

What happened that night

By Deanna Pan Globe Staff, Updated November 26, 2019, 8:55 a.m.



ILLUSTRATION BY SHONAGH RAE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

My memories of my rape are scattershot, like the disjointed images of a strange dream. The smooth curve of the Uber driver's head. The crisscrossing shadows in the car. The lights from the bridge. The fluorescent glow from every fast-food joint and gas station we passed.

My friends and I were in the back of that car. It was late, sometime after 1 a.m. on a Saturday. We had all been drinking. We were going safely home.

Until the moment it happened, I had done everything right. Almost everything.

A good defense attorney would point out that I was drunk. A good defense attorney might also note what I was wearing (a skimpy-ish romper and over-the-knee boots). A good defense attorney would wonder about my relationship with the accused (friendly, collegial). A good defense attorney would remind me that I never said "no" (though I hadn't said "yes," either). And if what happened to me that night was, in fact, so unwelcome, so invasive, so bad, a good defense attorney would ask why, then, didn't I fight back?

I've often asked myself that same question.

Because when I felt his fingers creeping up my thigh and under the seam of my shorts, I didn't swat his hand away or slap him across his face. When he probed me, as if he were fishing for a utensil that had tumbled down the drain, I didn't scream or kick or cry. Instead, I stared at the curve of the driver's head; I was as inert and malleable as a lump of clay. In those moments, my reality broke down, my body split open, my consciousness escaped and drifted over us.

I don't remember how long it lasted. I don't know if anyone else in the car saw. But when the driver finally reached my stop, I stumbled out of the car so quickly, I didn't notice my wallet had slipped out of my purse and onto the floor under my seat. And I didn't notice, as I bounded up the stairs to my second-floor apartment, that my rapist had followed me until he was standing at the threshold of my home. "You need to leave," I said, before I shut and locked the door.

That morning, as I lay in bed, I briefly wondered if I had made the whole thing up, if the dull pain between my legs was the product of my own delusion, like an infestation burrowed into my skin.

He texted me after 10 a.m.

“Sorry if I did anything stupid last night I got so drunk.”

I didn't text him back.

When I consider the catalog of indignities I've endured at the hands of bad men — the famous journalist more than twice my age who slid his hand over my thigh; the drunk stranger who kissed me on the lips after the Seahawks won the Super Bowl; the tailor in India, where I studied abroad, who groped me under the pretense of adjusting my neckline — what happened in the back of that car was worse, yes, but still so shockingly ordinary.

Later that day, I called my twin sister and told her someone I thought was my friend had digitally penetrated me without my consent. She sighed and, in a quiet voice, said the same thing had happened to her — three times.

At the time, I didn't use the word “rape,” and neither did she. Rape, like fine china or decorative hand towels, is reserved for only the most special occasions. Rape is for men in ski masks who prowls dark alleys and lurk in shadows. Rape is for smothered screams, drugged cocktails, bruised wrists and bloody sheets. Rape is for a gun to the temple, a knife to the throat.

Rape is a serious crime against serious victims, a designation I didn't want or feel I'd earned.

And so I told everyone who knew — my boyfriend (now husband), two of my sisters, a few close friends — that I wanted to move on with my life and forget what happened. Because I was young and powerless, and I feared if anyone else knew, too, my reputation and my work would be forever eclipsed by the worst thing a man had ever done to me.

I wasn't naive, either. Rarely do stories like mine, of women coming forward, end well. Whether we are called “victims” or “survivors,” in the public sphere our names are still marked with an asterisk. In some traditional cultures, women who are raped are murdered by their fathers and brothers for casting dishonor on their families. Here, we pillory these women on the Internet; force them into hiding; drag them through long, humiliating trials; call them “sluts” and “liars”; dissect their stories; scrutinize their bodies; consider whether they are worthy of belief or not, worthy of humanity or not.

So I would take my painful memories from that horrible night, shove them in a box, and bury them.

I didn't call the police because I wanted to move on.

I didn't go to the hospital because I wanted to move on.

But you and I both know how this story goes.

