
NON-FICTION | SPRING 2017

Soft Side of the Tiger

By Cheryl Shore

I took the new panties I'd purchased out of the dryer.

“What happened to these?” I was puzzled. I knew I had purchased this particular pair, in a three-pack of brightly colored Hanes briefs, just a few weeks previously. Now it was ruined. I'd worn them once or twice, no more than that. I've always hated wasted money, even for small things. A horizontal slice across the crotch, through both sturdy cotton layers. The cut was straight, not a random tear. There were some smaller nicks at the front midline and near the right hip area. The elastic leg openings were still intact.

I'm not throwing them away. I was preparing for a late summer vacation with my husband and two small children. The chore of packing loomed; requiring multiple loads of laundry. We went on our trip the next day and came home a week later. I started a new position on an in-patient youth psychiatric unit after our return. There were many new routines to absorb, but I liked the environment and my coworkers. The new school year started. Life settled into a regular rhythm.

One warm September weekend, I put on a pair of shorts. Later in the day, I realized the inseam was ripped. As I took them off to put on another pair, a thought occurred to me: “these shorts are the same color as your ruined underwear”. And then it hit me – I had worn both on a warm July night. I'd traveled 300 miles from my current home to get academic advice about finishing my master's thesis. I'd run into Adam, an old friend, and we shared a meal together, drove to his workplace where I met a few of his coworkers, and ended up getting some ice cream.

That's when things started getting a little strange. I'd imagined going to a Dairy Queen and sitting outside on the warm evening with ice cream. Instead, Adam drove to a grocery store where we bought a pint of Haagen-Dazs. We separated briefly when he went to find some spoons. We returned to the place where I was staying, an older dorm where long-distance students could rent rooms by the night. There even was a hall attendant 24/7. I wasn't really planning on inviting Adam to my room, but it seemed pretty safe.

As we ate the ice cream, I remembered becoming very hot and dry. My skin felt warm and my contact lenses felt like they were sticking to my eyes. It had been a warm summer day and I wondered about dehydration.

Adam went to the window and looked out of it a couple of times, which struck me as odd, but I was getting too sleepy to be alarmed. He looked in the room's small closet, too; I was a little

embarrassed because I'd thrown some dirty clothes on the floor. I remember Adam pulling at my tee shirt. I remember trying to push him away. Hard.

After that point, I wasn't aware of my physical body at all for a while. I remember seeing bright pictures in my mind of members of my family – it was as if they were being projected on a white screen from a projector inside my brain. After an interval (not sure how long) I remember struggling to open heavy eyelids and an inner voice was telling me “Wake up! Wake up! You are in trouble here!”

I finally succeeded in opening my leaden eyelids. My former friend was sitting in front of me, smiling, looking very pleased with himself. We were both fully dressed. As far as I could tell, I had fended off an unwelcome advance. There was a strange conversation that followed, that included Adam spelling his last name for me. He left me at the place I was staying. He continued to wear a smirking expression as he walked down the hall. The attendant was still at her desk. I dressed for bed and fell asleep.

Two months later, faced with the damaged shorts and panties, I found myself wondering, did Adam come back? Did he somehow get in my room and rape me after I was asleep? That scenario seemed very unlikely. But once I reached this point in recovering my memory, I couldn't shake the feeling that he had raped me that hot July night. The thought struck me as ridiculous, though. I'd pushed him off, he'd stopped, and that was that. I spent a lot of mental effort trying to convince myself that Adam had not raped me. But I was still obsessing about the thought that he had.

My new job provided me with access to an Employee Assistance Program. I decided to make an appointment. I was to see a counsellor whose first name was Sandra. I thought, “She's going to think I'm crazy.”

Sandra was a woman of about my own age. She dressed professionally and had short dark hair. She put me at my ease, and did not seem to think I was crazy. But, at the end of the visit, she gave me the card of a professional colleague. “She's really good,” Sandra said. “And your sessions will be covered by your employer.”

Great. She did think I was crazy.

But, I went to see her colleague, a 50-ish woman named Karen. Karen welcomed me and told me that I needed to talk, because talking was the only thing that would help. I told her the story. When I came to the part about Adam pulling at the neckline of my tee shirt, Karen said, “Stop!”

