

My Father's Words Helped Me Survive a Brutal Attack and Kidnapping Attempt

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As the man pressed the gun against my head, I heard my dad's voice: *Don't get in that car.*



Ashlee dephillippo as told to Amy Paturel, M.S., M.P.H.

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Content warning: This story contains descriptions of assault.

As the sun set one day in late October, I pulled from my closet a red plaid skirt and black sweater with a velvet collar — the same outfit I had wadded up and thrown in a plastic bag a year before, still soaked with my blood. *I really liked the outfit, and I only wore it once, I thought. Why not?*

My heart raced and my breaths got shorter. I started to wonder if it would be weird to wear it again. Until then, I wasn't really ready to re-immense myself in the memories of when I wore it last: November 2, 1994, the night that changed my life.

It was a cool night, about 1 a.m., and I'd just left a bar in Long Beach, California. The streetlights gave everything a yellow glow. My car was just across the street, about 50 yards away. When I got to the corner, two men pulled up in a Honda Accord. As soon as I stepped off the curb, one of them jumped out of the car, wild-eyed, wrapped his arm around me and pointed a gun to my head and neck.

"You're coming with me, bitch," he muttered into my ear, pushing me toward the idling car with an open back door.

This isn't happening, I thought, as I felt the cold barrel of the handgun firmly pressed against my temple. The man's finger was on the trigger.

Quickly, I shook myself out of denial. *This is happening, I reminded myself*. I was only 21 years old. In an instant, I envisioned two futures: one of me doing all of the things I hadn't yet experienced, and the second of me sprawled out on a dark stretch of road — naked, bloodied, dead. I knew I had to try and fight for the life I hadn't lived yet.

When I was 12 or 13 years old, my dad, a former police officer, taught me how to survive an assault. He'd told me about a case where a heavily pregnant woman simply sat down during an attempted kidnapping. She became dead weight. Her assailants couldn't move her. "Never let an attacker take you to a second location," he'd said. "Try to stay where people can see you."

As the man continued to press the gun against my head, I didn't make any conscious decisions. I operated on instinct, from memory, following the instructions my dad had wired inside my mind.

I heard my dad's voice: *Lean back, but not too far. Flash your jewelry. Give him your bag. Don't get in that car.*

Every time my attacker told me I was coming with him, I said, "No, I'm not. Whatever you want, you can take it right here." I dug my feet into the pavement and slowly leaned back until I could feel my back against his chest, the gun still firmly pressed against my temple. I wanted to show him I was unafraid to push back.

Don't get in that car.

It was like a mantra I kept repeating to myself.

If you're going to die, die in the street where someone might see you.

This inner monologue continued as the gun pressed against my head. Just as I was preparing to go deadweight — to sit down and become immovable — my attacker waved off the car and dragged me by my hair to the steps of a small apartment complex nearby. The driver pulled

the back door shut, drove down the street and waited. The assailant tossed my purse aside, told me to remove my jewelry and felt my breasts to see if I was hiding anything in my bra.

I did as he told me, but I forgot to remove my earrings. When he saw them, he threw me down. "When a man tells a woman to do something, she does it," he hissed. I felt a devious satisfaction that he'd found me uncooperative.

He pistol-whipped me, sending the butt of the gun across the back of my head, over and over and over again. My head crashed to one side and then to the other as blood splattered across the pavement. Every time he hit me, I cried out, hoping someone would hear me and call 911. No one heard.



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With each blow to the head, I got knocked down, but I instinctively kept getting back up. After the third hit, I started to raise my head again when a voice inside my head said, *Stop. Stay down.*

I stopped and faked being unconscious. I prayed he wouldn't notice my head suspended above the step — that my long hair would fill the gap.

Instead of going numb, I stayed present, coaching myself: *Keep talking to yourself. Try to stay conscious. Hold still. Listen closely. Whichever way he runs, run in the opposite direction. Call 911. Repeat this until they leave.*

His last words to me were, "Just lay there, bitch!" As I lay motionless on the blood-soaked steps pretending to be dead, I sensed his footsteps running away from me. I heard a car door creak open, then snap shut, followed by the screech of the car wheels speeding away from the scene. As soon as they were gone, I leapt to my feet and ran in the opposite direction, which ironically led right back to the bar I had left minutes before.

