



It was several more years before I told anyone. I was in my early 20s when I first told a group of girlfriends. We were playing cards. It was a rainy day, and we were all sitting around in our flat in Auckland, playing cards and drinking, having glasses of wine and lots of girly banter. I can't remember the context but I just blurted out, "I was gang raped." And then went, "oh my God, I can't believe I've said that." I was a nurse by then, and they were health students, and they went, "do you want to talk about that?" And I was like, "no. Okay, let's keep playing cards".

Zoe

* THIS NARRATIVE INCLUDES DESCRIPTIONS OF SEXUALISED VIOLENCE. *

The insight component of [Insight Exchange](#) shares a person's **lived experience** of violence and abuse, highlighting a person's responses and resistance to violence and where 'social responses' were helpful, unhelpful or harmful. This reveals the roles that individuals, organisations and communities play in people's experience of violence.

ZOE

The sexualised violence I experienced as a teen does not define me – I refuse it that. It has had a massive impact on my whole life though and influenced all my relationships, most importantly my relationship with myself. I've engaged in significant personal work over the years and this deep work has and will forever lead me home to me. I've rumbled with the impacts; defying endless invitations to be crippled with fear and shame. Instead I have aimed to transform trauma into a motivator, a passion to work to bring dignity and safety, to influence change. Eventually my story led me to work

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with men who use violence, and this is where I have learnt the most – about myself, my courage to confront fear and my vulnerability to unravel and travel with my story. To find the threads I share with other victim survivors and to seek to understand the causes and drivers of family and sexualised violence. I refuse hate, I nurture and nourish compassion and hope for a kinder, safer world.

In my late 20s as a nurse, I was working in women's drug and alcohol detox and rehab and I recognised that I was on a parallel journey with the people I was working with. I think that was the thing that struck me when I first started working in women's spaces; I was being drawn to work with people who had experienced a lot of violence in their life, particularly a lot of sexualised abuse and violence. I had begun to reach out, tentatively starting to deal with what had happened to me.

I grew up near a country town on a farm, and in all respects, you could look from the outside and say we were a happy family. But there were a lot of tensions in there.

My mum was unwell. She struggled with her weight, and there were clearly deeper issues happening for her mental and emotional wellbeing - she had a few bouts in hospital. I was really close to my mum, and I recognised that she wasn't travelling very well, but I didn't really have a way of making sense of it. She was a stay-at-home mum until I was about 14 when she started working.

I experienced my dad as quite distant, harsh, not accessible. - bad tempered. He wasn't the dad who would play with us or cuddle us. He was very authoritarian. Very controlling. Family happened around what he thought was okay. It was his household. Very old school.

We lived in a small house when we were kids, 70s style, a little box, even though it was a farmhouse. I'm the third of four kids. There was a lot of sibling rivalry and I got teased a lot by my older siblings for being too sensitive, "away with the fairies, mum's favourite," a bit different. I was the black sheep of the family.

My dad was quite harsh on my relationship with my mum. He gave her a hard time saying she was too soft with me, that I got away with too much, that I was her favourite, so he had to be harsher on me.

We lived in a big rugby playing community. My dad was a referee for the senior competition. I'd grown up on football fields. He played when he was younger. When I was a little kid, he used to be the coach of the team where we lived. So, it was always a big part of his life, and being a country town, it was always a big part of all our lives.

There were a lot of rugby teams of different grades. Dad would referee a senior game on Saturdays and then on Sundays he would often voluntarily referee friendly games, with teams from other communities. We would go as a family, while he would referee the game us kids would explore and play with other kids there. He was really well respected and liked.

Afterwards, there would often be an event or a hangi with the two teams, as people would come by bus from miles away to play. So, rugby was a really big part of our lives. It was celebrated across community.

There was only one high school in town. Some people went away to boarding school, but pretty much everyone went to that one high school. Along with the whole black sheep thing, I was the one who wanted to push the boundaries a bit more than anybody else in the family, a bit of a rebel. Around that time, it manifested with me wanting to get away from my family. I used to feel like I didn't belong or fit in.

