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Author

Fangmeyer, Amy I.

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THE CACTUS

By

Amy Irene Fangmeyer

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APPROVED

Dr. Katie Ford
Department of Creative Writing

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair
University Honors

ABSTRACT

This capstone is a creative project centered on recounting my first-hand experience of sexual assault. By creating this memoir, I intend to do several things. The most prominent affect I hope to achieve is to serve as a voice for those who remain silent about their assault out of shame and/ or fear. This is especially important when considering a large population of college age students, particularly my peers, have had some form of experience with assault. I also intend to expand on the originally perceived sexual assault narrative. Too often narratives will conclude after the assault. My intent is to expand further by including the psychological effects the assault had on me the following day. In including this, it will allow for survivor's experience and healing process to be better understood by the general public. Although these things could be achieved through a more research-oriented capstone, the memoir formatting will allow for readers to step into the shoes of a survivor and understand the full implications of what it means to experience this trauma. By doing so, I intend to continue the conversation and to inspire change in how society views survivors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Cactus—a small, shitty bar in a small, shitty desert town—this small, shitty desert town is my home, which I eventually grew to love. This bar was on the corner of Two Mile and Adobe, prime location to pool in the constant flow of young Marines who got stationed in the Devil’s Armpit, as we often called it due to the extreme heat of the summers. Twentynine Palms has been the perfect location for combat training. This desert holds similar conditions to combat zones overseas: hot, dry, and deadly—too many have died during training. No Marine wants to be sent here.

“What’s up pretty lady!” Channelle greeted the bartender. Channelle’s an alcoholic—frequenting this bar because it’s close to her house. “Get me and my friend here a Blue Moon.”

“Sorry hun, we’re fresh out of Blue Moon. You want something else on tap?”

“How can you be out of Blue Moon” Channelle gasped. “Fuck. You got a preference, Amy?”

“I don’t drink much. Just pick something else on tap, I’ll drink it regardless,” I said.

It was a Friday night. The bar was filled with groups of already drunk Marines and local girls, many of whom I grew up with, shooting their shot at trying to snag a crayon eater (as we would refer to Marines) for the night. There were two small rooms, one had the bar and “dancefloor”, playing obnoxiously loud, over played music with enough flashing lights to throw anyone into an epileptic fit. The other room had a few tables to sit at and two pool tables, nothing exciting. I already hated The Cactus. I preferred my hippie inspired, western saloon in Joshua Tree, not this nightclub wannabe.

“Let’s sit on the patio. It’s really hard to hear in here,” I told Channelle after she finally decided on some bland beer.

The patio had a few metal tables with matching metal chairs, and a section near the back with a cushioned bench. It was poorly lit—

Did I say poorly lit?

I meant, barely lit. The only light came through the doorway leading to the bar, a few neon signs in the window, and a small string of Christmas lights that lit the area. Naturally, the lit and comfortable spots were taken. So we settled with the only semi-available table.

“Dude, I’m so proud of you! You killed it on stage tonight. You were so believable. I was really able to feel your pain. It all seemed so real. You even cried. Crying on cue is fucking hard!” Channelle had taken me out for congratulatory beers after seeing my production of Tennessee William’s *The Glass Menagerie*.

“You see, the secret is in the method. I call it—‘The Fangmeyer Method!’” I laughed, ‘The Fangmeyer Method’ is a joke I created with a few of my cast members, but I still love to tell it seriously when explaining how I get into character.

“— ‘The Fangmeyer Method’ is kind of like a mix of Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner’s methods. It’s all about acting naturally, as Meisner says but it’s more than that. It is truly becoming your character and making them a separate entity from yourself—”

I drone on and on about this for at least half an hour. The name may have been a joke, but my acting method is all business.

“Man, you’re so smart. You graduated college, you’re about to abandon me and go off to university, you’re in an amazing play. I’m proud, dude. Everyone! look at my pretty friend. She’s in a play and you should all go see it!”

“Shut the fuck up and sit down, Channelle.”

...

I certainly was not pretty, like she had announced. I was still in my stage makeup and the curls in my hair had a mind of their own without the constant touch-ups. To this day, I remember the outfit. That night is scorched into my memory—even the memory of my very unusual choice of pairing brown ‘dad sandals’ with black high-waisted shorts, a black halter top with white skeleton hands printed over my breast, and an oversized red flannel. That was my go-to outfit.