The bar was only a block from where I stood, but it looked like it was miles away. I felt like Alice moving through the Looking Glass, traveling through a tunnel. I couldn't feel myself running, but I could feel the cold air on my face and I could hear my feet pounding against

the pavement as I ran. When I finally arrived at the bar, I shouted, "Call 911," above the hum of rowdy bar patrons.

With many targeted assaults, there are pre-incident warning signs. Safety experts say to always trust your gut feeling and act.

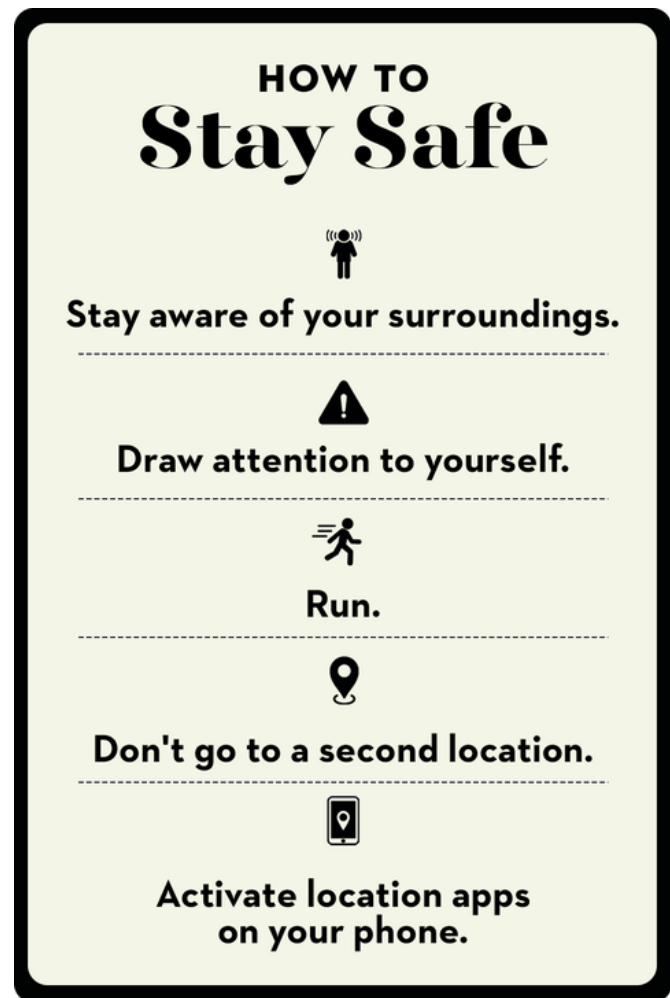
The police arrived within minutes. As it turned out, the gunmen who attacked me had been assaulting several women across different Southern California cities for days, including an actress in Beverly Hills who was raped in front of her elementary school-aged child. Just hours before the men found me in Long Beach, they had carjacked a woman, stolen her car and raped her at gunpoint before leaving her naked in a marshy area off the Pacific Coast Highway. She was their fifth or sixth assault in three days. I was likely their seventh.

With bar rags to soak up the blood from my head wound, I headed to the hospital in an ambulance, and, in the wee hours of the morning, to the first of three police lineups.

The morning after the attack, I returned to the crime scene with my father to make sure I had all the street names right. That night, I asked a friend to go back with me to the crime scene again. I asked her only to listen as I stood in each location of the attack and explained what happened. I needed to recount every moment from start to finish, to remember every detail, so I could start to release the trauma and pave a path forward. I didn't want to be too afraid to leave my house.

| I couldn't stand the idea of the attackers taking anything from me.

In the weeks that followed, I was waking up two to three times a night drenched in sweat and shaking in terror. After every nightmare and flashback, I rewrote the ending in my mind. Sometimes I disarmed the attacker with a leg sweep like something out of a Chuck Norris film. Other times, I went through the Police Academy, hunted down my assailants and threw them behind bars. No matter the ending, I always prevailed. Rewriting my story via positive affirmation slowly helped my mind start to heal, and my nightmares eventually stopped.



