

*"I was raised to believe in myself, to know that I had the power, enabled by a higher power, to do anything I dreamt. I moved to Uganda at 18 because I knew I would be supported (eventually) and loved and that my passion would be respected. From there I studied at University and moved freely between my home in the US and a world in which I was infinitely curious. I had opportunities to live and work in Uganda, India, China, Nepal, Indonesia, Thailand, Rwanda, DRC. I loved it and struggled with it and hated my privilege. I could not understand, and to a certain extent still do not understand why I was born with all the advantages this world has to offer, why I will never fully understand what it means to grow up in a war torn nation or have to choose between my feeding my children and educating them. While I had infinite questions about the world, I had never questioned myself-my ability to make decisions, my ability to trust my instincts, my belief in myself as a capable, compassionate woman. One night in 2006, everything changed. While traveling to Malaysia from Banda Aceh, Indonesia, where I had been working with an Acehnese community development and tsunami relief NGO, to renew my visa, I was attacked. I had met a man on the plane from Medan to Penag, a western man--German to be specific. His English was impeccable and it was comforting to speak freely, not constrained by the strict gender codes of Sharia Law I had been working within in Aceh. There was an immediate level of comfort with Henry, he had a kind, albeit weathered smile-the kind that comes from years of working in the sun. He told me he was working with a sustainable development group outside of Aceh. He hadn't been to Penang before, so I told him there was a great little hostel with live music and hammocks with a delightful selection of used books, it doesn't get much better in the hostel world! We split a cab there and went our separate ways. I wandered around the island, an intoxicating mix of Indian spices, Malaysian delicacies and weathered backpackers. There are beautiful fabrics blowing in the sea-laden breeze, temples and street vendors selling everything you could never need. I came back to the hostel that evening to find a reegea band playing in the courtyard. I listened for a while, but soon decided I was tired and wanted to read in the privacy of my room. I had sprung for a private room with a bathroom and was looking forward to a good night's rest. I was getting my things out of my backpack when I heard a knock at the door. I opened it to find Henry, the man from the plane. He asked to use my restroom since the communal toilets were all the way at the end of the hall. I let him in and turned around to find my*

*book, a title I can no longer remember. Before I knew it, he struck me across the head with a beer bottle, knocking me to the ground, stunned and disoriented. He began beating me and kicking me, yelling in German. He threw me on the bed and began ripping my clothes off and raping me. He used himself and the end of a broom once used to switch on the fan, now an instrument of torture. He slammed my head against the wall and I floated in and out of consciousness, fighting as hard as I could, but constrained by his force and anger. My mind went blank, the room silent, fear-for a short time-left me and I saw myself as an outsider detached from my body. When I had expended all I had, I went limp, he threw me in the corner, spit on me and left me for dead. The music right outside my door had overtaken my screams for help. He walked out the door never to be seen again.*

*That night changed everything. For a long time I did not believe that I was capable of making good decisions, of maintaining my safety or that safety was a reality-instead that I was destined to live in a world in which I was constantly at risk, vulnerable and weak. Growing up an athlete with older brothers to toughen me up, I never knew this side of myself. I had been a strong competitor, and was confident in my ability to defend myself if it ever came to that. I was wrong, as wrong as anyone can be. I had neither the strength nor the capacity to defend myself that night and it shook me deeper than I could have imagined. I felt powerless, alone, and frightened of everything that came into my path.*

*Since then, with the loving support of an incredible family and network of friends and professionals, I have come to a new conclusion. Not that I am destined to live in fear, but that I am still here for a reason. For all intents and purposes, I should have died that night, but I didn't. I survived because I am powerful and whatever it is that over me is the most powerful. I have made conscious decisions every day to take this experience as a part of my fabric to strengthen my ability to love and care for people. A very wise woman once told me, that pain--no matter the cause--understands pain. And there is depth of truth in that statement that cannot be understood by those who have not experienced something that has indelibly changed their lives. There is no doubt that I am a stronger, more*

*compassionate, more grateful woman because of this experience. I have come to realize that not only will I survive this, but I will thrive because nothing that anyone else does to me will define who I am. I make the decision as to what defines me, and it certainly is not anger and rage and violence-but light and strength and love.*