Now, it is stashed away in a box, buried in the middle of the desert.

...

She resumed her seat but not for long. “Let’s get another beer!”

We returned to the bar, got a second round of piss-water beer, and returned to the table. Seemingly out of nowhere, Channelle looked excited and she darted up from her seat.

“Oh my God, Karl! Come here, come meet my friend!” She flagged this ‘Karl’ guy over. He was a tall, maybe 6’1, scrawny white guy who radiated hippie vibes from not only his outfit, but also from his obvious lack of deodorant. To put bluntly, he stank.

“You know I come here all the time, and so does he. We’re drinking buddies. His name’s Karl.”

“With a ‘K’,” he interjected.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s Karl but spelled with a ‘K’,” He explained. From then on, we did not refer to him as simply “Karl,” we referred to him by his proper title, “Karl with a ‘K’.”

Karl with a ‘K’ sat at the table and joined into our meaningless conversation. As the night progressed, more people filled the bar, including the patio. The amount of people there and the loud music made it harder for me to hear. I grew tired of speaking, and since I couldn’t hear, I began to communicate purely in sign language.

BEER DON’T-WANT. I FINISH. DRUNK, DON’T-WANT.

“Amy, are you seriously signing at me right now!” Channelle laughingly exclaimed.

YES. I SIGN. CANNOT HEAR.

“I have no idea what you’re trying to say,” Channelle said.

“Oh! I’ve always wanted to learn sign language. How do you sign ‘You’re beautiful?’” Karl asked.

“To sign ‘You’re beautiful’, it would look like this—” I responded to Karl with a ‘K’, as I demonstrated the sign.

YOU BEAUTIFUL. Karl with a ‘K’ signed.

RIGHT. I both signed and shouted in response.

YOU BEAUTIFUL.

RIGHT.

YOU BEAUTIFUL.

“Yo dog, you’re signing it right!” I eventually shouted at him, unaware that was his way of trying to flirt with me. Seeing Karl with a ‘K’s failing attempt, a broad-shouldered Marine sauntered over. *Well hello there. You, sir, are coming home with me tonight.* I thought to myself.

“Hey, you’re cute. Let’s go grab a drink,” the Marine said to Karl with a ‘K’. “I’m stealing your man,” and off the two went. *Well, damn. I guess he’s gay.*

Chanelle then mentioned to me that she invited a friend to join us and that she was going to wait in the parking lot for her. She insisted I stay at the table and reserve our seats. I complied. Still having roughly half of my second beer left, I decided to slowly sip the rest of it, despite my better judgement telling me not to.

“So, I saw you signing. That’s pretty cool. I’m Mike,” the guy sitting near me said as he extended his hand out to shake hands.

Mike and I chatted while I waited for Chanelle to return with her friend. There was something about him I didn’t like. Mike was nice. He laughed at my jokes and gave small compliments, but he also seemed to have tried too hard to impress me, claiming that he and his buddy brewed the beer I was drinking.

“Tastes like piss water,” I exclaimed. He was not amused. “What’s wrong, Devil Dog? Cat got your tongue?”

He seemed surprised that I knew this military slang, but it’s hard not to when you’ve lived here as long as I have. That’s the way Marines talk, they shoot the shit at each other with an arsenal of insults but it’s all in good fun. Even when you’re not a Marine, it’s said so often, it’s part of the town’s vernacular.

Realizing his efforts were in vain, he turned back to his group and ignored me for the remainder of the night.

After what felt like forever, Chanelle finally returned.

...

Wait. Was that the order? Did I meet Karl with a ‘K’ before or after Mike? Was this the first or second time Chanelle left me? Wait. Does that mean she left three times? Everything is blurring together. Everything is fading into black. The harder I think, the less clear it becomes.

...

The second time Chanelle left was longer. She went to wait for her boss and his wife for some reason. She left for about thirty minutes. *Could it have been longer?* She returned much tipsier than I last recalled. She sloppily slammed another beer down in front of me.

“My boss is the best. He bought us more beer!”

