

Episode 97: Karen was attacked while hiking

As human beings, one of the things we crave is community. We need social interaction, and we want to feel like we belong in a group. Whether it's family, or co-workers, or a church, or a local club – it seems like we just have a need to be with other people.

But for some people, there are times when we like being alone. I ride my bike every morning, and it's something I really look forward to – just being out there for an hour, just me and my own thoughts. And maybe a podcast or two of course.

For some reason, in our modern society, there's sometimes kind of a stigma with doing things by yourself. I know some people who would feel a bit awkward going to see a movie alone. That doesn't bother me at all though. If there's a movie that comes out that looks really good to me, it might be something that my wife wouldn't want to see – so I don't mind just going to see it by myself.

My guest today, Karen, lives in South Africa, and she's the same way. She always kind of liked being by herself, especially in the outdoors, with no other people around.

One afternoon she was out on a solo trail hike, really enjoying the solitude and being surrounded by nature, with no one else around. But she wasn't the only one on the trail that day.

Scott

One of the aspects of this story is poaching. How common is that in this area and what animals are usually targeted for that?

Karen

Poaching is a very big subject. When you talk about poaching, most people think of it as, sort of, big-game – killing elephants, rhinos, or

endangered species for valuable body parts. There's a lot more to it than that. Poaching basically just means illegal hunting. The kinds of poachers that I ran into that day are not doing big-game: they're not hunting for meat, they're not hunting for skins or anything like that. It's actually a highly organized illegal gambling network. They take dogs into nature reserves. I'm not too sure how it works or where the money comes in but it has something to do with betting on the dogs which they sent to track and kill game in the nature reserves.

Scott

This happened in the midland region of KwaZulu-Natal where you were hiking. That's pretty close to where you live, right?

Karen

Yeah. I stay in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. There are mistbelts, mountainous valleys, and hills - very green, very lush, very, very beautiful. This particular reserve is - I mean, there are many in the area - but this one is about a six-minute drive from my house.

Scott

And it's huge too! I read that it was 900 hectares which - for the Americans listening - is about 2,200 acres. So, this place is really big!

Karen

Is it that big? I didn't realize it was that big. I'm terrible with units of measurement. We would actually consider it relatively small, to be honest. So that's interesting.

Scott

And what kind of wild animals would you expect to see when you're out there?

Karen

That's actually a very good question. It's a safe hiking region. It doesn't have any of the "Big Five". It doesn't have any dangerous predators in there. There are probably some leopards in there but they're impossible to find because they're so shy and secretive. But basically, there are no major predators in there that would be a threat to anybody's safety. It's not like in the States where you guys go hiking in Alaska and might run into bears. You won't have that problem there. So, it's a really pleasant hike with lots of birdlife. I've been going to this particular reserve since I was a child all through my life. Every time I went there, it's a wonderful scene with antelope, deer, and so many different species. It used to be teeming with them. Then, I went overseas for a long time. Every time I come back home to South Africa and visit this nature reserve -- the last few times that I went there before I moved back properly, there was a massive sudden lack of animals. It's still fantastic, full of life, and beautiful, but you don't really see those zebras or deers out there. You used to be tripping over them and, suddenly, there were gone. There was just this massive drop in the population. Of course, now, I know that it's because of the poaching. I just couldn't figure it out at first. Because I've been going there since I was a kid, it always had strong sentimental value to me. I've always loved this specific particular reserve. So to me, it's always been a place that's very familiar and very beautiful whether it's full of wildlife or not. I mean, it's nice if there's wildlife, of course, but I like to just be there.

Scott

It's wonderful that you don't have to worry about any predatory animals. However, the humans are another story.

Karen

Yeah.

Scott

So, on that day, when you were there, how far did you plan to go on this hike?

Karen

It was just a day hike. I wasn't planning on doing anything spectacular. I kinda went there on a whim. It was a beautiful day with beautiful weather. I woke up early and I thought that it'd be really nice to go for a hike and have a swim in the river. So I was really just taking it easy. It probably helps if I, sort of, describe what the terrain in there is like. It's basically a very, very deep valley - very, very steep. What you do when you arrive there is you sign in at the reception and then drive. Around the rim of this valley, there's a dirt road. You can park your car at various points on this dirt road. Wherever you leave your car, you can hike all the way down to where it's flat, at the bottom, which is where the river is. You can do whatever you want down there but getting in and out requires hiking very, very steep trails through the valley.

Scott

So, as you go further down, you're kinda thinking in the back of your head that you have to go through that steep mountainside to get back up to the dirt road.

Karen

Exactly. So, if it's a hot day and you went for a swim in the river, by the time you get to the top again, you're going to be sweaty and hot again because it's such hard work and quite strenuous in its own way.

Scott

So for a hike like this, what do you wear and what do you carry with you?

Karen

I was wearing a swimsuit underneath because I knew I would be swimming. I was also wearing - not jeans, but they look like jeans, but they're not as thick of fabric - just sort of a stretch pants that have a little bit of weight to them because of pushing through the undergrowth and stuff. I was also wearing just a T-shirt and a cap - super simple. And I had a fantastic pair of old-school hiking boots - the ones that look a bit like Dr. Martens. They are a pair of 36-years-old old-school lace-up hiking boots. In my pack are really basic medical aid, a few Ziploc bags - I could put my phone and stuff in so that it wouldn't get wet - a small towel, something to eat, and a pepper spray. So, I actually had people come after me for hiking. I have some thoughts on victim-blaming - we can get into that later if you want to - but I'm not a complete idiot. So I did bring my pepper spray with me. I've actually made, like, kind of a belt holster thing so that it would be around my waist and I would just completely forget about it. So I'd be hiking and forget that it was there, but it was secure on my hip. Your pepper spray or your Mace is only as good as you can reach it. If it's at the bottom of your bag, you may as well not even be carrying it. So, I always made sure that mine was easily accessible if I needed to grab it.

Scott

Obviously, now, after this, you're more aware of your surroundings, the dangers of being alone, and that kind of thing. But how much did you

think about that before it happened? I mean, obviously, you had some thought because you were carrying Mace, but was it something you were very much aware of?