Shame consumed me in the days that followed. I was ashamed that by drinking too much, I had become vulnerable, even in the presence of my friends. I was ashamed that while he penetrated me, I sat motionless, despite years of adolescent scheming about all the ways I would fight off any man who tried to hurt me. Most of all, I was ashamed that through my silence, I let him get away with what he'd done to me while I alone bore all the consequences of that night.

And I felt guilty — guilty for the outrage and agony my assault had caused my loved ones, guilty for subjecting them to the inconvenience of my personal trauma.

Avoiding the man who raped me was an exercise in futility. We saw each other nearly every day. We shared the same friends. We didn't speak of that night until two months later, when he had gotten word of what I had confided to a mutual friend. Over a few text messages, I told him he violated me; he said he didn't remember, but he apologized anyway, on top of a mishmash of denials and equivocations.

“I had no idea this happened until [redacted] told me last night. I don't remember the uber ride besides you yelling at the driver for something, I remember dropping you off and you saying no [redacted] to me, but I didn't know why. That's why I texted you the next day. I would never do that to anyone, that's so [expletive] up, I can't see myself doing that to anyone. You have no reason to be making this up, so I'm sorry for what happened and hurting you. Not sure if sorry would ever fix something like this but I would never intend to consciously do that to anyone. I feel terrible. I don't even know how it could have happened with everyone else in the car too.”

“Thanks for apologizing,” I wrote back. “I really do appreciate it.”

“I know it seems like the easy way out to say I don't remember but that is the honest truth. I would never wish this upon anyone.”

And so I buried my memories a little deeper into the ground.

Meanwhile, my assault shattered any illusions I had about my value as a woman in this world. I used to believe that if I worked hard enough, if I was talented enough, if I was smart enough, kind enough, good enough in all the ways a person can be, I, a mixed race

woman, could overcome whatever limitations others perceived in me by virtue of my gender or my race. I could follow the rules, no matter how unfair, if it meant I could pass through life in this body unharmed.

But my rapist was someone I trusted, someone I considered a friend. I assumed I had won his respect. And yet, he betrayed me, so easily, at a time when I was pliable and defenseless. To him, in the back of that car, I was little more than an opportunity for the taking. It didn't matter how hard I worked, how talented I was, how smart. Maybe I'm not any of those things, I thought. Maybe this is all I am, all I'll ever be — a bit player in someone else's story.

Two years ago, my now-husband proposed. Our engagement was inevitable — by then we had been together for 10 years — but we lived in separate cities, hundreds of miles apart. I should have been happy, incandescently and unquestionably happy. But my assault had ruptured something between us. He was angry at the man who hurt me, angrier than I ever knew he was capable of. He threw his dinner at the wall after I told him, as soon as I hung up the phone. He wrote furious letters to my attacker, pages and pages of handwritten screeds. Later, he sat on his fire escape, flicked open his lighter, and watched those pages burn to ash.

Whatever confidence he had in my safety evaporated. He was paranoid and afraid, and I could tell. I hated it. It reminded me of my own brokenness, and I hated that too. When he asked me to marry him, part of me wondered if this was just another man's ploy to lay claim to my unruly body. Was this about love or was this a trapdoor and a cage?

Deanna Pan, photographed in November. DIANA LEVINE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Journalists traffic in memories. The worst ones — the most devastating, life-changing, and traumatic — are often the basis of our best work. In our quest to expose wrongdoing, we seek out those who've suffered all manner of tragedy and loss, and we ask them to recount for us, in intimate detail, their greatest sources of pain.

We cannot promise them justice or restitution. What we offer is the catharsis of truth-telling and a public reckoning of their suffering. When we tell their stories, we demand that the world pay attention, rather than turn and look away. Because in matters of injustice, there are no neutral observers, only those who are complicit and those who stand up for what's right.

I never intended to tell my own story this way. I feared I wasn't capable of articulating all of this messiness — the language of sexual violence is vague and inconsistent — and I feared the nastiness my story would almost certainly invite. Mostly, I feared confronting the bare facts of my case, the shoddy stitches I would have to tear out.