At the age of 14, 15, I was working in a local corner shop and often stayed with friends. They had more freedom than I had. They lived in town. They cruised around a bit more. One of my friends had a boyfriend, who was about three or four years older than us, he was 17 or 18; we'd hang out with him and his friends.

One afternoon, while I was staying with her, they said, they were going to this party at Sam's place. It was a Saturday afternoon, and it was like, "we're all going." We weren't meant to. I was supposed to be at my friend's house, visiting. But we went to this daytime party. There were maybe 20 or 30 people, mostly outside, in the backyard. A sunny day. Drinking beers.

It was exciting. I was 15, I was very new to going to parties with older guys. And some girls. I went with my friend because her boyfriend was there. We went as a bunch of girls. I remember getting there and feeling out of my depth. I was just 15, at a party, there's all these guys who are 17 and older, up to mid-20s, even probably late 20s. Not a lot of girls or women there. But there was a group of us together.

It wasn't very long after we got there, that I needed to go to the toilet. I asked, "where's the toilet?" Someone said, "it's just in the house, left, through the kitchen." I went inside to go to the toilet. I walked in, into this kitchen area, and there was a bunch of guys in the kitchen, and I think I asked, "where's the toilet?"

I went to the toilet, and when I came out, I knew something was weird. The door to the outside had been shut. And then, they started talking to me. I remember feeling really shy, out of my depth; nervous, but at the same time, you know, they're talking to me. This was a group of senior A-grade rugby players aged between 18 and late 20s.

When I started to make my way outside, they went, "where are you going?" And tried to engage me. But I just didn't feel safe. When I think about it now, they were footy players and they already had their moves worked out; the play.

Rugby was a really big part of our lives. And it was celebrated across community.

"Where are you going?"

They started pushing me towards this bedroom, I said to them, “I want to go outside to my friends.” The next thing, I’m in the room and they’ve shut the door. There’s five of them. One of them is leaning against the door. I just remember having this incredible sick feeling and thinking, “I don’t want this, I’m really scared”. I felt paralysed with fear.

I wasn’t a virgin; I had had sex a couple of times not very long before that, with someone I thought liked me and could be my boyfriend. So, I knew what was happening. I started asking them to let me out. “Just let me out. I just want to go back out to my friends.” And they said, “no, you’re not going anywhere.” It was a small room, I remember it had a bunkbed, and they pushed me onto the bottom of the bunkbed. I started crying and begging them to let me out.

I was so freaked out. I didn’t scream. I didn’t call out. I felt really overwhelmed by the presence of these five big rugby players, senior A-grade players. I knew who they were. They knew who I was. They absolutely knew who my dad was and that I was his daughter. I felt completely overpowered, intimidated. I can remember just lying there, initially they were trying to take my clothes off, or to take the bottom of my clothes off. I was resisting. Not fighting but resisting – I was frightened, overpowered. Pushing them away, saying, “please don’t. I don’t want to be here. Let me go.” It became more and more clear that they weren’t going to give up. It’s like they didn’t let it in at all. They weren’t going to stop.

They were talking to each other. They were laughing at times. It’s like I wasn’t there. I was terrified that they’d hurt me, I was too scared to do much, I cried asking them to stop, to let me go. I can remember feeling so ashamed of being in front of these five men as they were taking my clothes off. I just felt so deeply ashamed of myself, my body, emotionally, mentally - everything. They joked amongst themselves. I experienced this huge level of full-body shame. I felt really powerless. I felt that there was nothing that I could do to stop them, and I just lay there. And the whole lot of them took turns.

They joked amongst themselves.

What happened as they raped me was, I ‘left’ my body. I felt really numb. I felt like I was there, but not there. It was almost like I had that sensation of my body is there and these guys are doing this thing to me, but I’m witnessing it from behind myself somewhere. I remember crying the whole time.

I really resent how people talk about sexual violence. It is violence using sex, but there’s nothing sexual about it.

They were saying, “I don’t know why you’re crying. Why don’t you enjoy it?” Their making comments seemed more about what was going on between them than what it was for me. I still don’t get gang rape at all. It seemed like there was more of a competition thing going on between them. I don’t know whether it’s around conquest against each other, something about showing their own sexual prowess/power with each other, some sick, weird bonding. I don’t know. Because there’s nothing

sexual about that act. It was an act of violence, power and penetration. I really resent how people talk about sexual violence. It is violence using sex, there’s nothing sexual about it.