Karen

I was aware of it. The way I see it - it sounds silly to me now in a way - I would always refuse to live my life in fear. There's always going to be a certain degree of danger in solo hiking or hiking of any type. I don't necessarily mean being attacked by people or animals - just spraining your ankle on a hike can create a life or death situation. You should know that when you go for any hike. I can prepare for the worse by having pepper spray on me. I have had combat training which turned out to be worth a lot, actually. I'm as prepared as I can be. The odds of it happening to me are still very, very low but if something does happen, I do have a few things in place to help me. I could rant and rave a little bit about this but do you want to live your life always dicing it on those odds or do you want to just live your life? I mean, it's not like I was walking into a war zone - I was going into nature. No one had been attacked there before. No one has been attacked there. What can you do?

Scott

Yeah, it's a calculated risk.

Karen

Absolutely. Again, it's not like I was completely naive. I don't know if that makes it better or worse but I did it anyway. I wasn't naive. Should the worst were to happen, I was prepared for that. Even when I was thinking, "It's okay if it happens to me," I still did my due diligence.

Scott

Take us from when you started hiking to what happened that day.

Karen

I arrived, I signed in at the reception, I got in my car, I drove through the gates for, maybe, about 10 minutes - maybe a bit more, I couldn't actually tell the exact time - along the dirt road. It's about a third of the way so it's not a massive distance but it's also not the kind of distance you want to walk. Then, I stopped my car and I hiked down. I knew the spots of the river that I wanted to go to. I had a specific area in mind. I love this particular hike because you go by these abandoned A-frame, sort of, camp on stilt. Because it's wasn't been used for so long, it looked really creepy and I liked that. It was like walking into the Blair Witch project-type area. So, I love that hike, I love visiting that area, and I love this spot by the river. So, that was my plan. I parked my car and it's a really lovely hike. It's all grassland at the top and, then, it rapidly starts to descend. As soon as you get in, you get engulfed with shadow and it becomes really dense with vegetation as you're hiking through indigenous forest.

Scott

Were you following a trail or is it just hacking your way through this brush?

Karen

No, this is a set trail. It's very narrow and because it's so sheer, kind of, zigzag and there are sort of little drop-off points so you have to be a bit careful. Again, like I said, with solo hiking, be careful because just falling off a drop-off point will get you quite badly injured because it's pretty steep. It's a really refreshing hike and it gets you nicely exercised but you have to think a little bit because of how narrow it is. It's usually a bit slippery as well because the canopy cover is quite moist. So I hiked down

there and messed around at the top a little bit. I zigzagged off to these teeny tiny little side trails and was just, sort of, reacquainting myself with some trails that I hadn't been on in a while. I reached my Blair Witch house area and hung out there for a little bit. Then, I went to the river to go and swim. I was really just taking my time. I was just enjoying the day by myself. I went to the river. I had a really wonderful swim. The water was freezing - that's always fantastic. I haven't gone back there and I really miss it actually. It's such a lovely place to swim and walk on boulders. There's quite a nice current at certain sections. There are rock pools on the sides that you can just hang out in. It's just blissful. It's lovely. I sat on the rocks for a while. I had my lunch. I'm really glad that I ate. It had been a good couple of hours between the hike down, the messing around, and the time in the river - I was already there for a good few hours.

Scott

And in this first part of the hike, you didn't encounter any other people?

Karen

No. Not at that point. Let me think. No, sorry. I did actually pass 2 other hikers at the bottom by the river. I remember thinking that it's unusual and I was kind of bummed that I bumped into them. I didn't want to see people. I really liked being on my own. I was thinking, "Damn, there are other people nearby. Am I going to have to switch spots? Am I going to have to go somewhere else? Can I stay where I want to be?" I didn't want to be around people. So, my plan was that I would leave the river, I would hike back to my car, I wanted enough time to drive back towards the front-end of the park, I would visit another little waterfall there that I really like - which is a super easy hike just to finish off on - just go and sit and look at the waterfall for a little bit and, then, go home. I planned to be home by 4.00PM because of the shape of the valley and how steep it is. Once the sun starts going down, even if it's still sunny topside, the valley will cast a shadow.

So, if you're in the valley, it gets dark much faster. I was watching the sun and I was thinking-- you've got to factor in how much time it's going to take you to hike to the top. I hate rush hiking. I like to take my time. I don't like sprinting. I didn't want to be chased out of there. I wanted to take my time and enjoy the hike but I was mindful of the fact that, "Okay, the sun's gonna start dropping in about an hour or so and I want to be topside by the time that happens." I was done swimming. I put my clothes back on and, then, I scrambled up the bank again. Now, alongside the river is a flat trail. I think I mentioned that it's just a trail that runs flat along the bottom following the river. From the river there, you can find different trails up to the top again. I had to walk this trail on flat ground for quite a while to find the trail that takes me back up to my car and it's not straight. There are a few sorts of curbs in it but it's basically flat.

I came to the top of the bank. When I turned left, I saw two men and dogs standing there on the road and I thought, "Uh-oh," because I could see they didn't have backpacks but they had dogs. This is a dog-free nature reserve so they're not allowed to have dogs in there. They have dogs off-leash in there and they were not dressed like hikers, so I knew immediately that they were poachers. They weren't badly dressed or anything like that, but this is not a typical scene at all. The dogs were a red flag which I knew immediately. I looked at them. They weren't right in front of me, they were quite a few meters back, but I saw them and they saw me. The second they saw me, they turned and they ran away because what they doing there is wrong and illegal. We all know that. They know that. So, that was probably the first mistake I made in all of this. They ran and I thought, "Oh God, this isn't good. You can be pretty sure that these are bad people." I mean, they are there for nefarious purposes, at least. They know I've seen them. They don't want to be seen so they've run away. Then, I thought, "Okay, cool. They're not going to engage with me because they don't want to be seen."

So I thought, "Alright, I'm going to stand here. I'm going to wait for about 10 minutes and give them lots of time to get far away and, then, I'm going to go," because they ran in the direction that I wanted to go to get back onto the trail that would take me to my car. So, I obviously didn't want to cross paths with them but I had to kind of make a decision. The alternative option would have been to go in the opposite direction and find a different trail up to the top and, then, walking along the dirt road at the top back to my car. However, I wasn't too sure how far away that trail was, what it was like, or anything like that. So, I thought I'd rather just go the way I know than be stuck mucking around at the bottom here for ages and ages. I'm just going to give them a good head start and, then, I'm going to go. So, you could say that was my first mistake.

