

## The Aftermath of a Hate Crime

*The noise of gunfire was startling. Before today I had only heard the sound from a far distance, or in movies, today the death-bringing sound was only a couple feet away from me. The woman who was firing the gun stared down at my brother's lifeless body with such a hatred in her eyes that it scared me more than the gun in her hand. She kept on staring at him as she fired the gun again... and again... and again. I lost track of the bullets that ripped my brother's beautiful and strong body into pieces. The woman was breathing heavily once she stopped. I could see her arms shaking, her lips trembling, and sweat forming on her forehead. Still, the hatred didn't leave her eyes as her gaze shifted from my brother's butchered body to me. I met her foreign eyes, knowing that it was my turn to face her wrath. At this point, I didn't care. I was ready to die. The hatred that shone from her eyes seemed to intensify even more as she stared back at me, and I could see the decision form in her mind. I don't know if I heard the noise of the trigger being pulled, the gun firing, or felt the pain in my thigh first. It happened too fast, and it all blurred together in a haze of fear and pain. Another type of pain than the one I had been experiencing witnessing my favorite person die next to me, and another form of pain than the one that had ripped through both my brother and me when we heard our parents screams from the kitchen. A scream made its way through my lips, black dots appeared before my eyes, and my hands were desperately trying to stop the blood that was running through my pants and creating a new red puddle on the floor. I prepared myself for the pain of the next bullet and once again faced the intruder's eyes. This time I was sure that my own eyes displayed pure fear, there was no defiance or bravery left in me to shine in them. I don't know if it made a difference, but the woman turned around and left the room with hurried steps. As she made it through the hallway towards the front door, I could hear the gun go off once more. I would later learn that she had put yet another bullet through my father's head on her way out. But for some reason, I have yet to grasp she left me alive. Left me to live with the memory of that evening. Left me to live alone...*

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I stared at the front door as the terror rose inside of me. The doorbell had just rung. My thoughts were racing, trying to figure out who could be outside. My hands were shaking, my lips trembling, and sweat forming on my forehead. I could hear my heart beating loudly in my chest. The doorbell made another

buzz causing me to look around for a safe spot to hide. My apartment was a mess, but it held few good hiding spots. As I was trying to decide whether to climb out the window or lock myself in the bathroom the mail slot opened.

“Pizza delivery!” Someone said on the other side of the door. I could feel my heartbeat calming immediately as I remembered the order I had placed only a little earlier. Still trembling, I walked towards the door and opened it slowly. Every time I ordered pizza I had to go through the same process. The deliveryman might be one of *them*. He might judge me. In some cases, it was one of us though, and in those cases, the process was much less intimidating than at other times. Unfortunately, I was not in luck today. The man outside of the door stared at me with foreign eyes; however, there was no judgment in them.

The first couple months after I moved here I tried to lead a normal life. Pretend like nothing had happened. Pretend that I was a normal individual. Pretend like the hatred never escalated to the point where several people died. But going outside made me paranoid. I caught myself looking over my shoulder constantly no matter where I went. I tried to convince myself that the fear of getting caught would subside, that I would start to feel comfortable in my new home, but it never happened. Instead, the fear only continued growing. Leaving the apartment started to become a terrifying aspect of my everyday life. The sound of sirens scared me to no extent, and big groups of people caused my heart to race. No matter where I went, I felt like *they* were always there. I hated the feeling so much that I had resorted to pure isolation. At first the isolation had been broken every time I needed groceries. Then I had found the saving grace of home delivery. For a couple of weeks, I had survived on pizzas and subs, but then I had found a company that delivered bags of groceries as well and life had slowly gotten easier. The worst part left was opening that door, facing a stranger, and hoping that they wouldn't know my background. That they wouldn't recognize me for what I truly was.

Another form of torture that was haunting me was the constant nightmares. There hadn't been a single night since then where I hadn't woken up covered in sweat and in a state of pure panic. The dreams were always the same. I was forced to shoot him over and over until his body was ripped to pieces with bullets. It was first when I was unable to recognize any of his features that I awoke. The visions not only haunted my dreams though. I could see the bodies every time I closed my eyes. I had attempted to distance

myself from them, from the event, and from everything that had led up to that night, but nothing worked. The dreams and visions still followed me.