They sat and chatted with us for a bit. I took a few sips of what was now my third beer. *Ugh, this is gross. I'm really finished this time.* As the night continued, that third beer slowly escaped my mind—I left it out of sight on the table, rather than keeping it glued to my lap like the previous two.

“Don’t forget about your beer!” Chanelle’s boss said as his grubby fingers gripped the rim of my glass, beer splashing over and drenching the tips of his fingers as he slid it over to me. *Gross.*

“Oh yeah. Thanks!” I said sheepishly as I grabbed the glass and released a faint nervous laugh.

...

No. I did not drink anymore of that beer. I thought I was being smart. I wasn’t drugged.

Not at least,

by him.

...

Eventually Chanelle’s boss wandered off into the bar—I did not see him again that night. After he left, Chanelle grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me from my seat.

“Come on! There’s some seats open over here,” she said, dragging me over to the cushioned section.

It wasn't as comfortable as I thought it would be. The seats were made of a hard, firm material; there was nothing soft about it. Just as I finally settled into a bearable seated position, the broad-shouldered Marine from earlier in the night approached me.

"Hey! I was hoping to run into you," he said as he sat uncomfortably close to me on the bench. I was puzzled. Just a few hours prior, he snatched Karl with a 'K' by the arm and disappeared into the bar. I was certain he must have been gay by what seemed to have been obvious flirting. "Sorry about earlier. Didn't mean to interrupt your conversation, but that man was floundering. I had to help a man out before you completely shut him down. He's definitely into you. Give the kid a chance."

If this was his attempt of being a hype-man for Karl with a 'K', it certainly wasn't working. The only man there who seemed even slightly enticing for the night was this Marine, who was evidently trying to hook me up with one of the least enticing men at the bar. I was disheartened. Just as I decided to try and throw this Devil Dog a bone in an attempt to win over his favor, Karl with a 'K' made his way over. *Fuck.*

"Well, it was nice chatting with you. Good luck!" Just before he rose from his seat, he paused. Suddenly remembering something, he leaned in close and in a loud whisper said, "By the way, watch out, he smells real bad."

He rose, offered his seat to Karl with a 'K', and disappeared into the night.

By this point, my gut was telling me something was wrong. Something didn't feel right. The alcohol must have finally caught up to me, I was beginning to feel drunk.

...

But how? I only had two beers. Nothing more, except for those few sips of the third one. I couldn't be drunk. Something wasn't right. What could this be? What was happening?

...

Karl with a 'K's stench was sobering enough to snap me back into reality. He had sat down unbearably close. The onion-like smell of his body odor wafted into my nose. *God, you're gross.*

Chanelle welcomed his intrusion and filled him in on all the details he missed about her last shitty Tinder date. This conversation continued long into the night. I had listened attentively, forcing myself to not think of the queasiness and discomfort I had been feeling. Before long Chanelle excused herself to go to the restroom. I rose to join her. She insisted I stay. She claimed she would only be gone for a moment— there was nothing to worry about.

After she left, Karl with a 'K' directed his attention towards me. He stretched one of his lanky arms behind me, gently placing his hand on my waist. Shivers flew up my spine. This wasn't the tingling sensation you feel with someone you're attracted to; this was the kind of signal your body gives to alert you of potential danger. Being in a drunken daze, my mind could not register the warning from my body.

PING

It was a message from Chanelle.

“Hey girl! I had to bail. I made it back home. Have fun with Karl with a 'K'!” She ended her message with a winking emoji. Have *fun*. I knew what she was insinuating. A sense of panic began to envelop me. She had promised to be the designated driver and I was in no condition to drive.

...

Why would she do this? How could she not have seen how drunk I was? Was I even drunk?

Everything was dizzying. Was this from the panic *or* could it be from something else?

...

I was visibly distressed. Karl suggested stepping outside, away from the claustrophobic crowd—it would allow for more fresh air. I gathered my belongings and the two of us exited through the bar. We were outside, away from everyone. It was a nice night out. Long after the sun sets, warmth still lingers in the August air, even at one in the morning. The air was still, and the sky was clear. Most nights, every star would be visible in the sky. However, on this night, the sky was illuminated by a full moon. Staring at the moon, a feeling of calm washed over me. I have always resonated with the moon. For a moment, the feeling of impending doom had subsided. I could breathe.