I waited a while and, then, I thought, "I'm pretty sure that they would be gone by now." I started walking back through the same way that I came in from. Around the bend, I saw them standing there - I don't want to say that they're waiting for me although that's possible. Here's the weird thing - they were really friendly, they were really nice, they greeted me, they smiled at me, they were young guys. If I see them on the street, I wouldn't have thought that they are poachers, I would have just thought that they were young and cool-looking dudes. So, they greeted me and I greeted them. Because conservation is something very near and dear to my heart, I said to them, "I hope you guys aren't poaching in here." And he said, "No, we're just looking for our dog. We've lost our dog. We're looking for our dog." And I thought, "Well, that's still not okay but I still went along." I mean, I knew this was bad and I knew it was probably dangerous, but there was nothing yet to tell me that this was really gonna kick-off. I was thinking, "Holy shit! This is terrible! These guys are in here?! They're with their hunting dogs. I need to get onto that trail as quickly as possible and get into my car. Then, the first thing I'm going to do is go straight to the reception and tell them, 'Hey, you guys have got a serious problem in here. You've got poachers in here, on a warm day, on a weekend, when there are quite a few hikers in the area. They are brazen enough to be there by the river on a day like today. You guys need to sort it out!'" I was thinking, "Shit, this is bad!" So, that was my

plan. I was thinking to just hurry up, just get onto the trail, and get to the car as quickly as I can.

I walked for a little while actually and, then, I heard this panting behind me. It was one of the hunting dogs and it was on my heels. I didn't do anything but it stayed behind me. It was tracking me. These dogs are highly trained. It's very possible that they sent it off to track me - I don't know for sure but it is a possibility. So, I had this dog and I kept hearing it panting and I knew not to run because if I run, that's gonna incite its predator instinct and, then, it will chase me. There are so many decisions you have to make on what you don't know in these situations and just try to make your best-educated guess on what to do. So, I've got a dog following me and I was hoping that they would call it back, but they weren't calling it back. Then, I thought, "I can't risk it chasing me."

Then, from behind me, I heard one of the guys said, "Give us your bag or you'll die here." And then I thought, "Oh shit, I am really in trouble here! This is very bad." I just did the math quickly: there were 2 strong young men here, there's a bunch of dogs, and there's me. Whatever they want to do, I don't know how much of a say I'm going to have in it, I don't know what I will be able to do to control the situation beyond what they want to do, which is the most hopeless and helpless feeling. I don't know how to describe it. You're completely at their mercy. What if something bad is going to happen and there's nothing you can do? It's such a horrific feeling. And I thought, "Just pretend that you didn't hear him." As I'm walking, I'm looking to my right - to my left is the river and to my right is where the valley starts rushing up towards the top. So, I'm looking for breaks in the brush, thinking, "If I can get to the trail, I can fold up the trail and, at least, still have higher ground and, maybe, throw stuff at them. I was trying to think about how I'll be able to protect myself in this situation. I didn't have a lot of options. I remember just holding my pepper spray. It was literally at that time when he first struck me that I went, "Okay, it's going down. Something's gonna go down here." I took my pepper spray in my hand and I made sure I was holding it really tight. I tried to walk faster but I didn't want to excite the dog too

much. So, I was just walking past desperately looking for any sign that this trail was coming up and I was already starting to get weak.

It's funny because I always used to think that adrenaline would make you strong but it really doesn't. It makes you feel quite weak. I felt like my legs were, kind of, melting and my knees were, sort of, dissolving. I thought, "Shit. I have to try and keep it together," and I was trying to talk my body into cooperating with me because I'm probably going to need to do something. I was just praying for some sort of physical strength to stay with me.

So, I didn't respond to them at all. He said, "Give me your bag!" Then, one guy came running up behind me and he said, "I want sex," and I just said, "No!" The funny thing as well is that he was asking me quite politely, "Please, please! I want sex. Please give me sex. I want sex," and I kept on saying, "No!" It's amazing - the stuff that comes out of your mouth. I turned to him and I said, "I don't even know you." Because taking it at face value, it was just so bizarre to me that he would ask me as if I'm going to say "Yes.". Like, in what world would I be okay with that? It was just so bizarre.

Scott

The fact that he was asking politely is almost creepier than if he was just demanding.

Karen

Yeah, it is. You don't quite know what to make of it which is why I think we were almost conversing because it wasn't this aggressive. I mean, okay, one guy had threatened to kill me but beyond that, there was an exchange. It was almost like he was trying to create a space where we're negotiating or something. So, I said, "No". And as I'm walking, his dogs

were groping me. So, he starts trying to, sort of, grab me as I'm walking and I just stopped and stood. I don't know why I didn't spray him with pepper spray then. I couldn't stand that they were behind me the whole time. Now, he started trying to touch me. I've got my back to them and I can't cope with that. So, I said to him, "Go ahead! Leave me alone and go ahead!" Then, I pointed out the trail and the direction that I wanted them to go and he stood there and smiled at me. He just stood there smiling. We just had a kind of standoff. Again, he didn't do anything. He just stood there. When I turn to face them, he stopped trying to touch me and he just looked at me. I tried to tell him where to go and he smiled. There was a couple of seconds like that. I don't know what to do. I have to go so I started walking again. Same thing: he didn't follow me at first.

As I'm walking, he's not following me anymore but I still hear the dog panting behind me. This dog is still tracking me. Then, suddenly, I hear these rushing footsteps. He was running and trying to tackle me to the ground. So, he came up behind me, he tried to sort of hook me around the waist and knock me down onto the ground, but I didn't fall, I stayed on my feet. I think that was the first surprise for them: I didn't go down. I think they were expecting me to just collapse but I didn't. I stood on my feet. The other guy had run up as well. So now, I was facing the two of them. So now, three of us were facing each other. And then, they started saying, "Give us sex or we'll kill you!" Then, the other guy punched and hit me in the face just by my left eye." He got me pretty good but, again, I didn't go down, I stayed on my feet. I can only attribute this to boxing training, honestly. I've done two years of boxing training with amazing guys, not just for fitness but also for sparring - so, I've been in sparring situations.