It was a miserable existence, filled with fear and guilt. It was an existence I wouldn't have wished on anyone... maybe not even *them*. The hatred that used to fill me every time I saw one of *them* or even thought of *them* had not disappeared. But it had faded over the weeks and started to become more of a sadness than pure hatred. However, the new feeling towards *them* didn't make my life any easier, and as I stared at the empty pizza box in my lap, I knew that I had to do something about this or I would go insane for real.

I didn't have many options. I had cut everyone from my old life off after that night, and I had not made any new friends. I was terrified of seeking professional help as they might judge me. This left me with few, if any, options. As a last resort, I decided to text one of my childhood friends. No matter what my life turned into, no matter what I had done, I knew that he would listen to me and try to help.

I was right, Eric responded quickly to my text messages, and we decided to meet the next day. After rinsing off the layer of sweat that covered me in the morning and getting ready to go out, I found myself standing by that door again. Trembling at just the idea of leaving my safe zone. Then it hit me; they had been executed in a place they thought was safe: in their home. I wasn't safe anywhere. With a new sense of determination and an urging panic in my chest, I left my apartment and stepped out in the sunlight for the first time in months. The old paranoia came over me as soon as I noticed other people on the street. *Only two blocks, only two blocks, only two blocks*. I kept on repeating it as a mantra as I tried my best to not throw too many glances over my shoulder, or walk suspiciously fast, or call attention to myself in any other way as I made my way down the street.

Thankfully, the coffeeshop was almost empty when I got there. Even better, there was not a single one of *them* in there. I sat down at one of the most secluded tables, and stuttering managed to order a cup of tea before Eric arrived.

"You look different," was his first comment when he saw me. I stared down at my lap for a second, reflected on my drastically different appearance since the last time I saw him.

"Yeah, after what happened I wanted to conceal my identity as much as I could," I heard myself say.

“Hey, you can’t do that to yourself. You can’t change because of what happened.”

“But I have, it’s safest this way, He will understand.”

I didn’t speak much during the rest of the encounter. Instead, I listened to Eric lecture me about my life. How I had to take *responsibility*. How I couldn’t turn myself into a victim, how I needed to move past this, and how I needed to understand *their* perspective. It sounded like he put all the blame and all the responsibility on me. There was no sympathy, no empathy, and I didn’t feel the least bit better when I left the coffee shop throwing paranoid glances at everyone that even looked my way.

The next morning my own scream woke me. My hands were trembling, and I could still feel the gun jumping as shot after shot was fired. I could see the body getting pierced by bullet after bullet, the blood streaming out of his chest, head, stomach, and arms. Before I knew it my own stomach turned and left yesterday’s pizza on the floor. Crying I stepped over it and went to cleanse myself in the shower. As the water washed the stench and the sleepiness away, I realized more and more that Eric had been right all along. I needed to take responsibility, and I needed to understand *their* perspective to be able to do so. After cleaning both myself and my apartment, I sat down in front of my computer. My fingers were trembling slightly as I typed in the only thing I thought could bring me answers. For the next month I immersed myself in *their* scripture. At first, my attitude was highly negative as I assumed the words it contained would be filled with the same hatred as its followers were. However, it turned out that their teachings were highly similar to ours. This caused me more confusion than clarity. Defeated, I closed down the tab I had been working with so hard for the past month. Slowly I started to wonder if *their* religion preached something different from what *their* scripture taught.

In a last attempt to find clarity I ventured out from the one place my mind still held as safe and went towards the one place I had never thought I would set foot in, *their* place of worship. The architecture mesmerized me, and the building was impressive in all aspects. The people who frequented it were not though. I could feel my stomach start to turn again as I walked through the doors. To my surprise no one called me out, no one noticed the difference between me and *them*. Terrified that someone would, I sat down as fast as I could and as far back as I could without calling too much attention to myself.

It was with a strong sense of despair that I left *their* holy place. Once again I had failed at my task to understand where they got the hatred from. It was nowhere to be found in *their* teachings, or in *their* scripture.