I’ve spent years working with this. I still experience a sense that I let myself down back then. Where was a feisty me that could have fought back and screamed loud enough that people would have come? I have a lot of compassion and empathy for myself in this space as well, but it’s something that I’ve wrangled with my whole life, loving and caring for that 15-year-old girl not blaming her.

I have no idea how long it was, but I know that when they left the room, left me in there, I put my clothes back on, I walked straight out, and out the front door. I left as it was just getting dark. I felt like I was in some surreal realm when I got up and left.

I knew that I couldn't go out to where the party that was still happening. I felt completely exposed. I'd been crying for ages. I felt really dishevelled. I felt them all over me. There was no way I could face going out there. I felt as soon as people saw me, they would know. Or, they would already know, because they might have bragged or something. There was no way that I could face that. I do remember getting up and looking and seeing the front door. A little hall. There's the kitchen, the bedroom was here, and there was a hallway. I think there was a lounge room or something at the front, and another bedroom. I just saw the front door and knew I had to leave. I felt completely disorientated and lost. Really lost.

I walked around to my friend's. She was actually at her boyfriend's place, I knew that she was there. I don't know how I knew that she was there, but I remember going and knocking on the door. I didn't tell them what had happened. They were his friends, I remember feeling incredibly alone and confused. I didn't know how to talk about it, or if I could talk about it. I remember walking in there, and she took one look at me and said, "are you okay?" And I said, "yes, I'm okay, I just need to go home."

I remember I got home, and I was in the shower, I was hurting. I was sore. I had just had five men rape me. I remember being in the shower, and crying, and feeling like I could not wash this, them, off me. I couldn't wash what had happened off me. And that smell of semen, and them. They'd been drinking. So, all of that awful smell felt all through me. I can remember being in the shower and thinking, I'm never going to get this away from me.

I made a decision when I was in the shower that I couldn't talk about it. I thought my father would blame me. He'd either blame me, and/or he'd want to go to the police. I felt terrified of the consequence of that. I knew I would be blamed, called a slut. That somehow it would be me, my fault. I was afraid of even speaking about it and having to tell anybody, and it being out there. If I could hold it in, somehow it would be like it didn't happen. If it came out then everyone was going to know, and I would become the focus of that, of everyone knowing. The shame of being raped was consuming.

I knew in my heart that my mum would not know how to deal with it. I was really close to her. She was a very loving, caring mum, but she couldn't talk about emotional stuff. She certainly couldn't talk about sex. In those early years, just before I started menstruating, she couldn't really have those conversations with me either. She was so full of her own shame, which took me years to find out why and understand. So I knew that my mum wouldn't be able to cope. She'd had hospitalisations in that past couple of years, she'd had 'nervous breakdowns', I knew that she was on medication for her 'nerves'. That was how it was described to us. So, I was wanting to protect my mum, and I was afraid of my dad.

I had heard a story about someone else, another girl, she was described as, "a bit of a town bike. She's a slut," as if she asked for it. All victim

blaming. It was never actually about the men who raped. Never. They were the rugby heroes. They were untouchable. And they knew it. They knew they were untouchable. They were the guys that everyone looked up to, and probably all the parents thought they're such wonderful young men. Look at them, they're serious rugby players. It's almost like there was an unwritten, unspoken code that everyone followed. That they could brag about it behind the scenes, but no one ever talked about it. No one ever held them accountable.

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I knew my mum knew something wasn't right. She knew. And she was quite troubled. And then, it became a cyclical thing for me, where I felt like I was contributing to her unwellness. So, it was really difficult for me, I didn't know what to do.

After that gang rape, two things happened. I became really insecure and I started being more rebellious. I started hanging out with other friends who were a bit wilder than me. I'd go and stay at a friend's place, and we would sneak out the window, meet other friends and go to parties that we weren't meant to be at. We would say we're going to the movies and then be picked up, and drive around town in cars, and drink. There was a feeling that I belonged to that group even though they were connected to the same group that had actually done this incredibly harmful thing to me. So, those guys were floating around in those circles.

