

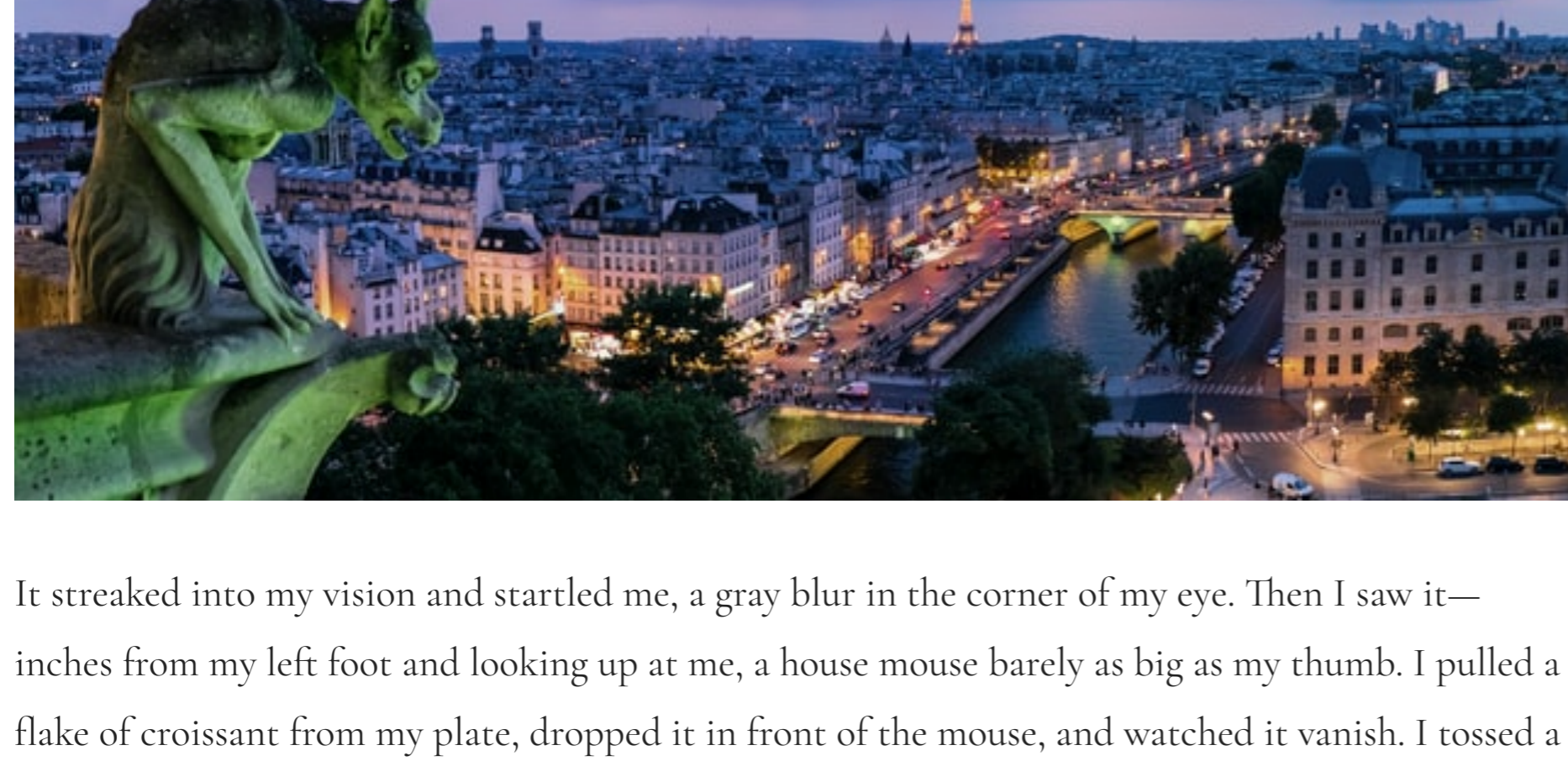


Essay

Dissociation

Although it's been decades, remembering that day at the sidewalk café still makes my heart lurch.