So, this guy punches me in the face and I had this voice in my head say to me, "Hey, you're in a fight now and you know how to fight, so you need to fight!" So, I left hooked him and I got him on the jaw. It wasn't a spectacularly hard punch. Again, something from the adrenaline had really sapped the strength out of me - I felt like jelly. It took hard work to move but I still got him at the jaw and he stumbled back. The look of surprise on his face was beautiful. When I think back on this, it's one of

those moments that when I look back, I felt good about that. He didn't see that coming at all. There was no expectation that I would actually attack back.

Scott

Yeah, and everybody listening right now probably feels really good about that too.

Karen

Yeah. I just wished that it had been harder. There was this sort of moment where he was a bit stunned, then, it all just becomes a jumble. I sprayed my pepper spray. I finally remembered that I had it in my hand. I couldn't get their eyes, though. One guy knocked it out of my hand very quickly and I was so furious with myself because when I took it out of its holster, I said to myself earlier, "You do not let go of this. No matter what happens, you keep hold of this," but they got it out of my hand almost immediately. In between that, I get punched a few more times. I managed to get a couple of jabs back in. This is not elegant fighting. This is really messy. This is me just trying to stay on my feet. For every hit that they get in, I tried to get one back. Then, the other guy comes to my side, grabbed my right arm, pulled me onto the ground and, then, I was off my feet, I was on the ground. So I hit the ground. The guy picked up my pepper spray, he held it in my face and he said, "You see this?! You see this?!" And I was staring at my own pepper spray. They didn't spray me, though, which got me wondering. I think, to a certain degree, they wanted my compliance - if that makes sense, I don't know for sure. I'll never understand why-- I'm very glad that they didn't spray me. It's kind of strange that he threatened me with it without actually attacking me with it.

Scott

That is very unusual. If he had done that, it could have changed the whole outcome of this.

Karen

Yeah. Big time.

Scott

But it should have been so clear to them, at this point, that you were not going to comply?

Karen

Well, this was the only thing that I had really going for me. Although it's two against one, the only thing I could do was keep showing them over and over again that, whatever they were going to do, I was not going to make it easy for them. That was really my only option - to make it as difficult for them as I could manage - and that is what I was going for the whole time. It's why I was so mad at myself when I dropped the pepper spray. When it went to the ground, I knew this is a game-changer. Whatever small victories I'd had, I was on my feet. Who knew what was gonna happen? One guy starts grabbing me again and trying to get my clothes off while I'm fighting him. I'm trying to fight him.

At one point, I got knocked back onto my back. As soon as my head hit the ground, the guy who was standing over me lifted his foot and stood on my head. He pressed his boots onto the side of my face and pushed my face into the earth. He was pinning me by the head under his boot. There's really not a lot you can do when someone's standing on your head. It was just so despicable. Then, the guy said to me, "As soon as I'm pinned, I can't fight anymore, at least not as effectively." The guy said to me, "Don't scream." It suddenly occurred to me that I hadn't screamed

even once in this entire thing so far. I thought, "Yeah, screaming is a great idea! I should do that!" Then, I screamed. Even as I screamed, even if someone hears you, there's no way they're gonna know where to find you. Even if they have a rough idea of where to look, they weren't able to get to you very quickly because of the nature of the terrain, so I knew it couldn't really do much good.

Then, in between him groping me and stuff, I don't really know what happened - I disassociated for a little while for just a second or two - there's a black space where I suddenly came to. I realized that I wasn't fighting anymore, that I was just lying completely still, that this guy was standing on my head. His friend was, kind of, kneeling in front of me between my legs and trying to get my clothes off and I wasn't doing anything - I was just lying completely still while he was touching me. At some point, my pants ripped and he was trying to touch me between my legs. Then, I realized that he's gonna rape me now or he's getting ready to rape me. From this blank state of nothingness, I suddenly woke up and registered that this is real, that this is the last chance, that this is my last moment to do something because if he does rape me, they're probably going to kill me. Even if they don't, I will kill myself because I won't know how to live with it. I just knew that there's no way I can survive this in one way or the other. If this happens, I'm not going to come back and I can't cope with it.

So, there was this voice in my head that was just trying to get me to rally and it's just this realization that this really was the last chance that I had to stop this. I don't know where I got the strength from but I pulled my knee back and I kicked him square in the chest. In a way, it's an advantage that I've disassociated because I've been lying passively, so he really wasn't expecting it. So, I got a solid and hard hit on the chest and he fell backward. As soon as he did that, the guy who was standing on my head - I don't know why, maybe, he was surprised - he lifted his boot and I was able to move out from underneath his shoe and then, I was just kicking again. I was on the ground and, now, I was just thrashing. Then the guy said to his friend, "Let's just go." It was the guy who was standing on my head who said, "Let's just go." I don't think it was

because of that one specific power moments. I think it was just the fact that I had not really stopped fighting throughout and I was making it clear that I was going to keep fighting - so, it wasn't worth it and it wasn't working for them.

Somehow, my backpack had come off my back but it was, sort of, still at my elbow, kind of, at my arm. Then, one guy still has the presence of mind to bend down to grab and pull my pack. There was a bizarre moment when I was actually fighting him because I didn't want him to take my pack, so I was holding my arm close to my chest to stop him from pulling it away. Then, I realized, "Are you crazy? They are trying to leave! Let them go! Let them take the goddamn pack!" And I let them go. They grabbed my pack, they ran off, the dogs followed them, and they were gone.

Scott

So it's like a combination of relief and, obviously, shock.

Karen

I don't think I really had a minute to celebrate. I just laid there for a minute or two, probably disassociated. Then I realized that I'm still lying on the road and they could come back. The least I can do is, maybe, hide so that if they do come around, I'm not immediately obvious. So, I crawled off the road, I crawled down this little bank towards the riverside into the brush there, and I hid there behind some bushes. I just laid there in the dirt and I tried to get my breathing under control. Then, I tried to make myself as still and quiet as I could, and I just hunkered down and listened. I was listening to the sound of the dogs coming back, I was listening to the sound of voices and footsteps. I just tried to make myself as still and small as possible and, then, I just hid and I listened. That was all I did. There's no thought. There's just listening. Now, I know how prey animals feel when they're hiding in the undergrowth. When you see

a rabbit quivering in the grass, I know exactly how it feels. Time does a very, very strange thing when you've got that much adrenaline in your system. It could have been anywhere from ten minutes to half an hour.