Internally ... If I was around them, I would imagine myself invisible.

Internally, I felt such deep shame. If I was around them, I would imagine myself invisible. I would become uncomfortable in my body, and feel like my movements were stiff, heavy and really awkward. I felt that people could see that I was tainted, that there

was something about me that was shameful. Because the shame, I just kept pushing it down, the shame and guilt. Like somehow, I had let this happen, I'd invited it, being raped. It was my fault, because I shouldn't have been there. Or, I should have done this or that to stop it.

Externally, I was like "fuck you, I'm going to have a life. I'm going to go out and have a good time."

Externally, I was thinking, "fuck you, I'm going to have a life. I'm going to go out and have a good time. I'm going to be my 15-year-old little bolshie self." That's quite a complex paradox that I experienced.

my friends - "who do you like?" and "who is really cool?" - I wanted to be part of that. My friends that I used to hang out with all had boyfriends. I didn't have a boyfriend. I felt really ugly. Like no one really wanted to have a relationship with me. They just wanted to 'have me', use me.

There's that constant inner dialogue. I wanted to be and do that usual teenage girly stuff with

But there was some sense of belonging with my girlfriends, that they wanted me to hang out with them. With my girlfriends, that was a safe place. I couldn't tell them what had happened, but they were a safe place. They liked me for who I was. We used to have fun together. They loved having me come over to stay. I could feel the genuineness of the connection.

My sister used to get really jealous of that and would always be attacking that, telling dad, "you give her too much freedom. She shouldn't be allowed to do that". I think I was trying to find a place out there in this world that had really harmed me as well ... then it harmed me again.

I was staying at my friend's house. I can't remember if we'd said we were going to the movies, but we ended up going to this party out of town. It was on a farm, in a shearing shed, quite a bit party. I think it was about five or six months after the first rape. And there were a whole bunch of people there. There were people from school, as well as those older men.

I remember we got there. We were drinking beers. I might have even drunk some spirits. And my friend who I was with said, "we're going back to town." I can't remember why I didn't go with them, if they didn't have room. But I ended up not going with them. They said, "there's a lift here for you."

So, later when I get out to the other car, I get in and there's a couple of those guys who raped me in the car. They were always around, so it's not like I didn't see them in a small community.

I was a bit drunk and I got in the car, and I remember they had a bottle of spirits, and they passed it around. I took a few swigs. Other people got in the car. And at some point, when we started driving away from the shearing shed, I realised I was the only girl in the car. I felt really uneasy. I just wanted to get home. They asked, "where do you want to go?" I remember saying to them, "I want to go home."

Once we hit town, instead of driving on the road out to my place, they drove across the river. I can remember saying, "you know where I live. You're taking me the wrong way." And they just kept driving, and they drove out of town, on the other side of town, and up to this forested area, up on the top of a hill by the sea.

"We're just going to go and have a little bit more of a party."

I can remember saying a few times, "why are we going here?" And they said, "we're just going to go and have a little bit more of a party." I could feel the dread more and more as we were driving. They pulled into this forestry track in this area with a lot of trees, and another car pulled in behind us. I can remember thinking, "that's weird." I was still saying, "I want to go home." I knew I was a bit drunk and I felt really uneasy. Next thing they were like, "come on, get out of the car." And when I said, "no, I'm just going to sit in the car," they pulled me out of the car. I then realised that this had been pre-planned. And I remember feeling that deep fear and dread of, "oh no, oh no."

They pulled me away from the car, pushed me to the ground, there were about six of them from the two cars. There were other guys in the other car, who had been following. I remember crying and feeling really sick and fearful. I can remember the same thing, saying, "I just want to go home. Please let me go home. Don't do this." I was too freaked out to even think about running into the bloody bushes. These were big rugby players. A team of them. I certainly didn't have the confidence I have now. I reckon they spotted that. Like when you see those wildlife shows, where the lions or the cheetahs are hunting and they're watching for the weakest one. And they make a decision between them, and they all just go for it. That's what it felt like. Like I was a little gazelle; I was their prey. And the best thing to do was to just get it over with, there was no way out.

