trauma therapy including Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy. My counselor was a sweet woman who worked with me diligently to get past the first onslaught of PTSD. During one of my EMDR sessions I blurted out, "I was raped!" I didn't know until she mentioned it to me at the end of our hour. Shocked, I started sobbing in my chair. I wanted to forget. We took some extra time that day and tried to set up a plan for dealing with my pain. She had noticed the cut marks on my arms and told me that I had to start eating. She taught me self-meditation techniques to access my safe place quickly. I caught on and learned how to visualize my cave on the beach when my thoughts turned negative.

A single knife, blackberry wine, and Yukon Jack were permanent staples in my barracks room. I bought a couple of Disney cartoons on DVD and watched them over and over and over while I cut myself and drank my problems away. Eventually, the psychiatric clinic at the military hospital prescribed heavy medications and sleep aids that effectively made me a walking vegetable.

My post-traumatic stress disorder is a direct result of military sexual trauma. For years, I battled alcoholism and self-injury. Medications helped to an extent, but it was my faith in Christ that helped me meet the goal of quitting. I imagined myself wrapping my addictions in a box and handing them to Jesus. My husband used to hold me down and pull the knife out of my hands to make me quit cutting. Eventually, I stopped fighting him and was able to quit cutting. I swore off alcohol after my husband and I went on a drinking binge and he got alcohol poisoning. The fear of losing him allowed me to give up the addiction, and I have been sober since. I held on to cigarettes as a final addiction, but I stopped smoking one Christmas day, and I told myself it was Jesus's birthday gift. This imagery has helped make me whole again because I believe that Jesus died to save me from my sins and addictions.

There are a few people in my church circle that know the truth I have endured. I am scared of people treating me the way my former unit did. It is hard to share, and I do not want judgments that I fear every day. I will probably never again know my old self. Even though there are pieces that I miss, there is a reason why this

has happened. I am a better person now and I am definitely stronger. I know that I would never lie in wait for an abuser to have a change of heart. Instead, I am now a woman that will fight to the death for my safety and that of my loved ones. I am no longer scared to use whatever is at my disposal to ensure my livelihood.

There is power in overcoming victimization, and I will stand strong. If I have appointments or errands that are out of my comfort zone, I treat them as missions. I try to get in and out as quickly as possible. I rarely take food from friends' homes and I suffer from hair loss every time someone comes into my house that is not my immediate family. I will continue hosting because I want people in my life. I know that seclusion only aggravates my symptoms. It is imperative for me to stay vigilant. Post-traumatic growth cements my beliefs. I know that I am on the right track.

My therapist helped make me stronger, and I learned that it was all right to have some weaknesses. She taught me about body language and how to not look like a victim. We discussed self-defense techniques and she helped me to toughen up. For months I learned about mindfulness and positive self-talk. Before long, I was more confident and wielded a thick outer shell. She taught me how to say no effectively and how to be assertive. I no longer had to be afraid of that simple word, and I slowly turned into a warrior again.

Post-traumatic growth has taught me a lot about myself. I have spent a couple of years reverting back to my childhood and literally carried a stuffed animal everywhere. My trauma team

encouraged me to hold on to anything that would ease my symptoms, and a white bear from an Asian marketplace fit the bill. This stuffed bear that has soaked up thousands of my tears has been one of my items of comfort for nearly a decade. A bear to make me feel safe has done that and so much more. My bear was there for all of the therapy and moved on to be in the hospital bed when I delivered my baby girl. I revel in knowing that a simple inanimate object has carried me through some very tough times. It has become a talisman of sorts, and his furry outside holds most of my deepest secrets. His name is Lumpkin, and I have sprayed him with more aromatherapy to keep my senses in the present. He watches me sleep and sits with me when I write the hard stuff. I can hug him when I need a tangible hug from something that does not ask any questions about why I need him.

My confidence allowed me to get my Bachelor of Psychology degree. When I started reading about Jesus' story, I learned I was not alone in my suffering. Although he was not sexually abused, his abuse and death comforted me because I no longer felt alone. Someone in history had experienced the pain that I have had to endure for years. Every word of his story became monumental to my post-traumatic growth, and I got a bit of my old self back. I became a fighter for a different war. A war where my divine chain of command loved me unconditionally, and that was the single best revelation since the day I discovered that the rape was not my fault.

Post-traumatic growth reminds me of the ocean. It mesmerizes me how the earth looks cut off from the beach. When I am driving

toward the water, the endlessness on the horizon makes my heart flip, and I feel like I am almost free. The closer we get, the more excited I become until finally reaching the shore to dip my toes in the water. I set my sights on freedom from pain, and with prayer to Jesus, he will help me reach the shore. Sometimes I want to give up when an obstacle blocks my view from the shore, but I remember that Jesus went up the mountain to pray to God. I use my personal mountains as places to pray. The ups and downs of my condition have brought me closer to God because I find myself praying each time the crests peak and the valleys dip. When I see a new level stretch of future ahead, I praise my Lord for seeing me through.

I can have a relationship with God on my terms. Fellow Christians do not occupy the space between God and me. The only person who stands between God and me is Jesus Christ, and he has become my best friend. When my symptoms become unmanageable, I talk to Jesus. If I cannot make myself get out of the house, I tell Jesus about it and know that he understands. On the days I am suffering and cannot bring myself to church, I know that it is all right because Jesus took personal time and prayed on the Mount of Olives. I can go outside and spend time with my farm animals where I feel closest to heaven, and I remind myself that it is perfectly acceptable to call out to God and ask him why. I may not hear the answer, but I know that Jesus called out to God too during his suffering. He is my leader and I his follower. I can be still and know that he is taking care of me. In the last few years I have let Christ enter the secret cave in my mind. I can open up to

him and not feel threatened. We exist in a place no mortal can penetrate, and I allow him to hug me and tell me that everything is all right.

Some of the biggest leaps in my growth had Jesus at the center, and I find myself fortunate to have finally found a method that helps me heal. I understand that not everyone turns to Christianity, but this is what has helped me the most. I often think those of us with PTSD have to hold onto whatever we can to survive.

In the beginning, the things I held onto were destructive and that was no way to live. The amount of positive growth I have had is a miracle. I have been fortunate to find something that helps me have a brighter future, and I hope and pray that all of my fellow veterans find whatever it is that heals them from the inside out.