

## Letters: Recovering from rape

**To the Editor:** The message of this story is how closely we live with trauma, how people repeatedly experience trauma, and how we unknowingly carry vicarious trauma in our health teams.

I would like to tell the story of a 24-year-old woman from our town (George) – a patient at George Provincial Hospital and also a staff member. She is someone that most of the health staff have bumped into when visiting the Emergency Centre (as ‘Trauma’ is correctly referred to now).

This story highlights something of the inner lives of people with whom we share our daylight hours – some of whom have themselves been traumatised – physically, emotionally, or vicariously. It also shows how terribly closely the shadow of sexual violence stalks us all.

Although I myself am writing this story, the wording here is more or less a direct transcript of her words to me: so it is really her own story.

Let me begin with where she is now on her journey of recovery.

When I interviewed her a while back, these were her words:

“God gave me grace. I’m filled with joy. (Ek is bly.) Many people in our community stood by me. Initially I was very sad. I kept on asking: Why? Why? My friends – I told them to go away – I resented them. Then, after a while, I accepted the Lord as my Saviour. I asked Him to help me forgive. I was converted and baptised. My pastor told me if I believed in God I would find healing. It was a miracle. My eye and my internal female organs were healed, through many prayers.

Then, last year, I felt strange inside. I went to the GP. He declared that I was pregnant – about four months. Then I had a threatened miscarriage. Again, through prayer, I came through this, and went on to have a successful pregnancy. When my pains started at eight months, they gave me extra pains at the hospital. Then I had a lovely baby.

I started working at McDonald’s. My child became ill with an ‘asthma’ chest. I spent a lot of time at the hospital. The next thing, I got the message to say that I am dismissed. Then I started working at Silver Solutions, here at the hospital.

I wanted to find the name of the doctor who testified in court. So I traced Inspector Plato, who had attended to my case, and asked him the name of the doctor. The testifying in court was very helpful and I am very thankful for the way that everything worked out (the accused was sentenced to life imprisonment).

I wanted to tell my story, but up to now I have not had the chance. Now I find that I want to help other young women who may have had similar experiences.

Recently I met a young girl, 17 years of age, who is in an abusive relationship. I can see that she is stressed and jittery. I am telling her to talk to her mom, to talk about this at the hospital, and to report this to the police. I have said to her: ‘If you want to cry, then cry. Don’t keep it all in.’ I encouraged her not to give up. She can still do Matric, get a better boyfriend, and find a job. Eventually she managed a smile. Later her mom came to me and thanked me for talking with her daughter.”

Can you take us back to what happened to you that fateful night in 2005, please?

“Yes. At the time I was working at McDonald’s. The young man in question was also working there. He was about 25 years old, not married, but with many children. He knew my boss well. We were sitting at the tavern. He asked us to ‘go out with him’ – the three of us, and him. So on Friday evening he kept on phoning. Eventually we said we would go out with him. At the party he initially ignored us; he was basically in the company of his friends. Later, he asked us to go with him to another party, to dance. We initially said ‘no’. We actually wanted to go home after the first party, but then we conceded. In the mean time, he went and bought wine.

My friends and I also drank at the second party. Later, he was put out because of a fight. Then he said he wanted to go home. As we all left, he told my cousins to go ahead and leave me and him. (‘Hy gaan my wegbring.’)

As we entered Rossina street he became ‘beswyt’ (‘besete’). He wanted to ‘vry’ with me. I was not keen and said ‘no’. Then he became angry and hit me from behind. I lost consciousness. When I came around I was vaguely aware that he was raping me. I fought back, asking him why he was doing this. He kept on cutting me with a piece of glass.

{She was left deserted in an open field, naked, and bleeding from 68 lacerations.}

The day started breaking vaguely in the east. He came back to me and helped me up.

‘Ek het my dood gehou.’ I asked him, by name, why he had done this. We were struggling in a ‘veldjie’ when I spotted a police vehicle and shouted for help. He left me, and the police came to my rescue.”

She was attended to at George Hospital in the early hours of Saturday morning, 9 July 2005. She was naked, covered in blood, cold, and full of dirt. She had been pushed over a barbed wire fence, and repeatedly stabbed with a piece of broken glass, while being raped. She had a total of 68 lacerations to her face, head, neck, left breast, arms, hands, legs and back. She had severe subconjunctival bleeding of the left eye, but an examination by the ophthalmologist revealed an intact eye. She was also seen by the gynaecologist, who documented no severe internal pelvic injuries.

She was placed on post-exposure prophylaxis against HIV and STI infection, as well as pregnancy prevention, and discharged into the safety of her mother. She followed up well, and her blood tests have remained negative to date.

The perpetrator was sentenced to life imprisonment, after a three-year court case, and our colleague remains in full service in the Emergency Centre, cleaning up behind bleeding patients.

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