They were calling each other when they were ready for someone else to come and take over. They were drinking around the car. They'd taken me a little bit away from the car, it was this tag team thing happening. I'm just lying there in the dark. I'm crying. I had my eyes shut. Limp. I was limp. Thinking, "just fucking get this over with and get me out of here." It was really, really unbearably horrible. Something inside, some part of me broke that night.

This time I was more 'there', and just wanting to shut it down. And what I did was I shoved it down, rather than leaving my body. I shoved it down. I just pushed it down. And it felt disgusting. I felt disgusting. I felt what they were doing to me was disgusting. I remember after that feeling and thinking, "I'm just damaged. Really damaged. The inside me is damaged."

When no one else comes. I put my clothes back on. They've taken my bottom clothes off. My pants and my undies. So, I've put my clothes back on. I go to the car, and I just sit in the car.

I don't remember speaking to those guys for the whole trip. ... I don't want to do anything that's going to make it take longer.

Then they drove me home. I don't remember speaking to those guys for the whole trip. I just wanted to get home. I wanted to get away from them. I didn't want to do anything that was going to make it take longer. I don't want to have to speak, because I can't process what's just happened - again. I felt like I was nobody. Like I didn't mean anything. They didn't care at all how I was, what had happened to me, how/what I might be feeling about this, what I'm thinking, was I alright. Nothing.

I was in that space for years. I couldn't talk about it. I couldn't even begin to think about how I might make sense of what had happened. That's what I mean by broken. I felt really broken. They knew who I was. They knew where my dad lived. They knew where I lived. That's the whole thing about wanting to be invisible, because they know everything about me. It's not like I was just some stranger and I'd be afraid of them finding me again. I've got to face these people. I worked in a little corner shop. I've got to face them when they come into the shop.

After the second rape I started withdrawing from everybody. I didn't want to go to school. I didn't want to go out anywhere. Even to see my friends. One of my friends; I knew that she knew something. She knew something was up, because I'd stopped wanting to connect. And I was a connector. And I'd stopped wanting to connect.

One of my friends; I knew that she knew something. She knew something was up, because I'd stopped wanting to connect.

I'd stay at home, and I became physically unwell. I couldn't eat. I was anorexic, it was more that I couldn't stomach food. I was vomiting a lot. I wouldn't go to school. When I went to school, I'd want to come home. And I got sicker and sicker, to the point where I couldn't even drink water without vomiting. I was so disconnected from my body, full of shame and deeply traumatised. My parents became worried. My mum became extremely worried. Even my dad was worried.

I went downhill really quickly. I would say within a month or two, my mum had me at the doctor, because I was literally vomiting all the time, and losing weight. And I was so sad. Really withdrawn. Crying a lot, obviously not my usual self at all. I remember the doctor saying, "I think we need to put her in hospital for a little bit and find out what's going on." So, we went up to the hospital, and was admitted that afternoon.

I thought that I had something physically wrong with me. I had disassociated from this having anything to do with the rapes. I wasn't talking about that to anybody. I wasn't even talking to myself about it. And so, when they admitted me, I thought that I had something wrong in my belly, and that was why I couldn't eat and keep food down. And so, I'm thinking I'm really ill.

In the late afternoon, after mum had gone home, they gave me some medication. Her and dad were coming back to visit later, after tea. I took the medication and then I started having a drug rigor. A drug rigor is like a slow-motion fit. It's when you have a reaction to a drug. Some drugs, particularly some of the drugs that are used to moderate and manage emotional states, can cause this if the dose is too high – they had miscalculated the amount and overdosed me.

First, I got a really high temperature. I'm thinking, I'm seriously ill. Then I started having this weird thing happen in my body; the muscles of my body began contracting tight, and then releasing very slowly. I was in the bed, and my head started going backward. I couldn't control it. I would get severe contractions in my abdominal and leg muscles, and it was incredibly painful. I'd be doubling over in pain. They called mum and dad, and they came in.