“It’s a nice night, how about we take a walk around the Historic Plaza to try and sober you up, so you can head home?” Karl said.

“Okay.”

The Historic Plaza was a small business center, having businesses that ranged from: a hair salon, an art supply store, a tanning salon, a vape shop, a liquor store, and The Cactus. These businesses were aligned in two strips with a parking lot in between. The Cactus was on the strip that went along Adobe Road. Karl and I walked to the corner and turned down Two Mile. He insisted that walking around the parking lot would be too short of a walk and instead, we should walk around the back of the plaza—the back was open desert.

We made our way behind the plaza. We weaved through jumping cholla and creosote bushes, each step accompanied by the crunching sound of the grainy sand beneath our feet. The queasiness crept its way back to my consciousness. I needed to sit down. Still being close to the buildings, we walked over and sat on the concrete loading dock behind the liquor store.

The panic feeling began to boil over. Something was definitely wrong. I couldn't breathe. My vision blurred. I started to tremble. I laid back. I propped my head against my bag—hoping to calm my nerves. I closed my eyes.

...

Darkness consumed me as I drifted out of consciousness.

...

Everything was black. There was a deafening silence. It was like being in a nightmare, where you are suspended in space and time, infinite blackness in all directions—you scream, but no sound escapes your lips.

There was a jolting pain in my groin that eased me back into consciousness.

The first sensation to return was sight. I blinked my eyes open. My vision was blurred. I could make out a concrete wall. I shifted my eyes up. I could see the light of the full moon creeping in through a crack in the roof over the loading dock. I could have sworn I laid on my back, facing towards the ceiling, but now, I was on my stomach, head to one side.

The next was sound. Everything was ringing at a high frequency. I listened close—

SWISH. SWASH. SWISH. SWASH.

SMACK. SMACK. SMACK. SMACK.

What a weird sound.

Then it was touch. The concrete was cold against my cheek. The corner of the slab piercing into my stomach. A tight grip latched to my hips, like claws of a lion being dug into its prey.

Burning thrusts—

in and out—

in and out.

...

I don't understand. What's happening?

...

I felt groggy. I knew I needed to leave—I knew I needed to stop whatever was happening. I was paralyzed in fear, yet I was calm. I hadn't fully grasped what was happening.

I laid there, concentrating on simply being able to move my fingers—then my wrists—then my arms. It could have been a minute, it could have been thirty, time seemed to have ceased to exist. When I regained mobility in my arms, I reached behind me and jabbed into his hips with my index fingers. He jumped back. I rolled onto my back and sat up. I looked at him. His lips moved but I could not hear much past the ringing in my ears.

I looked down. My shorts were unbuttoned but still on.

I counted as I refastened them:

one...

two...

three.

All buttons accounted for. The leg hole was torn and cocked to the side—I was exposed. I readjusted them as best as I could. I turned to grab my bag—the content was scattered. In one fell swoop, I gathered everything. I did not bother to check that everything was still there. All I needed were my keys. I unzipped the front pocket of my messenger bag and felt around. My fingers found the cold and jagged edges of my keys. *Thank God Chanelle didn't take my car.* I gripped my keys tightly, allowing them to poke out between my fingers just like my mama taught me to do if I didn't feel safe. I stood up and hastened my way back towards the bar.

When I got around the building—when I entered back into the parking lot, my mind was still foggy, my vision tunneled, I zeroed in on my car. *Only a hundred yards.* Only a hundred yards between me and leaving. Only a hundred yards between this nightmare and being able to lay in my bed and wake from this. Only a hundred yards.

The night was winding down and people were leaving the bar. I stepped into the parking lot, my mind only thinking of the hundred yards.

HONK

I stopped and turned my head. Two blinding headlights shone in my eyes; the car horn screeched.

“What the hell are you doing stepping out in front of cars like that? I could have killed you!” The driver shouted towards me. I was frozen in fear. Someone walked up behind me and placed their hands on my shoulders.

“Sorry! She's had a little too much to drink tonight, lost sight of her for a minute. Have a good night.” It was Karl. He shoved me out of the car's path.

“You gotta be more careful. You could have been hit.” I ignored him. I kept walking. I needed to get to my car. I needed to get home.