*The gun was jumping in my hand, and I could feel my fingers pressing the trigger again. Slowly and deliberately they tightened, my arms straightened, my wrists tilted the gun so it would hit its target just right. I stared at the corpse in front of me. It had turned from a young man to a bloody mess in matters of seconds, yet I could not manage to push the hatred away and stop firing at him. My fingers pulled the trigger all the way back, the gun jumped, and yet another hole appeared in the man that allowed even more blood to flood the floor.*

*“You need to take responsibility for your life,” the girl spoke up. Her words threw me off, and the sincerity in her eyes scared me. “You need to take responsibility for your life,” she repeated. I could feel my fingers tightening around the trigger again, and I could feel my aim shift towards the girl. Her brown eyes looked defiant, but as my aim shifted towards her, a hint of fear appeared in them. “You need to take responsibility for your life,” she said again. The hijab that covered her hair had spots of blood on it, her hands were covered in it, and it was surrounding her on the floor where she was sitting. None of it was hers - yet. I pulled the trigger, and a scream made its way out of her throat. When her eyes met mine again the defiance was nowhere to be found; there was only fear now. “You need to take responsibility for your life.”*

I woke in the same manner as all other mornings since that night, but for the first time I had experienced a different dream. A version where my former self had spoken to me. A version where she had called me to action. After quickly getting ready I decided to do the only thing that could bring me freedom. I left my apartment, but this time I was not scared, I was determined. I walked into the police station and asked to see her. Janice Miller. The woman who had caused all this suffering, the woman who had turned my life upside down and destroyed my confidence and self worth so entirely. While I waited for her to be brought to one of the telephone booths that they used to allow visitors to see the prisoners, I caught a glimpse of my own reflection. The girl looking back was not me. She had light brown hair that fell down over her shoulders, contacts that made her eyes appear deep blue. She wore a tight top with a leather jacket over it, and a pair of tight jeans with holes in them. There was no resemblance to the young girl who used to

veil, dress modestly, and be proud of her dark brown eyes. I looked at my own reflection and felt sick. I hated what Janice Miller had made me do to myself. I hated the power she still held over me. After the attack, I had convinced myself that Allah would understand why I had to take such drastic measures to protect myself. He would understand that the American people around me, the ones who hated Muslims, would not show me the same type of understanding if I continued to veil. I had taken it off and hoped that it would keep me safe. That it would prevent me from getting executed because of my faith; because of a piece of cloth I chose to don my head with. But after hearing a drunk man at a grocery store make a comment about hating Arabs and me not being welcome in *his* country, I had purchased hair dye and contacts and a new wardrobe. I prayed for understanding instead of standing up for myself because for the first time of my life the people around me scared me more than the thought of disappointing Allah.

I could see tears form around the blue contacts, and I forced myself to pull it together. I was here to get answers, not to break down again. I just managed to collect myself before I saw the officer open the door behind the glass wall that separated my side of the telephone booth from the prisoners. However, it wasn't Janice that he led out. Instead, a man I did not recognize walked out and sat down a couple telephones further down. I hadn't even noticed the woman waiting for him, but she happily started talking as soon as he sat down. At first, I felt intimidated by having her there, but then a sense of safety settled over me, one that I hadn't felt in the presence of any other human being in a long time. Especially not a white American woman who might hate my guts for what I believed in. The realization calmed me further, and the next time the door opened, and Janice Miller walked towards me, I felt in control.

She sat down opposite from me but did not look my way or pick up the phone. I didn't know what to do about it. I felt too insecure to slam the window that was separating us to call her attention, so instead, I just waited. After what felt like ages she finally looked up. At first, she looked annoyed, and then a slightly surprised look settled over her face.

"You can't fool me with that look," she said with a smirk on her face. The hatred I remembered in her eyes had dimmed, but it was still there. At first, I didn't know how to respond, my instincts screamed at me to run. But I had come too far to give up, so I asked the one question that had haunted me since she left that night.

“Why did you leave me alive?” My words came out more as a whisper than I had intended them to. I saw how she hung the phone up, how a smirk spread across her face, and how the hatred returned full force to her eyes.