At that point I thought, I am dying. There's something really wrong with me. Particularly when mum and dad came in; mum was so upset. I thought, she knows how sick I am. She knows something that I don't know. In the end, they had to ask my parents to leave, because I became more distressed about how distressed they were, particularly my mum.

At one point after Mum and Dad had left, I was still having these contractions and I realised that if I got out of the bed really slowly, walked with incredible focus holding on to the bed, around the bed and got back in the other side - it helped a bit. I think it took two or three hours for that rigor to calm down. It was the most hideous scary experience. Still, no one has said anything. No one talked to me, told me what was happening.

I was in a room by myself, and they literally closed the door and left me in there, came and checked every now and then. Once the worst of it was over, I eventually went to sleep. And the next day, and all the days after that, they kept me in that room by myself. No one, not one single person asked me what had happened, was I okay, had something happened to me. They'd given me this powerful drug, and no questions. They'd just take my temperature, do all the checks. They told me that they needed to stabilise me on the drugs, and once I'm settled down, I could go home, go back to school. No explanation. I still didn't know if I had something wrong with me. I haven't made the connection with the rapes at this point. That wasn't till a quite a bit later.

I went home after a couple of weeks. I was supposed to go back to school, but I'd want to be at home. Mum had started working at that point. So, she would be at work, dad would be at work and I was in this hideous place. I used to watch daytime TV and smoke cigarettes. I was on this mood-altering drug. I put on weight. I always had this horrible taste in my mouth, and my brain felt distant. I couldn't think properly. It just felt like I had a head full of cotton wool, really dulled. I felt completely trapped inside myself and not myself.

The doctor sent me home with repeat prescriptions for these drugs, and I tried to go to school for about six months. I used to do quite well at school, but then I really struggled. Mentally, I couldn't stay focused. It was like I was in this weird bubble, isolated and alone.

I grew up with a family that believed doctors were like Gods; he knows what he's talking about. And that was the message I got. If Dr Taylor says you have to take these drugs, you have to take these drugs. I used to go to him when my prescriptions were running out, and he'd be looking at his prescription pad, not looking at me saying, "do you need another script? How are you?" I'd say, "I'm fine." He'd write me a script, and I'd walk out. That was it.

If Dr Taylor says you have to take these drugs, you have to take these drugs.

I felt myself falling into this deeper and deeper dark hole with the drugs, with not feeling like I belonged in school or anywhere anymore. I was half at school and half not. I was really struggling to be at school. Feeling disconnected from my friends. Feeling like I was completely disconnected from myself. And yet there was something inside me, I've got quite a strong survival mechanism, I started thinking, "I need to get the hell out of here. The town, my family: I've got to get out of here."

Then Dr Taylor went away and a locum came. I ran out of my drugs, and I remember going to the doctors, in my uniform after school. I think he was probably in his 30s. I said, "I'm here for my prescription." He opens up my file, he's reading it and he said, "I'm not giving you these." I was like, "what do you mean, you're not giving them to me?" I can remember, he looked up at me and he asked, "what has happened?"

"What has happened?"

I couldn't talk. I couldn't tell him. And he must have sensed that. "These drugs, you should not be on these drugs. These are not drugs for a 15-year-old girl." He said, "if something's happened for you, find someone to tell." Something like that. He planted a little seed in me. It became really clear; "I've got to get the fuck out of here. I have got to get out of here. My mum will have me drugged for the rest of my life. My dad will want me to be compliant, and happy, and not make trouble, and I will just become some fucking neurotic, pill popping, no one." That moment is etched in me.

"I've got to get out of here."

Around then, a job came up at the local bank and I knew I was not doing well at school, so my friend and I both applied for this job. Thinking, "maybe they'll have us both." Anyway, they rang up afterwards, and they said, "you interviewed quite well. We actually don't have a job for you here, but

there's a job at the branch in Auckland, if you want it." My friend got the job locally and I had such a strong sense of, "I've got to get out of here," I went home and I said, "Mum, I've got a job in Auckland." And that was it. That was my ticket out.