Seventy-five yards

Fifty.

“Hey, are you sober enough to drive?” I said nothing. “You think you could give me a ride home? I live near the Bowladium.”

“No,” I said faintly. I was not ‘sober’ enough to drive, nor did I want to drive him home.

Twenty yards.

Ten.

“Are you sure you can’t take me home? I can spot you some cash.”

Finally, I reach my car. I unlocked the driver-side door and quickly entered. Before I could close the door, Karl’s hand gripped the top tight, preventing me from closing it.

“Do you really think you should be driving?”

I just wanted to leave. But this man—this monster still stood in my path. I slammed my hands onto the horn. Startled, he released my door. I caught hold of it and slammed it shut. I locked the door immediately, threw my key into the ignition, and peeled out of the parking lot. Luckily, I only lived a street away.

I pulled into my gravel driveway. The gravel made the drive bumpy, vibrating the entire car. The pain began to set in. Each bump pressed my butt into the seat, creating an intense pain which served as a bitter reminder of what just occurred. As I approached the house, I fumbled through my keys until I found the right one. I navigated my way through the pitch-black house, being careful to not wake up my grandparents. I found my way to my room and stripped myself naked—tossing these soiled clothes into an empty box. In the morning they will be buried. But

as for then, I needed to sleep. It was too late to shower, so I laid in my filth and drifted off to sleep.

PING

I awoke late in the morning to a message from Channelle. “Good job last night! Karl’s a good guy. You had some good dick stuck in you!”

That message confirmed to me that the event of the night before was not simple a nightmare I dreamt up—it was true, a true living nightmare.

I texted her back, “I dunno, man. I don’t think I was sober enough last night.”

“Oh shit. Are you okay?”

...

I never responded to her after that. To this day, I have yet to speak to her, despite her numerous attempts to go on “one more bar run” with her before I left for university.

...

I wrapped myself in a blanket and dragged myself to my bathroom. It’s small and extremely claustrophobic. Typically, I would leave the door open to allow for room to breathe since there’s another door at the end of the hall to allow me enough privacy to do so, but not on this morning. On this morning I was filled with shame and disgust and closed myself in to the four-by-four room. I stood in the cramped room, unsure if I should urinate first and have to see what damage was left on my body or if I should begin cleaning up and have to face myself in the mirror. I chose to urinate but was too scared to face the truth. I removed the blanket draped around me and balled it into my hands and covered my face as I did my business to muffle the sounds of my sobs.

I needed to shower, but by that time, my grandparents were awake. The shower was in the bathroom on the other side of the house. I couldn't walk past them knowing I was a mess and still in my stage makeup, which by that point had to have been smudged. Still, I couldn't face myself in the mirror. I was ashamed. I draped the blanket back around me and sat back down on the toilet. I took out a makeup wipe and proceeded to wipe away whatever I could. Then I cautiously hunched over the sink and began rinsing away any makeup I might have missed.

I walked back to my room and grabbed a tee shirt and a pair of sweatpants from the laundry basket of clean clothes I hadn't yet put away. I threw them on and walked to the door at the end of the hall. I stood there, hand on the knob, hesitant to open the door. I could hear my grandparents just on the other side. I took a deep breath in and opened the door. I went into the dining room where my grandmother was seated at her usual spot at the table, scrolling through Facebook on her iPad.

“Good morning, Amy Girl. How was last night? Did you have fun with your friends after your play?”

“Mornin' gramma. Yes, we had fun.”

I hurried past her with my head tucked. I couldn't let her see the distress on my face. I entered into the living room where my grandfather was lounging in his beat-up tan recliner, flipping through the TV channels with both his cats sitting on his lap.

“Mornin'. Late night?”

“Yes, grandpa. Late night. It's already time for me to start getting ready for our next show,” I said as I walked past him across the living room.

I finally made it to the large bathroom. I turned on the faucet. While waiting for the water to heat up, I undressed. I had to face myself—I had to face the truth. So, I stood there, staring at my reflection. I couldn't recognize myself—it was me, but it also wasn't. I used to see the world in color, but my golden locks now looked dull and dusty, my rosy cheeks were flushed—all the colors seemed to have faded away. Half of the curls in my hair had had gone flat from where I laid on them, the other half flared out in a massive, tangled mess. There was still a faint trace of eyeliner smudged under my eyes. I looked—older. The trauma from the night before had aged me, by what felt like a hundred years. I was worn out and tired and hungover. I had never looked at myself so intensely before. I didn't want to. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. I was ashamed of what I saw.