By **B.K. JACKSON**



It streaked into my vision and startled me, a gray blur in the corner of my eye. Then I saw it— inches from my left foot and looking up at me, a house mouse barely as big as my thumb. I pulled a flake of croissant from my plate, dropped it in front of the mouse, and watched it vanish. I tossed a second morsel and a third until I noticed a man at another table with a small mottled mutt curled at his feet. When he bent to see what was going on under my chair, his face lit up, twitchy and excited. I knew what was coming. As he reached slowly to unleash the dog on the tiny prey, the mouse pulled itself up on its haunches and drew back its whiskers. Its heart banged in its chest as its eyes darted right and left. Sickened by the man's blood lust, I jumped to shield the mouse with my newspaper and sent my cup tumbling, café au lait flying as the mouse scampered to safety.

I'd been in Europe three weeks and in Paris for one, and my father and a family friend had only just arrived. An hour earlier, I'd met their train at Gare du Nord and led them there to my new favorite café. Until I spilled my coffee, they hadn't known what was going on at their feet. Why all that fuss over a mouse they wondered. I couldn't say.

Although it's been decades, remembering that day at the sidewalk café still makes my heart lurch. Something unravels in me to recall the look on the man's face as he practically salivated at the thought of his dog savaging a mouse. Yet I can't summon the face of the man who only three weeks earlier tried to murder me on the day I landed in Europe. Thinking of him arouses nothing in me— no visceral reminder of the terror he unleashed on me.

Greeting my father at the train, I was relieved the bruises had healed and I wouldn't have to explain them, just as I'd been relieved three weeks earlier when I rang the bell at my cousin's flat in London a week before I was expected. As he opened the door, I watched his eyes stray from mine to my neck and back to my eyes. His jaw lowered and one eyebrow arched, but he took a breath and let it be. He said nothing about the purple choker ringing my neck or the black and blue thumbprints, like tattoos, above my clavicles.

Many of the particulars about the events that occurred before and after those bruises bloomed are cloudy, but others are razor sharp. Some I've suppressed altogether. I try to imagine the compartments inside my brain where irretrievable memories must be stashed. I picture scribbling my recollections on slips of paper, folding them again and again into tiny squares and stuffing them into slots. I listen as they make a soft landing in a spongy recess of my hippocampus, where the nuclei in my amygdala will sort them into those I can access and those that will remain buried.

Maybe sorted in those same brain lockers are the details I can and can't retrieve from the time when I was a very young child and someone did something to me—just who and what I'm not entirely sure. I can never conjure his face either, but what's still raw is the feeling of rough fingers trespassing on a place I'd never been touched and the pulsing like a heartbeat—his or mine I don't know—where his belly lay, a great weight on top on mine. I remember counting the beats and watching the clouds move across the wide windows up high on the basement wall.

I adored London and knew it well, having spent the better part of a summer in the city five years earlier. It was a place I felt safe and at home, so I fled there to get as far as I could from my attacker without actually going home. I'd managed to book an early flight from the country in which I'd been assaulted after having spent a sleepless night sitting on a hard wooden chair under flickering fluorescent lights in an empty room at a police station, hungry, quaking, and in pain as the police came and went, staring and snickering. While I waited for an officer to drive me to the airport, I ran the attack in my mind like a film reel on an endless loop.

I took a deep breath on takeoff and felt a stab of pain under my chin. When the small plane banked sharply in a wide arc across the channel toward England, the light of the just-rising sun glinted on the wing. There was of course no horizon, nothing to see in the dawn light save the sea and the air, an infinite wash of cerulean blue. Gazing into it, I felt everything slide off of me—all the fear, pain, and exhaustion—as if I'd cast it into the blueness and let it fall to the bottom of the ocean.

I'd thought I'd never get over it, that it would be like a time bomb that would detonate in the future. I anticipated nightmares and flashbacks, that I'd curl up in a ball and cry, that I'd see danger lurking everywhere, that I'd recoil from any man's touch, that my long-anticipated summer in Europe would be ruined. But none of that happened. The two weeks I'd spent in London were carefree, and except when I caught sight of myself in a mirror—the grisly evidence around my neck—it was hard to believe it had ever happened. Even now, all these years later, I've seldom given it a thought, and I'm surprised that when I do—like now, as I'm writing this—I feel nothing. It's like a story someone told me or a scene in a movie I saw a long time ago and have long since forgotten the plot.