When I got there, I took myself off the drugs. I decided that I wasn't going to take those drugs anymore, because I couldn't think straight. I felt like my brain didn't work. A couple of the women I worked with, who were a bit older than me, took me under their wing. One of them I got on really well with, I used to go and stay with her and her family. There were five siblings and they had this lovely, warm, welcoming, wonderful family. It was really safe. They liked me, and I felt, "I'm safe with them." That was the beginning of a journey out for me away from the oppressive, stifling shutting down.

It was several more years before I told anyone. I was in my early 20s when I first told a group of girlfriends. We were playing cards. It was a rainy day, and we were all sitting around in our flat in Auckland, playing cards and drinking, having glasses of wine and lots of banter. I can't remember the context but I just blurted out, "I was gang raped." And then, "oh my God, I can't believe I've said that." I was a nurse by then, they were health students, and they asked, "do you want to talk about that?" And I said, "no. Okay, let's keep playing cards".

"Do you want to talk about that?"

It just felt like I needed to get this thing out, somewhere where I felt it was not going to be a drama. Somewhere that I wasn't going to have to explain myself, or I wasn't going to go anywhere that I wasn't ready to go. I think I was testing them or me; if I tell this, am I going to be rejected? Are people going to go, oh my God, I knew there was something weird or wrong about you. I always felt like people could see that I was not right. But I wasn't judged. They didn't think any less of me. They didn't think there's something wrong with me or that I've got something to be ashamed of. That I'm shame. It's interesting, that whole journey with shame is so powerful and complex. It took me a long time to be ready to go, okay, now I have to deal with it.

A few years later, I was back living with mum and dad for a few months to save money before I went travelling. I'm in my mid 20s, and I was at one of my friend's, the friend whose place I went to after

the first gang rape, her partner was part of a biker gang. They had this party and she said, “come with me. We’ll go and hang out for a while. Old school friends will be there.” So, we went to this party at the bikie headquarters. We’re going right into the thick of it.

We’re sitting there, I’m sitting on the sofa with my friend and see this girl who I knew went to school with my younger brother. And out of the corner of my eye, I see her being ushered out the door by these men, I could see she was quite drunk. And

“Come and sit with me.”

so, I got up and I walked across the room and I grabbed her by the hand and I said, “come and sit

with me.” And I pulled her away from them.

I sat with her on that sofa and between my friend and I, we organised for her to get home. She was really drunk, and she was about to be taken outside and ... Same freaking story, 11 years later

Later, we went up to get a drink, one of the guys who was trying to usher her out the door, tried to have a go at me, “who do you think you are? What were you doing? What right have you got to come and interfere.” My friend, because her partner was vice president of these bikies said, “leave her alone. Don’t go there. You’ve got to deal with me. And if you deal with me, you’ve got to deal with him.”

The really bizarre thing was that one of the men who had been present at the second rape, but hadn’t raped me, was sitting in that

same room, and he watched the whole thing happen. And later he

“You’ve changed, haven’t you?”

tapped me as I walked past. He said, “you’ve changed, haven’t you?” I thought he was acknowledging that I’d found my strength and found my voice. I knew I had helped stop something for my brother’s friend. And for me, I reclaimed something, my agency that night.

It wasn’t long after that I told mum and dad. I felt like I need to tell them, because they’d watched me go through so much. They’d watched me go wild, drugs and a crazy life. I was always the one that they really worried about. I look back now and I think, fucking hell, if that was my daughter, I would have been completely freaked out. So, I told them, both of my parents. It was like I knew it would be. My dad seemed unable to process it. He said nothing. He just looked away. Kept watching the TV.

And my mum says, “oh my God, I feel so bad. I must have been such a bad parent that you couldn’t tell me.” She went straight into self-blame.

“I must have been such a bad parent that you couldn’t tell me.”

But I needed them to know. I needed to put a bit of context about me into their life, and I needed to say, “this is what I’ve been dealing with, running from,” and I haven’t even dealt with it. But I need you to know. Before I leave here, I need you to know, this is what happened to me. I didn’t tell them who, I just told them I had been raped, no details. And then I left for Australia.