I eventually broke my gaze and turned towards the bathtub. There never actually was a shower in my grandparent's home. All we had was a tub. I couldn't take a bath, knowing what filth would be left in the water. I stepped into the tub and crouched into a ball under the faucet, allowing the hot water to wash over my body as best as I could. I cupped the water into my palms and splashed it on my face and scrubbed away the last of my makeup. My hair needed to be cleaned. I bent my head between my legs to let the water run through my hair from the back of my head.

That's when I saw the bruising. I was terrified and quickly jerked upwards, only to end up smacking the back of my head on the faucet. I sunk down and quivered in pain on the floor of the tub. Once the throbbing in my head subsided, I knew I had to look at the bruises. The faint purple of the fresh marks was the only color I saw during this dark moment. They ran along my inner thigh, a small sliver on my stomach, and, after contorting my body in an attempt to examine my

back, I found more along my butt and tailbone. Shame and disgust consumed me. I scrubbed at the bruises, trying to wash them away. I scrubbed until my skin was blistering red. No matter how hard I scrubbed, I couldn't wash them off. I felt dirty. I felt as if every inch of my body were tainted, and no amount of soap could wash away what that monster did to me—no amount of soap could wash away the marks he left on me; nor could it mask the permanent stench still stuck in my nostrils. The soothing scent of my lavender body wash was overpowered by the memories of the previous night. All I could smell was his onion-like body odor. I laid on the bathtub floor in defeat. I could not scrub off the dirt and grime, I could not cover the stench of his body. He left his mark—this body was no longer mine.

I managed to eventually drag myself out of the tub and made my way back to my room. I sat on my bed and disassociated. It's a coping mechanism I have developed years ago. I just sit and stare into space—not a thought in my mind, not a feeling in my body. It feels similar to falling asleep, except I'm awake. I didn't want to do anything but sleep and never wake up, but I had an obligation to the theater. We worked so hard on this production, it was one of my dream roles and so many tickets were already sold. I couldn't stay home, regardless of how much I desperately wanted to.

When I snapped back into reality, hours had elapsed. Where had the day gone? I needed to get ready since it takes hours to curl all my hair. I trudged to my small bathroom and began sectioning out my hair into manageable strands. I plopped down onto the toilet seat as I waited for the curling iron to heat up. Pain shot up my spine. I had momentarily forgotten about the sores. The pain broke me to tears. I couldn't go to the theater like this. I was an emotional mess. I decided to text Katie, my director.

...

Katie is like an older sister to me. We have worked together at the local theater for years. Theater is a place where you need to establish trust—trust between you and the director, between you and your cast members, between you and the crew. You rely heavily on each other. As a result, it has created a trusting bond between us. She’s one of the few people I feel like I can wholeheartedly trust.

...

“Katie, will you be coming to the show tonight? Something bad came up (don’t worry, I can still perform tonight) and I kind of need some advice and I don’t know who else to turn to because I can’t talk about this to my grandparents.”

Shortly after I texted her, she replied, “I wasn’t going to stay, but I’ll be there before the show starts. Of course, you can talk to me, I’ll be there.”

I was scared. I didn’t remember much of what occurred at the time but what I did know was that it was bad, and it was affecting me. I tried to push the mixture of emotions out of my mind—I tried to ignore the intrusive thoughts. I put all my energy into making every small, tight curl. By the time I finished the curling, I looked like Shirley Temple—it always gave me a good chuckle before I brushed them out to create the classic wavy, yet curly style of the late 1930s, early 1940s, for my character. Typically, I would try to get most of my makeup done at home so I can spend my time at the theater getting into character, but I didn’t want to smudge my makeup after talking with Katie. So, I waited.

When I arrived at the theater, I sat in my car and trembled at the thought of telling Katie what happened—I trembled at the thought of speaking my truth. I just needed to breathe.

