

Learned Hopefulness

I believe that some of the most interesting people in the world have experienced adversity. Big or small, adversity makes us rethink, reevaluate. It makes us strip down each wall in our lives and build them back up again. It makes us live for something, something greater than just “well, this is ok.” Without one, you might never question the way you have been told how to live your life. You might wake up one sleepless night, roll over, look at the life that you have built and think, “how the hell did I get here?” When you have experienced adversity, you never think that. You know exactly how you got there.

I experienced this my senior year of college. It left me breathless and wordless. It gave me an illness that hides inside of me, pulling me down. I often wish that I could beg for a different way to find my purpose, a different way to seek all the things that I now want in life. But unfortunately, this is it and this is how it happened.

I walked to the party alone, my heels clanking on the sidewalk. It was a cool night, the beginning of autumn at Notre Dame. Leaves were falling all around me and I felt peacefully alone. I turned to walk in the middle of the street with the rows of trees lining either side of me and the full moon above. I had the same three lyrics stuck in my head, replaying over and over. 'If I follow the light that I deem the brightest/ I won't believe it/ it's always like this.' The feeling that I had that night is one I can never really explain to anyone. Words and images don't do it justice, but people ask me constantly, “What did you feel that night? Were you afraid?”

The answer to that is no, I was not afraid.

I had looked up at the sky to admire the clear Indiana night. I'd never seen a sky quite as big as Indiana's. The stars are brighter and sharper than in New York, where I'm from.

When I looked down, he was standing right in front of me.

It happened fast. I couldn't react and I just lay there. Whatever was happening to me and whatever he was doing I couldn't feel. I was in pain. I knew that. But I just lay there, watching him. He ripped my tights off and that's when I completely left my body. I closed my eyes and after what felt like a lifetime, he was gone. I got up and continued walking to the party, not totally aware yet of what had happened to me. The feeling, that infinite amazing feeling, I would never experience again.

I was surrounded when I got to the party and when I felt my face I realized why; I was sobbing hysterically. I collapsed instantly to the ground.

Someone picked me up and put me in my best friend Allison's bedroom. She was at her boyfriend's at the time, but when I heard a knock I knew that she had returned. She ran into the room and hugged me. I had been sitting on the bed, staring at her book collection for ten minutes, wondering how I got there. Allison had a wall in her room that had bookcases from floor to ceiling. It took hours to read all the titles alone.

“What the *hell* happened?” Allison's voice interjected my silent, meaningless thoughts.

“How many hours have you spent reading all these books?” I asked.

“Maria, what happened?” Allison said softly, taking in my twisted dress, ripped tights, and leaves adorning my hair.

“No really, how long?” I said, crying quietly.

“Oh, Mar.” Allison slowly spoke these words, drenched in more pity that I've ever heard in my life. Her eyes watered. “I didn't think it would happen to any of us.”

That year there were a series of rapes. There had been three so far in just the few months since school had begun. I was the fourth. I was also the only one who could identify my rapist or, more likely, the only one that wanted to.

I first saw him on the football field. He was proclaimed the 'golden boy' for Notre Dame that year. At Notre Dame, this is basically being crowned king of the school. Every girl was screaming his name as he rushed 50 yards to score a touchdown within 5 minutes of kickoff. I swear the gold on his helmet shone a little bit brighter than everyone else's that day. Henry Harris, the future of Notre Dame.

But now all I can see when I think of him is the way he was standing that night. In a dark hoodie and jeans standing directly in front of me, eyes as cold and dark as the night. I can still remember the look on his face, so blank and expressionless. So different from the warm smile he had given the stands that day after scoring his touchdown. Sometimes I like to think someone hypnotized him, that it wasn't his own thoughts or actions. This somehow made things easier to think about when I thought back to that night.

A slew of people asked me to tell my story, again and again. Nurses, campus police, parents, friends, and administrators.

The same question, “Are you *completely* sure it was Henry?” Yes. I was sure.