Somewhere in that point, I realized, "Okay. The longer you stay here, the worse you actually make it for yourself." Again, there's no guarantee that they won't come back. They threatened to kill me repeatedly throughout the attack. They kept on saying, "We'll kill you." It's hard to explain that to people because these words are just words, but when they are directed at you like that, you really feel them - they really mean something. You understand the full weight of that kind of threat when someone says, "I'll kill you," and they mean it. So, I've sort of shaken them off but they would have realized that I'm weak, that I'm injured, and they might say, "Hey, she's still alone. She couldn't have gotten far. Let's just go back and stab her." So, I realized that I need to get away from this spot. I have to be somewhere that they wouldn't expect to find me. I figured that I got to move because I was starting to feel a little bit safe. Although I'm still not completely safe, I needed to move. I picked myself up and I started walking. This time, I had to just commit myself to go in a direction that I didn't know, muddling through and finding a trail. I mean, it's pretty intuitive. I knew I needed to go up to get to the dirt road. It was just a case of how to get there, but I knew the general direction to go in. So, I started walking and I felt so exposed on that road, on that bottom trail. I couldn't wait to cut up into the undergrowth, but it's very steep, it's got thorn bushes, it's really overgrown and wild. You can't just go up. You have to look for a break. You have to look for a way that you can push through. The whole while that I was walking, I was desperately searching for something that looked like I could get through. Eventually, I found a trail I'd never seen before. It was more like an animal trail - I'm not too sure about that. It was really, really narrow and overgrown so I don't know if it was a disused trail or if it was an animal trail or whatever it was, but it looked clear enough for me to get through.

Scott

At this point, you're traumatized and exhausted. Did you have any water?

Karen

No, because everything was in my pack, so they had my water. I was so thirsty. I didn't quite realize it until I was going up the terrain which started getting steep. That was when I started to get some sense back. I was physically and completely numb. Because I've been punched in the face a few times, my mouth was cut inside, so all I could taste was blood. Other than that, my mouth was completely dry. I could feel my face swelling up and I had no water, I had nothing. It's pretty tough going like that. I didn't know how long it was going to take to go topside. I was terrified and petrified of hearing the sound of dogs coming up behind me. I would go up a couple of meters and, then, I would stop and listen. I would stop breathing and I would just listen until - I had to really convince myself - there's no sound because as soon as I started moving, I was making sounds that I couldn't listen to. So, it was a bit of a fight with myself. I can't stand here frozen and listening to dogs all night. I gotta keep moving.

Scott

And that state of hyper-awareness is just mentally exhausting, isn't it?

Karen

It's horrific. Here's the other part, I didn't snap out of it for months. It's a state of hyper-vigilance. It's one of the things that you go through with PTSD. Your brain doesn't quite snap all the way out of it, so you're in this hyper-vigilant state. I was also acutely aware of the fact that I had no weapons, I didn't have anything. I was also very weak now so if they did come back, I don't know how well I'll be able to fight at all. So, I was looking for rocks. As I was moving up, I was grabbing these rocks but I could only carry so many at a time. These rocks were in my hands. If I found a better one, I'd throw another one away. The plan was that if they came up behind me or if the dog came up behind me, I will just start

throwing the rocks at them. So, I was just swapping these rocks in and out of my hands as I'm trying to go up. Bear in mind, because it's so steep, I can't really look ahead because looking ahead means looking up. It just felt like everything was too much to focus on. So, all I could do was focus on how to keep myself moving. I just wanted to lie down. That was all I wanted. I just wanted to lie down and disappear. I wanted the world to go away. I was so tired and so thirsty. I don't know how to explain it but I just wanted absolute stillness. I knew I still had a long way to go, I still wasn't safe, I wasn't back home, and they could, feasibly, still come after me. I didn't think that it was likely but it wasn't impossible. I didn't know where I was going to come out. I didn't know how long a hike it was going to take to get to the top and how long to get to my car. Even when I reached my car, I didn't have my keys anymore because they were in my pack. So, I wouldn't be able to just get into my car and drive out. I would have quite a walk ahead of me. By the time I reached the reserve reception, it would probably be closed. There's all of these things to worry and think about but there was no time to relax and no time to look after myself.

This is where it gets interesting because it's almost like my mind split. I tried explaining this to a psychologist, like, "It's like I became the mother and the child. The child was saying, 'Please, can I sit down? I'm so tired. I'm so thirsty. Please, can I sit down?' And the mother would say, 'I know you are but you can't do that yet. You've got to keep moving!' in the sweetest voice." So, I was making these little bargains with myself. I was saying, "Okay, you see that tree up there? When you reached that point, you can sit down for 10 seconds and you can catch your breath. I'll let you relax for 10 seconds. Is that okay?" I was making these little deals. Then I'd reach the tree and sit down for 10 seconds. When I wanted to just stay there forever, the voice would come back and say, "Honey, you got to move now. You can't stay here. Do you see that? Let's go for that rock. Let's walk, let's keep moving, and you don't stop until you reach that rock and, then, you can stop again." I was trying to get myself to keep moving from point to point until I reached the top.

Scott

I'm just fascinated by that. The way the mind can come up with methods for self-preservation and survival is just incredible.

Karen

This is where it's so profound and really beautiful. I don't know if I'll ever have the words to adequately describe to people what it was like, but I formed a connection with myself in those hours on that hike that is so close, so special, so beautiful, so unique. I mean, I've always had a good relationship with myself. I like doing things alone. I enjoy my own company. I loved hiking on my own. I loved being in my own mind and in my own space. That has always been really nice for me, but this was a whole other level of love and care from, like, a higher version of myself, speaking to the other me who's in trouble, and just encouraging me to survive and to make it out of this.

Scott

One of the things that you wrote about this was, "I was in the deepest conversation with my soul." That's just something that I think very few people experience.

