

Mr. Stranger

I froze. I froze like I do any time anything even remotely triggers my acute stress response. I am, and always have been, a freezer. When I thaw, I typically start fawning, but somehow, I muttered the words, "What are you doing?" You did not respond verbally. One of us moved your hand, but I was already numb to it. I remember thinking you were asleep and thanking whatever there is to thank that you were not intentionally assaulting me. The darkness that masked the night was still slowly invading, even though I had not noticed it yet. I moved off the blood-colored sheets and Scout came running after me. Maybe she moved first; I am honestly not quite sure. What I do know is that I was trying to get her leash on her when you came out of your bedroom, very much awake.

I froze. Words were coming out of your mouth, but I was not able to look at you; honestly, I was not listening. I think I responded but I am still not sure. I know I do not remember much of anything that you tried to say that night. My brain seemed blank, but I know that my defenses had risen. My subconscious was protecting me from you. I do not know if I was shaking then, but I am now. I took Scout outside. It was cold. I shivered and saw my breath. Goosebumps were covering my skin but not from the temperature. The darkness around me was abyssal, as if I was plunged into the depths of the ocean. The stars that illuminated the sky stared at me mockingly, smiling with sharp, slicing teeth. After returning from the only true thing I would feel that night, Scout and I retreated to my room, where I shut the door and did not even attempt to go back to sleep. Seconds, minutes, maybe hours passed, and you came knocking on my door.

I froze. I do not remember much. All I know is that you ended up crying on my floor and I felt almost nothing at all. Every word you said was dipped in poison and, though I do not remember the things said to justify what you had done, I can still taste them. At some point, you

left. I did not cry. I did not sleep. I do not remember much of anything honestly. I dropped Scout off for her grooming appointment after the sun rose. Despite this, darkness was still looming, so I tried to seek shelter with your sister, but she was busy. Between Scout's grooming appointment and my therapy appointment, I somehow wrote an essay for school. Then it was time, and I told my therapist.

I froze. She told me that I could not stay in your house any longer. Only then did I begin to thaw. I called your other sister. The one that lived much further away. She did not know what was going on, but still allowed me to spend the night with her. I packed up everything I could think to pack. I did not know how long I would be gone. I told you I was leaving and then I left. I only spent one night with her, and then I stayed with your eldest son until I found a place of my own.

I froze. My therapist was just telling me that I sound like I am reporting this on the news. Something is missing from the story: facts, but no feelings. I do not remember feeling much other than numb. Shock held onto me quickly and took its time letting me go again. Now that I am safe, I can actually process it. Sometimes when I try, I freeze; I always thaw; I always breathe.

I have not reported you. I am at odds with myself about whether I should. Everything in me screams that you deserve to pay for what you did to me, but my life would drastically change again. If you were anyone else to me, I do not believe I would hesitate, but, then again, I hesitated last time too. I cannot bring myself to turn my world upside down again just to get you behind bars. I am sick and tired of feeling as though I have to keep secrets from people about this. I might report you just to get it over with, but I am so scared of what will happen. I freeze; I thaw; I breathe.

I have such strong convictions about people who take advantage of other people sexually. I believe that, in a way, it is much like murder. People like that take someone's life from them. You took my life from me. Maybe not physically, but the person I once was died and can never come back. Because of that, I think that people who commit sexual crimes should also receive the death penalty. Do I want you dead? I do not know. Probably not really. I do feel like it might be easier for me if you were. I would not have to worry about you doing what you did to someone else. I think you would still haunt me though. I freeze; I thaw; I breathe.

I am very angry with you. I know that this is a valid response, but it is hard for me to dive much deeper than the anger. I know there are other things submerged in the sea, but I do not wish to dive into the depths again. Shame, guilt, and maybe a little bit of fear. The anger is only the defense I have put up around my heart so you do not hurt me again. I know I am hurt. I know I am not running away and refusing to deal with it like you try to claim, simply because I am not speaking with you. We have already tried to have conversations about this. I told you that I was not willing to have a conversation with you about it until you admitted that what you did was sexual assault. That is a boundary I have set, and I am sticking with it. I freeze; I thaw; I breathe.

I do not know much about myself anymore. What I do know is this: my body still feels it, even if I cannot express it. I am shaking. My thoughts are fast, as though there are no thoughts at all, but I am sure that they are just going too fast for me to catch. My body is so exhausted that I should be able to sleep, but I cannot. I feel the pain you put me through in my bones because my brain cannot comprehend the loss. I do not know who I am anymore, and I know you are to blame. I am mourning the me I never got to be. I am mostly numb because you reached inside my chest and ripped my heart out. The hole you left spills with words instead of blood. I have always been a poet, but the stanzas have escaped me today. There is no way to convey how the

betrayal has hurt me. It is something not many will ever truly understand. You definitely will never understand. I freeze; I thaw; I breathe.

I hope you never read this. You might somehow get a glimpse of it if I decide to share it anywhere, but honestly, I do not care. If I had the strength to say this to your face, I would. I am not going to avoid talking about this to protect you anymore. You have not shown any intention of changing. If any consequences come from me speaking freely, they were only ever your consequences to begin with. I am, however, still shaking at the thought of being in the same room as you. This is not the end of my growth; this was not even the beginning. Even though the people closest to me hurt me most and left me guessing<sup>1</sup> and sometimes I still freeze; I will always thaw; I will always breathe.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to "Breathe" by NF from his album *Therapy Session*