Then there were the physical wounds. For months, I couldn't lie down, sit up straight or even wear jeans because of a broken tailbone. I had to lie in a certain position, propped up with pillows. The slightest movement produced excruciating pain. Doctors stitched up the five-inch gash at the back of my head, leaving me with clumps of blood-soaked hair I couldn't wash (because of the stitches). I eventually cut them out with a pair of kitchen scissors and gave myself a layered cut to help mask the area the nurses shaved before the doctor stitched me up.

Two weeks after the attack, the stitches still in my skull, police captured the two brothers and one cousin responsible for my assault. They were later sentenced to life plus 99 years. During the year following the attack, I became a different person. My hair grew frizzy where the stitches had been. I had a near-constant stabbing pain in my tailbone, but I also discovered that taking a beating shaped me. I became stronger and more perseverant. I even spoke at events and women's groups about my experience.

Still, I couldn't stand the idea of the attackers taking anything from me, even something as insignificant as a sweater and a skirt. I had thought about throwing them away, but I rarely buy new clothes, and I was irritated that I'd only wore them once. As the one-year mark approached, I finally hand-washed the outfit, watching as the bloodstains dissipated in a pool of water.

That night, I reached into my closet and pulled out the outfit, taking a deep breath and saying to myself "all right, let's do this." Something about that moment felt satisfying, like maybe I had won. The date, November 2nd, still haunted me, but I had reclaimed my life. Eventually, I was able to reclaim the date, too: More than a decade after the attack, my twin daughters were born on November 2.

Today, all four of my children know pieces of my story. They know how to knock out a taillight from inside a trunk and to scream if they feel threatened. They also know the lifesaving lesson I was so lucky to learn from my dad: No matter what happens, you have to do everything in your power to never let an attacker take you to a second location. More than that, they know what it means to stand in their power, a skill I can only hope they've learned from me.

Stay Safe Strategies

Nearly one in five women has experienced an attempted or completed rape during her lifetime, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). With many of these assaults, there are pre-incident warning signs. "If your sixth sense starts buzzing, you need to act," says Michael Farrow, a security consultant based in Southern California.

Indeed, studies show that people who have experienced targeted violent acts often have a gut feeling their situation could lead to harm. Here are five ways to stay safe.

1. **Stay aware of your surroundings.** "Too many people text, talk on the phone or look down when they're walking or driving," says Richard Birdsall, a former police detective with the Long Beach Police Department in Long Beach, California, who was instrumental in apprehending Ashlee's attackers. Such distractions make you an easy target.
2. **Draw attention to yourself.** Walk with intention — and loud footsteps — and keep your keys out so you don't have to fumble for them when you get to your car or your front door. If someone threatens you, yell, scream, flail your arms. Attackers like to feel in control. "Victims are often afraid to anger their attackers, but nothing you do to fight back will change their intent," Birdsall says. If you do something to catch them off guard, if you're uncooperative and hold firm, they're more likely to get frustrated and leave. Birdsall also recommends yelling "fire," because people are more likely to come watch a fire than chase down a perpetrator.
3. **Run.** Rather than fighting back, run! While a tool or pepper spray within arm's reach can be helpful, your objective isn't to gash an assailant in the eye or knee him in the groin; it's to escape. Make a plan to run and scream. Then practice that plan until it's wired into your brain. According to Ashlee, having a plan in place saved her life. "I didn't let my attackers take me to a second location, because I had already made the decision before I was presented with the danger," she says.
4. **Don't let an assailant take you to a second location.** The more control you give the attacker, the less likely you are to survive, experts say. "Rape-homicide case reviews have shown that victims who were taken away from other people in a vehicle where the person may have tools to cause harm are less likely to survive," says Farrow.
5. **Activate your panic button and locator apps on your cell phone.** Locator apps like [Life360](#) and [GeoZilla](#) (both are available for iOS and Android) provide a phone's exact location to trusted loved ones. The panic button feature on iOS and Android systems are invaluable, too. "With the panic button, it now only takes a sweep of a finger to ready a device, press the virtual button and alert not only the authorities to your distress, but also those who know your plans," Birdsall says.

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