Karen

Yeah. I don't have words for how lovely it is and it's terrible that it comes at such a price. It's a completely remarkable thing. Honestly, it's the only thing that got me through and I don't just mean on that day, but also in the months that followed as well. It's a bond that's never been broken. Whatever was going on in my life, that voice is still there to talk me through and I feel like I know myself on a level that's really profound, complex, and multi-layered. I know myself from quite a few different perspectives. So, I kept going until, suddenly, this trail widened. I suddenly popped out at this quite nice and recently redone campsite which I had never seen before and didn't know it was there. They have

these little wooden hat things. They're not, like, full protection but they're, sort of, for people overnighing who need shelter. It was clear and it was quite clean. Obviously, it had been recently built and installed.

It's strange because I had a very strange reaction. I didn't think "Oh, yay!" I thought, "Oh, shit," because I didn't know who was there. I thought that even if the game ranger was there, I probably would have hidden from him. Anyone I saw at that moment, I'd probably have hidden from them. I don't know how to explain that. To me, in that context, if I ran into anyone, it wasn't going to feel safe for me. I was terrified. The other thing is that there's nothing to say that the poachers don't use that as a base. A lot of the similar, sort of, campsites within that reserve have been used by poachers. So, I thought, "Shit. Some guy could step out there and they would have weapons here."

I saw that there was an outside tap that had water. I didn't know if it was connected to any pipes but I could see a tap there. I needed water. I wanted to drink water so bad. So, I kind of edged around, I hid in the bush, and I was listening to anything that indicate that there were people. I didn't hear anybody. Eventually, I decided, "Okay, it's safe enough. Let's go and see if there's water in this tap." So, I opened the tap, water came out, and it was the most beautiful thing. I've never been so happy about a tap opening. So, I was just frantically gulping lots of water and, then, the mommy voice came in again and said, "Listen, you can't drink too much or else you're gonna throw it up. Stop!" So, I had to stop myself from drinking. I wouldn't have moved. I mean, it was amazing.

Then, I was thinking that, maybe, I should stay the night here. It's the child that just wants to go to sleep. The child was speaking again and was saying, "Please, can I just rest here? It looks safe. There's water here. Can we just stay?" But then, the Mother voice was saying, "No, you can't. We have to keep moving. We're not safe until you're home." That was the first time I wanted to cry - when I left that campsite. Up until then, I

hadn't cried or wanted to cry. It was the first time that I felt like I needed to cry. But I knew that if I let myself cry, I would lose all strength and resolve. Again, the Mother voice was saying, "When you're home, you can cry as much as you want. But until then, it's a NO"

Scott

You can't spend that energy crying because you need it.

Karen

Absolutely, as much as I wanted to. It's also almost like a luxury thing. I have to be in a safe place to cry. So, now, it was just a hard "NO." It was so difficult having to leave and not letting myself cry. There were still a lot of steep trails ahead of me so I kept going. At least, this time, now, I was properly on a trail so I knew the top was getting closer with each step. I just reached a, kind of, halfway point, I guess. So, things were looking up, I was making good progress, I just had to keep moving, and I kept on pushing. Then, finally, I looked up and I saw the sky through the branches at the top which meant that it was flat up there. So, I was about to break out onto the top. I was about to exit the valley and reach the top road. I knew, then, I could consider myself safe - not home yet, but safe - enough for now. So, here we go. I pushed out of the valley and now I'm on the dirt road, I'm at the top, and I'm under the blue sky. Again, I just wanted to lie down, I just wanted it to be over, I just wanted the whole world to go away.

At this point, I was actually starting to feel pain from my injuries and stuff. My face was throbbing. I don't know if it was the water that woke up my nerves but I was aching and I could feel how much my face was swelling on the side. I knew the sun was already dipping down which meant that there wouldn't be many people in the valley soon. I was quite far out so I'm pretty far from my car. The way I had to hike was quite the other way. I didn't know if any other visitors would have driven their

cars past that point to go and hike on that side of the valley. I knew there was a fair chance with no guarantee. Now, being a true crime fan and having read lots of books of true crime - being a horror fan, I know how this goes - it's terrible and sad that if someone is in the middle of the road, people often drive around them even when they're in distress. I thought that even if someone comes across me, there's a chance that they will do that because, obviously, I'm a mess. I thought, "No, I am absolutely not going to let that happen. If a car comes up behind me, they are not going around me." So, I looked on the ground and I found the perfect stick. I found this stick because I was still very aware that I didn't have any weapons. I thought, "I still don't know if I'm 100% safe." So, I found a stick that was quite a nice length, quite a nice thickness, and had this wonderful broken and really sharp point. It was a great and fantastic stick. I walked right in the middle of this road with this stick and I thought, "I'm just gonna keep going with one foot in front of the other with the stick. We're just gonna keep going." I was headed in the direction of my car because there was really nothing else to do. If someone came up behind me, great! If they didn't, then I was just going to have to force myself to keep walking until I reach the reception. If it was closed up and locked, then I would just sleep by the front door and deal with whatever may come. As long as I was moving in the right direction back to safety, that was fine. So, I had to just keep going like that. There are no words for how exhausted I was. It was such an effort to keep my feet moving. Every time when there was the slightest uphill incline, I would want to just stop and get down because I couldn't face the uphill. Even if it was just a slight rise in the road, it was so hard making myself move. Again, it's the Mother voice saying, "You have to move! I'm sorry but you have to move one foot in front of the other. You don't have to run. This isn't a race. As long as you're making progress, it's good. So, let's just keep going." I had to keep encouraging myself like that. I walked for ages and found my car. That was another really hard feeling because when I left that car there, I was a completely different person, excited to go swim in the river. Now, there's my car waiting for me and I can't get in. There's nothing I can do. I have to just keep walking and leave it behind.

So, I kept going for ages and ages and ages until eventually, finally, I heard a car coming up behind me and I turned around. Because I was slap bang in the middle of the road, it couldn't go around me. So I turned, faced them, and I waved my arms. I walked around to the passenger side, the woman rolled down her window, and I said, "Please help me. I've been attacked." That was when I knew, "Okay, I'm gonna get out of this now." Then, they let me in the car and they drove me home. There was a woman and a man. They are rock climbers and they've been climbing through the cliffs at the far back end of the valley. All the hikers had left for the day. It was just a couple of rock climbers coming back from climbing.