Within a year of arriving in Australia, I was working in women’s detox and rehab and had started on the journey of facing what had happened. I was working as a nurse but was moving in work outside of the hospital system. Focusing on health and wellbeing. The more I got into nursing, the more I saw how things like my own experience of being overdosed and then drugged, plays out. How it creates its own industry of disease. One of the reasons I left nursing was because of how medicine can harm. I realised, “I can’t work in the system anymore.” Don’t get me wrong, I have a lot of respect for the medical profession, and it’s necessary and important. But I couldn’t reconcile my experiences within myself. I was looking for something else.

I started doing a whole bunch of study at an alternative college near where I was working; alternative medicines and complementary therapies. I was doing shiatsu and Swedish massage. I did a whole bunch of units in spiritual psychology.

I was a vivid dreamer, have been all my life, and kept diaries of my dreams. I went to a dream workshop set up by the psychologist who was employed by the college for the students. I went to him pretty much straight after that dream workshop and said, “I need to work with someone around what has happened to me. I want to work with a man, because I want to be able to build a sense of safety around men.” I need to

“I want to be able to build a sense of safety around men.”

have the courage to explore this with someone who I feel has an open mind. I just knew it, and I told him, “I feel like you’re that person.”

My dreams just went off the wall - I started having powerful dreams full of fear and of being overpowered. I ended up working with that group for two years doing really deep work. I worked one-on-one with him as well. It was brilliant, painful and scary, he guided me through that whole journey of talking about it.

At the same time, I worked with another man who was a Reiki therapist. The first time I went to him he gave me a form to fill in and it had a question on it, “have you ever experienced sexual abuse?” I just stopped, and I remember reading it again and going... I don’t know that I’d ever seen it written down before. I answered “yes.”

When I went in and he asked me about the question and he said, “tell me about this, you’ve answered yes on this question.” I just said really briefly, “I was gang raped when I was 15.” He was such a lovely, gentle, safe man, he said to me, “have you ever done any work around this? Have you ever talked about it? Have you ever had any therapy?” And I tentatively said, “no.” He really gently said to me, “if you don’t do something, it will kill you.” I went and saw him regularly; he did energy work. Really gentle energy work.

These two beautiful men helped create the space for me to talk about it.

I was meant to be passing through Australia and travelling on, but I felt this heaviness lift off me here. I’ve had to go to the centre of it and not be afraid. To feel the fear and not be paralysed by it. I drew strength from the people who ‘saw me’ and ‘got me’. The people who value who I am after I’d felt so much shame, after I’d felt so devalued and de-humanised.

I found myself working in family violence and eventually with perpetrators of violence. I could never have imagined this is where I would end up. After years of working with victim-survivors it seemed the natural place to be. The journey from deep shame to vulnerability and courage has informed my work. In the work with men we locate shame, it’s important for them to feel it but not get stuck there, to make the move to remorse and guilt. These are active places where change can occur, where actions, alternative ways to respond can be explored and activated.

Acknowledgement and thanks

Insight Exchange would like to thank the person with lived experience of sexualised violence who has generously shared their insights for the benefit of others

We acknowledge that despite our best efforts to assemble with a person a more accurate representation of some of their experiences of violence, we can never fully understand all that their experiences mean to them now or through their life. We understand that no one's life experience can ever be fully represented in language or any other form.

Handle with dignity

You have been reading a carefully assembled excerpt of a person's lived experience of violence. This is not simply another 'story', 'sample' or 'case study'.

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- Keep the copies in an envelope distinct from paperwork and reports
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Further resources and support

My Dignity: My body is mine is an Insight Exchange resource for anyone who may be experiencing or has experienced sexualised violence, and for anyone who may be responding.

Wherever it is difficult to tell someone about domestic and family violence, it may be even more difficult to tell someone about sexualised violence.

The intent of [My Dignity](#) is to provide information, support reflection, share lived experience insight from others, and signpost to contacts and supports.

It is available online at www.insightexchange.net.

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Disclaimer: This Voices of Insight is a carefully assembled excerpt of a person's lived experience of sexualised violence. Details of this person's identity have been altered to protect their safety. Whilst great care has been taken to do no harm and to contribute to improved understanding of and responses to domestic and family violence, Insight Exchange assumes no responsibility for how the resource is used by other parties.