I approached the Green Room door and paused momentarily. *Leave your drama at the door.* I took in one final breath and opened the door, entering the theater. The crew could be seen rushing through the Green Room towards the stage, double checking the lighting and sound equipment before our performance began. I could hear our stage managers engaged in what was presumably an entertaining conversation as I heard them giggling from afar. Everything was so normal.

I sat my backpack down in the corner of the room, pulled out my makeup bag, and placed it on one end of the counter where the cast would sit to apply stage makeup. On the other end sat Janet who played Amanda Wingfield, my character's mother. We sat there in silence—she sat there getting into character, I sat there trying to keep my composure.

Shortly after I entered the Green Room, Katie and Chris arrived. Chris is her husband who played Tom Wingfield, my character's brother. I decided I would wait for the two to settle in before I would approach Katie but before I could muster the courage, I heard Katie say, "Hey Amy! Want to head into the main theater to chat?"

I wasn't quite prepared. I thought I would have a minute to finish composing myself. My head began to spin. I was scared.

"Of course!" I responded, trying to mask the quiver in my voice. I rose cautiously from my seat and started for the main theater with Katie.

We sat there in silence. *What do I say? What do I tell her?* How do you even begin to recount these events to someone, especially someone you care about? So we sat there in uncomfortable silence.

After what felt like forever, Katie asked, "Are you okay?"

Overcome with emotions, I couldn't contain it anymore. So, I told her. I told her everything—everything I could remember at least. I told her about Chanelle. I told her about The Cactus. I told her about the first drink and the second. I told her about Karl with a 'K'. I told her about the impossibility of blacking out after two drinks. I was desperate to get that point across. In that moment, I didn't want to be viewed as the girl who had too much to drink. I didn't want to be viewed as having brought this onto myself. I had already been blaming myself for the whole ordeal, I couldn't live with Katie blaming me either, regardless of the fact that she would never have seen it that way.

Despite how desperate I was for my story to be heard, I wasn't ready to accept what happened. The only thing I could admit, the only thing I held onto and repeated on a loop like a broken record was "I think we had sex, but I wasn't in the headspace to consent." As if I had to prove to her that my experience as valid. It was all there. I knew what happened, but I couldn't say "sexual assault," I couldn't say "rape," because if I admitted to it, then it really happened.

Katie sat and listened to my story, never interrupting, never invalidating me. Despite not being ready, despite the overwhelming cocktail of emotions I was feeling in that moment while I tried to piece every fuzzy detail together, despite having my sense of safety stolen from me, it was with her love and reassurance that made me feel even the slightest bit safe.

"What happened to you was in no way your fault. Whether you were drunk or drugged, you did nothing wrong. You are not alone in this; I understand the fear and pain and confusion you're feeling. I don't want you to blame yourself. I love you and I will be here for you through this. But I need to know, what do you want to do next? I want you to feel safe. What can I do to help you?"

What could she do? What was I hoping to achieve by telling her? I thought long and hard. I was scared. I didn't know what could even be done about this. A fear set in.

"I don't remember much about it happening. I don't know if there was a condom or not. I'm scared he could have hurt me worse than I know, but I'm more scared to go alone," I tell Katie with a shaky voice.

"Do you want me to take you to a doctor? I want to do what you want and if seeing a doctor will help you feel a bit more at ease, I will take you," Katie replied.

I sobbed in pain and relief. She heard me, she believed me, she cared for me, she validated me. After composing myself, I pulled out my phone and scheduled the next available appointment at Planned Parenthood in Rancho Mirage, a little over an hour away. "Are you sure you can take me?"

"Of course I can. I don't want you to go through this alone. All they're going to do is run a few tests to make sure you didn't contract anything. They might give you some preventative medicine too. Everything is going to be okay, and I will be right there with you."

I needed that talk with Katie. I felt a little more at ease.

...

After our talk, I got ready for the performance. I fixed my hair, I touched up my makeup, put on Costume #1, and held a spare glass unicorn to try to get into character. My character, Laura, was an awfully shy and timid girl, with a love for her glass menagerie, especially her unicorn. I would pace the green room with the fragile glass between my hands, gently caressing its tail while creating "memories" of her life—thinking of her life as though I really were her. That's how I channeled my character, except for on this night. I held the fragile glass, trying to

become Laura, but my mind was clouded in a dark haze. Every thought I had led me back to the night before, the stench filling my nose, my breathing shortened, I was trying to not panic—

“Places!”