Scott

And you were obviously so thankful that they were coming back.

Karen

There are no words. I mean, I said to them later, I said you guys don't know how profound it was for me when you stopped the car and let me get in. It wasn't just because they let me in the car. They would say to me, like, "We just gave you a lift. You did all the hard work yourself. We just drove you out of there." I was, like, "You don't understand how I felt. I was at the point of collapse. I pushed myself to the end. Every last edge of strength and resolve had been sapped out of me. I had given everything I could down to the last drop. I doubt I would have made it to the reserve reception. Actually, I'm pretty sure I would have just collapsed at some point on that road." She was so kind as well. I mean, she just turned and said to me, "Did they rape you?" I said, "No, but they tried," and I showed her my clothes that were torn, kind of, between my legs. She was just so kind. How she spoke to me was just perfect. I know people say that they just gave you a lift but it was so much more than that. When someone lifts you out of that situation, it's so much more than that. I will forever be grateful. I will never know how to express that adequately what that felt like at that moment. I was staying in a cottage on my mom's property. Because I've only moved to the area quite recently - I

moved back home, basically, recently - one of the things I did was I gave her my spare car key and I said, "Why don't you hold on to this because I'd rather don't have it just in case something happens." So, I got the spare key. Then, my rescuers went back into the reserve and they bought my car back for me. From there, I had to go to the hospital, to the emergency room there, so that they could look me over, confirm my injuries, and then give me the report because I'd need to go to the police. The next thing after that is going to the police station to report what had happened. I mean, I didn't want to do the hospital thing. I mean, I knew I was injured but nothing major. I knew I'd be fine. If I could, I would have left it out as well, I would have done that at that moment anyway, but I got to do what I got to do, apparently.

Scott

Would you recognize either of those men if you saw them again?

Karen

Yeah, in a heartbeat. No problem. The police did get a sketch artist person to come in so that I could do a composite sketch of the guy who was so determined to rape me because I saw his face much more than the other guy. So, I gave a description of him.

Scott

At this time, now that you're safe, did you consider that this attack may have affected you from a mental health standpoint?

Karen

I think it takes a while for the shock to kind of balance out. I don't want to say that it wore off because it didn't - not for a while - but it, kind of,

just taper to a balanced point. I don't really know what to say about my mental state in the immediate aftermath. I mean, even the guy who rescued me looked at me and said, "How are you still standing?" Because at that point, I hadn't cried yet, either. I was in an organized mode. I was trying to get my car back. The problem with me is I present quite well. It's funny. Someone might see that I'm upset about something really small. That's more visible than if I'm upset on a more profound level. So, I was largely presenting fine. I looked like I had my shit together but inside I was a mess. The first time I cried properly, I think, was in the shower. I couldn't wait to get clean. You wouldn't believe the bruises all over me.

One morning, I was standing in front of a mirror, I was tying up my hair, and as I lifted my arm, I suddenly saw this perfect handprint bruise on my upper arm. I mean, you could just about read his fingerprints. Never mind my face but when the guy stood on my head, you could actually see the tread marks from his boot on my face. It was a case of looking in the mirror and seeing these. These are all temporary injuries but they were so detailed, like being able to see the tread of a boot, being able to see a handprint bruise. It was so confronting. I was looking and thinking, "How can they do this to me?! They did this to me..." Just this rage and heartbreak... I don't know how else to explain it but I was furious and sad that this had happened.

I think, also, listening to your episode with Kira, she mentioned about how people don't understand what it's like when someone threatens to kill you or when you know that someone is willing to kill you. To me, it was amazing that my life meant nothing... Nothing! I was just a momentary entertainment for these guys. They wanted to have sex with me. They were willing to kill me and they would have done that for fun. That's an afternoon's entertainment for them. My life - it doesn't matter who I am, how kind I am, how intelligent I am, or my contributions to my family. The wholeness of my own being is completely irrelevant. I am just a body that they want to play with and I don't exist beyond that. It's a really hard thing to get your head around about how someone can think of anyone that way and then treat you like that... like I don't have a soul.

Then, of course, I spent a few days and I just stayed home. I didn't go anywhere to do anything. I just stayed home and hid. I took multiple showers and waited for my bruises to fade a bit. There comes a point when I needed to go out and, sort of, slowly start facing the world properly again. The first time I started doing that was when I realized that I now have panic attacks to deal with in the future. I couldn't handle having people behind me at all. I couldn't handle crowds. I couldn't handle people standing too close to me. I needed everyone to be where I could see them so that I know exactly where everyone is and I can watch what everyone's doing off the corner of my eye. This isn't something that you're consciously deciding. I mean, the psychologist explained to me later that it's just pure hyper-vigilance and that's why I was so exhausted. Any amount of interaction with other people was beyond exhausting because your subconscious mind is not resting. It's on high alert. It's trying to keep track of everything and watching for signs that you're in danger. It's really exhausting. Grocery shopping was a nightmare of epic proportions - I cannot begin to tell you. Walking through supermarket aisles: Holy shit, so hard, so difficult, I still struggle with it. I haven't been able to go grocery shopping since this happened while being completely chill and just doing my thing.

Obviously, I'm handling it a lot better now but there's still that certain edginess. When that happens, I just give myself permission to just flap my back to the wall, to the display, and just stand and look around until I feel ready to move again. Again, I've never quite recovered a sense of ease with my back being exposed. I think it's because I spent so much time during the attack trying to walk away and, then, being attacked from behind. That was a huge issue for me on that trail. They were behind me and I couldn't do anything about it.

Scott

We haven't mentioned what your career is yet but I'll say it now. You're an author of horror fiction. One of the really interesting things that you

told me is that you've seen horror as therapy. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

Karen

Well, okay. For me, one of the hardest aspects of trauma, when you go through it, is how other people don't want to talk about it and they don't want to deal with it. So, when something really awful happens, you're often left to deal with it alone. There's a lot of hand-patting. People are like, "Oh, dear. I'm so sorry that happened to you." It's all lip-service. There are very few people who actually sit with you, which is fine. There's no pressure on them, really, but it's a very lonely place.