I'd been in love only once before, with a boy named Trey. The first time I saw him, he was leaning up against Five Guys and smoking a cigarette. His hair was flaming red and he was tall. My friend Kelly knew him and sprinted towards him, practically jumping on top of him to give him a hug. He smiled at her in a way that I had always wanted someone to smile at me. We fell fast, and hard. We were 18 and so wide-eyed, so quick to believe. Our sophomore year, the relationship ended as quickly as it had begun. He finally made it on to the football team and girls came with the position. Dozens of girls with long blonde hair and mini skirts surrounded him at every party we went to. His ego shot up, and the guy I had once known was long gone.

I hadn't really talked to him since that year, which is why I was shocked to see his face through my peephole at 9 am on Saturday. “Maria?” He said. I opened the door. “Trey... What's up?” I said.

He looked uncomfortably at the ground, then back up at me. “I need to talk to you about something.”

Ten minutes later Trey was sitting on my futon, the awkward 'how have you been?' conversation over, he finally approached why he had come over that day.

“I heard.” He spoke slowly.

“What did you hear?” I said, knowing exactly what he had heard.

“Henry's a dick, I know. But I need you to think about this,” he said.

“I don't understand. What would I need to think about?” I looked down at my shorts, pulling a thread off of them. “Notre Dame football isn't exactly something that's good to mess with, I'm just saying.” He said this sternly and then immediately put his head in his hands. “I mean shit Maria, if this is about what happened with us...”

“Are you *fucking* kidding me?!” I looked up to see Allison standing in the doorway, a look of rage in her eyes, hair wild from sleeping on my floor.

Trey stood up quickly and looked at her.

Allison walked in and everything went slow motion. She stood in front of him for a couple of seconds, her five-foot stature looking positively ridiculous next to his height. She was glaring though so deeply into him I thought that he might explode.

Her hand went up swiftly and smacked him directly across the face, a bright red palm print left behind.

Trey reached up to cover it in pain, or maybe embarrassment.

“Get the hell out of here. And don't talk to *her* again.”

He left without saying a word.

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In 1974 a South Bend woman got gang raped by 6 football players. Some were suspended for only a year, and then immediately placed back on the football team. The woman spent at least a month in psychiatric care. Two years later, two of the same six football players were found raping a student by a resident advisor. When the woman was brought to an official at St. Mary's she was told to, "shut up and mind your own business." These were a few of the many horror stories we all knew and played over and over again when we were out, surrounded by men, and alone. Everyone knew they would cover sexual assault up as best they could at this school. Everyone knew, and no one talked.

I didn't ever feel that I had another option. Well, Allison actually really didn't give me any other options, driving me straight to the hospital. But I also didn't feel the need to hide it; I didn't feel as much of a tie to the football team as maybe some did. I also didn't feel as much fear for the years to come, perhaps because I was a senior and had established friends. There was just never any doubt that I would tell.

Of course when you tell, everyone knows. Wherever you go people look at you and think, "Hey, that's the girl that was *raped*." You are no longer the other thousand qualities that make up your existence, your being. Then the media joins in. They take the basis of what you are and they slap these labels on you, dehumanizing you.

Do you see, now, why people stare? Why I stopped leaving my apartment? Why I had to start talking to someone, other than Allison? Why I would wake up at 2 am screaming in fear of something I couldn't identify? Why I stopped doing stand-up? Why I stopped laughing? Why I stopped even getting out of bed?

Time, unfortunately, waits for no one. I felt that time was standing still, that I was not changing or feeling anything anymore, but around me people were doing all of these things. They were going to football games, they were getting drunk at tailgates, and feeling the magic of Notre Dame. They were cheering on the running back that was leading us to more wins that we had ever had. Every day there he was, running on the football field, scoring touchdowns, being the golden boy. Henry Harris remained untainted by the rape accusation that hung over his head. But for me, Notre Dame was no longer a welcoming beacon of hope. I didn't sing in the stands or wear green and gold every weekend. The magic was lost, because everyone was cheering for the person that had taken my hope. No one was cheering for me.

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In mid-November I was applying mascara in the bathroom of LaFortune when a tall blonde girl walked in and stopped dead in her tracks. "Hi." She spoke softly, looking at the ground. "Uh, hi..." I turned back to the mirror, figuring it was just

another person ogling at me since the incident. “Can I talk to you?” She looked up, hopeful. I turned and noticed her hands shaking. “Yeah... I suppose.” I snapped my purse shut. “Who are you?”