Here's what I remember and what I don't. He was supposed to be waiting for me outside, to go get some dinner. It wasn't a date—I'd made that clear—just fellow travelers sharing a meal before moving on to different cities. I can't recall his face or name or how he pushed his way into my hotel room, but what stays with me is the funk of body odor and smoke from his Galoises cigarettes that repulsed me when he tried to kiss me. I asked him to stop and he did, and I thought that would be the end of it—a simple misunderstanding—but he pulled out his wallet and began slapping photos of women on the dresser, hard, like he was laying down a winning play in a hand of cards. "This one, and this one, and this one," he said, showing off his trophies. As his anger and entitlement blazed, I understood he was telling me he always got what he wanted and what he wanted was for me to be part of his gallery of conquests.

I don't recall how he pinned me on the lumpy bed or when he pulled my shirt up and unzipped his pants, but I know there wasn't a moment when I considered not fighting. Even though he wasn't a big man, I couldn't wriggle out from under his weight or move my legs to kick him. All I could do was writhe and yell, which only magnified his rage. He sat on me, dug his knees into my hipbones, and wrapped his sweaty hands around my throat. He squeezed, lightly at first and through clenched teeth said, "Shut up! I'll kill you. I've done it before." But as I continued trying to thrash around, he tightened his grip. With his fingers lacing my neck and pressing on my jugular vein, I could feel my own pulse pounding and I was flooded by a memory of watching clouds passing in a wide, high basement window.

My throat closing and my lungs convulsing, I was getting lightheaded. I refused to look at him as he wrung my neck harder and harder. I turned my eyes toward the window and noticed in an oddly detached way the trilling laughter of a woman walking down the hall and the gurgle of air in my windpipe. I knew I was going to die. How long, I remember wondering, does it take to be asphyxiated? I closed my eyes and went limp, as if I were passing out. Maybe I was passing out. When he lightened his grip and rose up on his knees, I jerked my knee straight up hard into his groin, and as he crumpled forward, I slammed the side of his head with my elbow. I scrambled from the bed, but he was between me and the door, so I ran to the French doors that led to a balcony overlooking the main street. The door wouldn't open, and in an adrenaline-fueled fury I punched my fist through the glass and screamed for help until my throat, already raw and aching, felt scorched.

It couldn't have been more than seconds until the police arrived. One took my attacker aside and they spoke in a language I couldn't understand. Another took me out in the hall and sat with me on the stairs. He'd taken a blanket from the bed, wrapped it around my shoulders, and held me as I shook and sobbed hysterically, violently, heaving and gulping and gasping for air. He was young but fatherly and he let me weep until I was calm enough to talk. He made me laugh at the same time a torrent of tears spilled from my eyes and he used his own sleeve to wipe my nose.

I don't know what my attacker told the other officers, but they told me he would have to pay for my room and would be taking another room on the same floor. That was it. There would be no further questioning, no arrest, not even a reprimand. And they expected me to remain in my room while he was free to roam around the hotel. It was clear: to them I was just another stupid American girl who couldn't handle herself, and he was just a man being a man. I insisted they take me to the airport, but they said there were no flights until morning and the airport was closed. I was welcome, they offered, to spend the night in the police station.

Later, when I'd jettisoned my emotional baggage into the blue of the English Channel, I felt at ease. I told myself I wouldn't give my attacker the satisfaction of having traumatized me; I insisted he had no power over me. It didn't trouble me then or later that I couldn't picture the face of this man who tried to suffocate me—or that it wasn't even like a dream on the edge of my consciousness or a word on the tip of my tongue. It was just gone. As time went on, I took pleasure thinking he'd be disappointed if he knew I couldn't visualize the violence in his eyes as he choked me—if he knew how little I thought about him and that when I did, I felt nothing, just as I had when I shoved my fist through the glass or watched puffy clouds roll by a wide basement window.