In September 2016, Brock Turner, the former Stanford University swimmer who digitally penetrated an unconscious woman behind a dumpster after a fraternity party, was [released from jail](#), three months into a six-month sentence. A month later, in October, *The Washington Post* published a secret video of Donald Trump, the Republican nominee for president, telling an *Access Hollywood* reporter, "you can do anything" you want to a beautiful woman if you're famous enough, you can even "grab 'em by the pussy." Then in November, Trump was elected by a coalition of millions, including my parents, who brushed off his explicit endorsement of sexual assault, along with the numerous accusations of sexual misconduct against him, as harmless and insignificant.

But a year later, something in the American consciousness began to fracture. It started with [exposés in *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*](#), revealing the staggering breadth of rape, sexual assault, and harassment allegations against Hollywood kingpin Harvey Weinstein. A dam burst, unleashing a cascade of women's stories of widespread sexual predation — in the media, in the workplace, in schools, in politics, in athletics, in church — under the hashtag #MeToo.

This September, I heard about a young woman named Chanel Miller, a writer and artist living in San Francisco. In a stunning act of courage, Miller revealed herself as the woman Brock Turner raped on the Stanford campus in January 2015. At the time of her assault, Miller was a recent college graduate, working at a small startup in her hometown of Palo Alto.

In her new memoir, [Know My Name](#), Miller describes her seemingly "ordinary" life in the aftermath of her rape. She recalls "fresh salmon dinners . . . long talks on the phone with [her boyfriend] Lucas, bike rides through the Baylands with [her] dad." From the outside looking in, "Life had seamlessly carried on," she writes.

But privately, Miller was also "Emily Doe," the pseudonymous victim in the press, found half-naked and unconscious in a bed of pine needles, who put her life on hold as Turner's court case moved through the legal system.

"In the beginning I was good at keeping the selves separate. You would never be able to detect that I was suffering," Miller writes. "But if you looked closely enough, cracks appeared." She went to bed crying so often, she started keeping a spoon in the freezer, which she'd press against her swollen eyelids as she brushed her teeth each morning. She held sealed bags of ice against her face while she drove to work.

In Miller's story, I saw glimmers of my own: A twentysomething, half-Chinese woman with literary ambitions, shielding a painful secret unbeknownst to the rest of the world.

Her announcement astonished me, and for the first time, I, too, felt I could cast off the weight of my secrecy and shame that has continued to haunt me.

In her groundbreaking work, [Trauma and Recovery](#), first published in 1992, Judith Herman, a psychiatry professor at Harvard Medical School, writes that among rape survivors, "The women who recover most successfully are those who discover some meaning in their experience that transcends the limits of personal tragedy," often through social action and public consciousness raising. When a survivor tells her story, according to Herman, she forces others to bear witness, to "share the responsibility for restoring justice." So speaking our truth becomes "an act of liberation," Herman writes, a taking back of something that was stolen from us.

Miller's memoir, similarly, is a testament not only to her survival, but her commitment to the truth. Although she faces a barrage of hostility, she refuses to cower; at every turn, she demands to be heard.

"We will not stand by as our mouths are covered, bodies entered," she writes near the end of her book. "We will speak, we will speak, we will speak."

So that is what I am doing here: I am unburying my story. I am releasing the burden of my pain unto the rest of the world, so I no longer have to shoulder it alone. This is not about vengeance. I will not name my rapist. I have even omitted any details that could identify him. Frankly, I am tired of the space he has occupied in my mind and the time I have wasted trying to parse his actions and divine his motivations. I am ready to shake him loose, like the pebble that he is, rattling inside my shoe. As Miller writes of her own assailant, "He could be Brad or Brody or Benson, and it doesn't matter. . . . This is an attempt to transform the hurt inside myself, to confront a past, and find a way to live with and incorporate these memories."

I, too, write this story for me. I write this knowing I am able to do so only because of the women and men who spoke before me. I write this so that others may speak, long after I do.

If you are reading this and you cradle your own quiet horror, your own memories too painful to say out loud, please know I am here and I am so, so sorry.

I will listen to you when you are ready to speak.

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