Her name was Lauren Graham and she was a freshman. She spoke softly, slowly as she told me her story while clutching a cup of coffee. “It was three nights into welcome week, and I left to go to a guys' room with some friends. We were all drinking and then Henry walked in. Every girl in the room was trying to get his attention, but for some reason he kept looking at me. We started dancing and he was really touchy but I just kept thinking to myself, Lauren this is Henry *Harris*. We started kissing, and I thought that was okay and everything, I couldn't believe he had chosen me I guess. I just, I feel so silly saying that now, and god I, I went to his room and then he was on top of me so fast and—” She stopped, eyes filling with tears. She looked into her coffee as though it could give her strength to continue. I sat awkwardly, unsure of what to do. Amidst the silence, I observed her. She was so young, so fearful and different from myself. I felt this swell of emotions, a drastic need to protect her from the world. I suddenly found myself embracing her as she sobbed into my sweater. “Have you told anyone?” I whispered. I felt her head shake no against my shoulder. I cried with her then. I didn't even know who she was until ten minutes prior.

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I spent the next two weeks until the trial mostly in bed, in a cave-like state with pillows and blankets. Outside was the beginning of the numbing cold that sweeps over the midwest after the first snowfall. Allison came in and out, yelling at me to come to whatever party or come eat something or try to make me laugh. But I couldn't, I just kept thinking about Lauren and I, intertwined together against this being, this person that had changed our lives forever.

The night before the trial, I was taking a walk when I came up upon a couple making out beneath a tree, clearly about to continue into something further. I averted my eyes fast, but they had seen me.

“Isn't that the girl they say you raped?” I heard the girl whisper.

“Maria?” A guys' voice called out towards me. I turned. It was Henry Harris.

I stood, shocked. Once again, I couldn't move. There was something in particular about him that made every cell in my whole body stop still, even my heart felt that it was no longer working properly. He came towards me and I wanted to run but my knees were locked straight.

“Hey, look I just wanted to apologize about that night. I mean ... the trial ... it's all so silly isn't it? A bit of an overreaction by Notre Dame?”

I stood staring, my ability to speak disappearing with the wind that blew against me. Suddenly, I was so cold, colder than I had ever been in my life.

He smiled, slowly walking towards me and I was taken immediately back to that night, my mind once again leaving my body. Then, slowly things came back. I looked to the girl on the ground, staring up at me inquisitively. So young, and so confused. I felt the same overwhelming rush of protectiveness towards her that I had with Lauren two weeks prior. All the sudden I felt movement, and a surge of warmth through my body, a strength that I was not aware I had. I walked straight towards Henry Harris, holding on to everything in my life that he had made worse. I threw all this towards him, and I felt his eyes widen as I drew closer. I stopped, directly in front of him, my leg moving upwards. I kicked him but he grabbed my leg on the way up. The girl sitting on the ground let out a small scream. Henry fell to his knees with me, a look of rage now entering his eyes.

“Bitch.”

He said this with a demeaning, chilling quality that made me feel as though I was not a real being, but below that. The girl to my right had now begun running away. It was only 9 pm and campus was not completely empty, therefore the girl returned quickly with some University official or another. They found me pinned under Henry Harris, blacked out from shock.

My case against Henry was postponed, perhaps indefinitely, after he was expelled from Notre Dame. I finally saw something from Notre Dame, some sort of action. I still struggle daily with the fact that he's still out there, however in the end it's all I ever really needed. It made getting out of bed easier, knowing that I would not see him. Knowing that he wasn't being worshipped every Saturday while I lay in the shadows of his glory. The thing about adversity is that you don't ever completely recover from it. You can feel stronger, feel better, but that sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach every time you walk alone reminds you that you are still afflicted with it. Your heart is harder to open, your mind less accepting, and your judgment crueler. All these things still remind me that change is still imminent, that I am still recovering.

In April I went to a party with Allison, the first one I had been to in months. Trey was there in the corner, and I raised my hand to wave at him. Allison said under her breath, “Dick.” I rolled my eyes and pulled her towards the kitchen to get a drink. We took tequila shots and as the hot alcohol ran down our throats, we grinned at each other with anticipation for whatever was to come. Her boyfriend came in, threw his arms around both of us and slurred, “You guys, we're sooooo young.” He was right. We were so young.