I applauded myself on my equanimity. I hadn't given in. I'd fought back. I'd been ferocious. I survived. I told myself it was a sign of strength and health that I felt nothing when I remembered his hands around my neck.

I still feel nothing. That hasn't changed. But I'm no longer certain being numb is a badge of health or strength. Numb is just another word for feeling dead inside. All these years later, I'm coming to understand that, as the trauma specialists tell us, "the body keeps the score." The terror lives here still—not a thought but an imprint—somewhere inside me. Maybe it is a time bomb. Now I wonder if there isn't something terribly wrong with me. I wonder if one day I'll wake and the horror will come flooding back.

Trauma leaves a stain one way or another.

Photo by [Pedro Lastra](#) on [Unsplash](#)

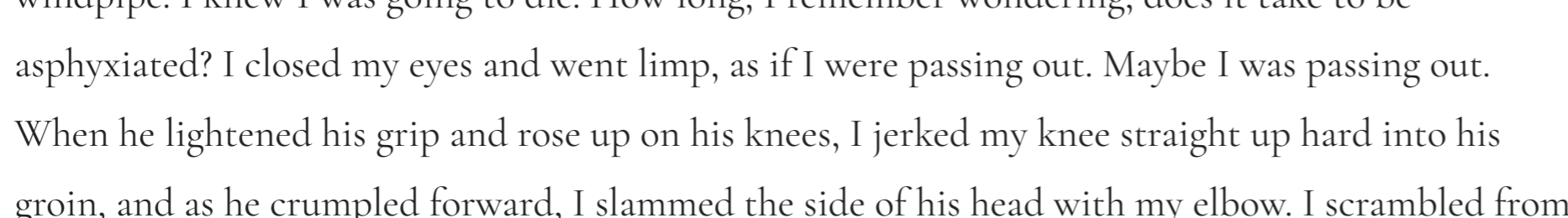
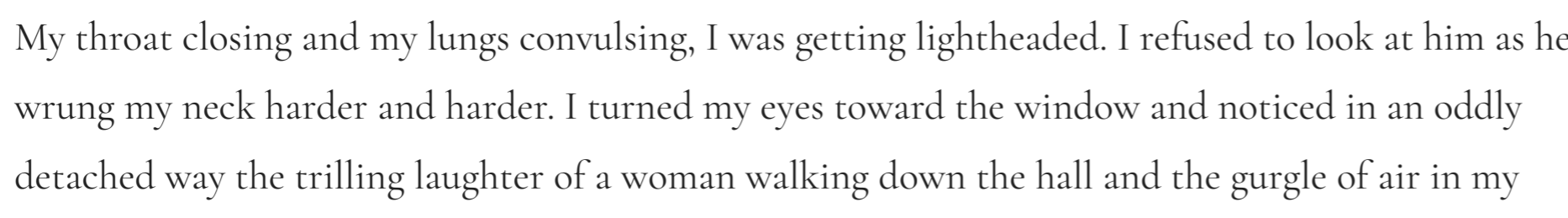
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B.K. Jackson (she/her) is a journalist, editor, and founder of Severancemag.com, a magazine and community for adoptees, donor-conceived people, and others with misattributed parentage. She's written for publications such as HuffPost, Visible, Everyday Health, and Herstory.

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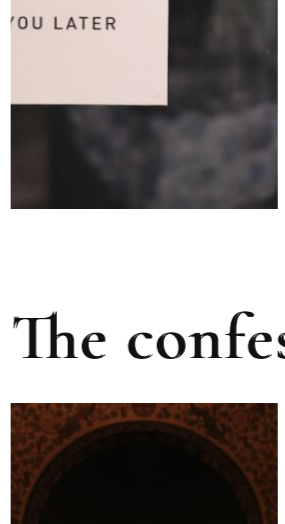
1 COMMENT

Marsha McGregor May 1, 2021 At 1:08 pm
"I pictured scribbling my recollections on slips of paper, folding them again and again into tiny squares. . . ." Your essay brought feelings of terror, rage, and admiration for your resilience and courage. It added to my understanding of trauma. At the same time, I went back to passages again and again, simply to experience the beauty of the writing.

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