“You were violated,” she insisted. “Adam violated your boundaries at that moment.” She had me continue. I told her about the images in my brain, the murky interval, struggling to open my eyes, the strange conversation, and the feeling like Adam may have returned, somehow. She listened to it all. The fifty-minute hour flew by. I had homework, too. To write a letter to Adam.

I completed my assignment. I also slept better than I had in weeks. In retrospect, I think my improved sleep was due to Karen's active listening and to the relaxation exercises she prescribed.

The next week, I sat in her sunny office and read my letter to Adam. I stressed that he may have tried to put himself in a position of power, but I regarded him as a coward, a person who was afraid of intimacy.

I think Karen thought I did a good job on my assignment. She asked to copy it. I told her I'd thought about actually sending it to Adam. "It's up to you," she said. "Some survivors do, some survivors don't."

Survivor. I guess that's what I was. But a survivor of what, exactly?

I decided to think about it for a while. In the meantime, the meanings and emotions associated with my memories came flooding in. My sleeplessness up to this point was due to ruminating over my memories and trying to make sense of them. Now, I was remembering the fear I experienced that night. The relaxation exercises continued to help me deal with the intense emotion.

I also realized the significance of the hot, dry feeling I experienced. I was drugged. In ice cream, of all things. Besides making me groggy, the drug may have made my muscles weak. I will never know for sure what was used, but I have a definite guess based on the effects and side effects I experienced.

A few weeks later, I had another big "A-ha". Adam assaulted me during that murky interval, after I pushed (or tried to push) him away and before the self-talk about opening my eyes. Karen seemed to have suspected that all along. "It seems like you did dissociate from something there," she said.

She went on to tell me that about half of her sexual assault counselees had dissociated during their attacks, while the other half remembered most of the experience.

"Why can't I remember?" I wanted to know. "Aren't I strong enough?"

"Why does it matter?" Karen asked.

"Well, if I was actually raped, penetrated, I could have been exposed to diseases for one thing" Karen nodded.

"And I think I deserve to know what happened to my own body."

Karen nodded again.

I made an appointment at Planned Parenthood. The intake person was extremely compassionate, affirming and didn't raise an eyebrow when I told her I wasn't sure if I'd been raped or not. "I think you're very brave," she said. I was tested for all STIs, and all tests were negative.

I spent a few more weeks in therapy with Karen. I was grateful to Sandra for the referral. I was healing, and could concentrate on the here-and-now with greater success.

I never did send the letter to Adam. I did call him, though, and told him I didn't remember what happened for a while, but my memory had returned (something of a bluff) and that I knew he'd drugged me and was pretty sure what the drug was (not a bluff). I also filed a police report, even though the assault happened several months previously. Once again, I was treated with respect and concern.

I had only one experience, with a healthcare provider, that was less than positive. I remember hearing, "If you were only raped once in your life, don't you think you'd remember it?"

You would think. I had always said, if I were raped, I would report it, I wouldn't hesitate to go to court, I wouldn't be afraid of any threats from the perpetrator. I never would have guessed about this degree of unconscious denial and the experience of dissociation. How could this happen?

The drug, of course, lessened my awareness and my ability to remember. And the dissociative experience was an escape. I couldn't defend myself well. It was as if my mind left my body and then came back to it.

My feelings about Adam were another factor. He was a fellow student, we'd shared common interests and we were both involved in the health care field. I'd always enjoyed my interactions with him, until that hot July night.

It has been more than a decade since the incident. Sometimes, when the anniversary rolls around, I'm aware of it, and sometimes the date goes by and I remember it a few days later. I never have recovered all the memories I "lost" that night. For several years, I hoped they would return to me, but now I'm accepting of the fact that they probably never will. It's okay. I'm okay.

I have a couple of good friends who know all the details of the story. One pointed out that the denial and dissociation were part of my drive for survival. She's right. I'm still alive. I'm a functioning member of society, and my life goes on.

Cheryl Shore, whose career has included teaching, researching and practice, has taught nursing students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and has practiced as a nurse practitioner for more than 20 years. Shore has published multiple research articles pertaining to family coping with chronic illness, and has presented at conferences in the United States, Iceland and Japan. She currently practices at a clinic for the underinsured in north central Indiana. In her free time, she writes novels and short stories in several genres. Shore lives in the greater Indianapolis area with her family. She plans to participate in a medical mission to Bolivia in the summer of 2017.

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