Fuck.

I navigated my way through the dark stage and found my place seated at the dining table, upstage left. *Just breathe.*

“I have tricks in my pocket...” (William 11) Chris began his opening monologue, downstage left. I latched onto his words, trying to stay in the moment, trying to stay in character, trying to not get lost in thought again. I needed to be there for the cast, for the crew, for the audience, for myself.

[Lights Up]

I felt like a deer in headlights. I felt every line slip away. *What am I going to do? What’s my line? Oh no. This is bad.*

“You smoke too much,” (William 12) Janet said in character.

“Mother, I’ll bring in the coffee,” (William 12) my line just flowed right out. No hesitation, no delay, no indication that I was having the worst night of my life. Every line, every movement, every expression was right on time. I was mechanical—calculated. I was in autopilot, but I wasn’t in my body. It was as if I left my body and seated myself in the front row, watching a stranger who looked just like me.

The show ran smoothly, although my performance was less than spectacular. The only thing that mattered to me in that moment was that the audience got a running show. I wanted so desperately to return to my body. I wanted to be whole again, but there would always be a piece missing. As the show drew towards the final scenes, it was as if my wish had been granted. I felt

myself embodying my character, I was finally pushing the thoughts aside and living in the moment—until my scene with Lyle, who played Jim O’Conner, the gentleman caller. Lyle has always been kind and respectful. We had spent the duration of the show building trust and finding the onstage chemistry. I had nothing to fear.

“How about cutting the rug a little, Miss Wingfield?” (William 62) Lyle said just before our waltz. We have rehearsed this scene so many times. I trusted him. However, the moment he placed his hand on my hip to begin the waltz, pain shot up my spine. I wanted to run off stage—to call it a night. Memories flooded my mind again. It came quick and heavy. I was no longer in Lyle’s arms—I was back with Karl, and I wanted to scream. I wanted the night to be over. This scene felt like an eternity.

“Somebody ought to build your confidence up—way up!” (William 64) Lyle said and he lifted me in the air. His grip tightened on my hips so as to not drop me. He was as gentle as always but to me it felt like burning iron rods pressing into my flesh with every touch. He gently tapped my butt with his knee to stabilize me from swaying in the air, just before he sets me back on the ground. This is what he had done every night. This scene is supposed to be sweet and full of love and chemistry between these characters, but on this night, I wanted to be as far away from him as possible. That innocent tap threw me back to the violent slamming from behind when I first woke up to Karl on me.

The only thing keeping me together was the thought that the show was almost done. *Just finish this scene. After that, all you have to do is stand on stage without a word.* We were so close. I just needed to hold it together. But I forgot about the kiss.

“Somebody ought to—somebody ought to kiss you, Laura!” (William 64)

...

Again, a tender moment ruined by the ever-intrusive memories growing louder in my mind. Our lips touched and when I opened my eyes I was there again. I was behind The Historic Plaza with the only light coming from the full moon, Karl inches from my face. This nightmare was never ending. While in this state, more details resurfaced, details that I didn't need to remember on stage.

“That's my girl,” I heard Karl say, stench slipping from his lips, only moments before I had lost consciousness. Those words echoed through my mind, disgusting me. The stench turned my stomach. I wish I could fight back but this is only memory—a memory that will continue.

...

As I faded out of consciousness in memory, I awoke on stage, still standing in my place, Lyle still speaking his lines. It felt as if I had disappeared for hours, yet I was only gone for a moment. Nothing had changed, life continued, the show must go on, regardless of the pain I was feeling.

The final scene ends with Tom and Amanda, played by Chris and Janet, getting into a fight. This fight was Tom's final straw with his ever-nagging mother. He leaves the home and never returns—abandoning his mother and precious sister. Laura witnesses it all. In that scene, every night I would become Laura and cried tears of anguish on her behalf. But not that night. That night I cried for myself—I cried for my memories, I cried for my pain, I cried for the loss of my safety and trust, I cried for everything still locked deep inside. Only to have to come back the next day and do it all again.

Work Cited

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