I find that people often connect with horror because it has some degree of cathartic value for them. You can confront your monster through horror fiction as an art form. So instead of having to deal with the actual fact of something, you can create a story around it, you can put it in the corner, you can analyze it, you can discuss it, you can do things to it, you can have it do things, you can see how it reacts, you can understand what you're facing. This is the power of horror and I always found it to be extremely useful.

I always said that horror is the most honest of all the genres that weren't cut away. It'll be honest about the bad things that people do and are capable of in the real world. It doesn't kid itself and it doesn't kid you which I find to be quite valuable. Just because you're a fan of horror doesn't mean that you like people getting hurt, it's quite the opposite, it's an act of empathy. If you didn't care about what happened to the character, it wouldn't be horrific. So when you're watching or reading horror, that is what you are doing: you're identifying with the character and you're identifying with what they're going through. I mean, when I was hiding off the trail after my attackers ran off, I realized that I have seen this scene in so many movies. I have seen women in this exact situation so many times. Now, I'm the one hiding in the bushes

quivering with blood in her mouth. It's me now. A friend of mine who also likes horror joked with me, sort of, saying, "In a way, you were training for that day in your whole life."

Scott

Have you thought about incorporating some aspects of this experience into future writing?

Karen

That's a really tough one. The funny thing is that since this attack, I haven't been able to finish anything, I haven't written or finished any new books. I've started tons but I haven't finished anything. For the first short story that I tried to write after the attack, I decided that, "Okay, I don't want to write about the attack. I want to write fiction. I'm a fiction author. I don't need to tell my life story so I'm going to write a completely different story." I started writing a story about a woman who goes for a job interview. It's in this building with a big lobby and a bunch of elevators. She gets in the elevator. Then, it stops at one floor and then this other guy gets in. They have a few words of pleasant conversation and then the elevator jams and, then, she's stuck for a while with this guy. As they're talking, he becomes more and more threatening and creepy and their conversation changes until she's in a -- I was halfway through this thing when I realized that I'm writing about the attack and I tried to put it in an urban setting. So, I thought, "Goddamnit, I'm not doing this! I don't want to do this. I can't do this." So, I never finished it. It's been two years now. As much as I keep telling myself, "I refuse to have my ability to enjoy life taken from me and I refuse to have things that I've done in the past be taken from me because of this," something has definitely happened to how I create.

I have started another book. I've gotten further with this one than any other since the attack. I'm hoping that I will actually finish this one. I've

definitely changed as an artist and it's just a case of figuring out how much and what that means in terms of my own creative process and what I create. I'd still go with, I'd say, horror. I'm a dark fiction author. I don't really write about monsters and stuff. I write about people and what people do. I think when you're an artist, you're always talking about yourself - whether you know it or not - in your work. So, I'm sure that I will be writing about this attack in many ways and many times in the future but it just won't be obvious, maybe.

Scott

How can people find you or check out your work?

Karen

They're welcome to Google my name. That should return quite a few. Otherwise, there's my Amazon Author Page which has all the stuff I've written together in one place. I am on Twitter but I just don't really use it. I vastly prefer Instagram. I've only just recently started using Instagram. I've been slow to this whole social media thing. I'm not the biggest fan of it because I'm actually quite a private person. So, for me, it's been a case of trying to strike a balance between how much of myself do I want to share with people.

Scott

We'll have links to your Amazon Author Page and your other social accounts if people want to follow you. I followed you on Amazon and I'm looking forward to receiving a notification that you've got a new release.

Karen

Thank you. Give me, like, a year.

Scott

One other thing that I wanted to ask you about is part of your recovery or therapy, so to speak, involves your discovery of rock climbing. How did that fit in?

Karen

Through my rescuers. As I've mentioned, they're rock climbers, they were coming back, and they were lovely. Once I've kind of recovered a little bit, I messaged them and said, "Hey, I'd like you to see what I look like when I'm not completely shredded. Can I buy you guys dinner just to say 'Thank you?'" I hung out with them and we had dinner together. The woman is such a wonderful person. She became a pretty solid friend of mine since. She just said to me, "We're going climbing again tomorrow. Why don't you come with us?" And I was like, "What?!" Do understand that I grew up doing adventure sports and outdoor stuff - hiking, horse-riding, cross-country, all these things - but rock climbing had never really come up. One of my brothers is a rock climber, actually, but I was always on horses and stuff. Rock climbing wasn't something that I really thought about. They said, "No, come with us!" and I thought, "Well, yeah. Why not?" I missed being in nature. I was determined to not be kicked out of the hills and the mountains that I love because of these two bastards. To me, I would no longer feel alive if I can't be out enjoying and exploring the world. That's how I feel about it. It's important to me.

Scott

And if you do join with them, that means you're back in that environment and you're also not alone.

Karen

And completely safe. Of all the people and all my fear after that incident - PTSD effects: panic attacks and feeling really nervy about people being close to me - I had no problems with those two. It's just a shortcut for me to feel instantly and completely safe with them. I felt totally safe with them. Here's the thing, they took me to the same nature reserve - because it has great rock climbing - at a completely different side of the reserves so it's not a part of the reserve that I knew at all. Actually, it was my first time going that far. I didn't even know that it existed in this park. I'd always just gone for the river. I didn't think about the curbs. They took me climbing. The great thing about rock climbing is you're hiking as well. You're hiking beautiful terrain to get to where you want to be and you're having this wonderful adventure. The thing with rock climbing is that it's a very unique sport, it engages your fight-or-flight in a very productive way, and I find that incredibly healing. The woman was in the car and she said to me that day, "The great thing about climbing is when you are on the wall, you cannot think about anything else. There is no space in your mind for anything except your next move. You can't worry about your overdue bills or that sound your car is making or your sick dog. None of that can come into your head because you are fully focused on getting from the point you're on to the next point and getting to the top. That is all you have space for, mentally." That's so true. It's a kind of meditation, almost, in that respect. You're engaging with yourself. When I want to be close to my inner voice again, that is what I get from climbing. That bond with myself, I feel that it is very Towsley as well as it just being so much fun. So, they took me climbing that day and it was pretty scary but at the same time, I was having so much fun. I've learned now - I've been climbing a little while - that actually the best climbing days for me are the days where I was really scared but I did it anyway. Now, climbing is a constant lesson. You're thinking, "Oh, God! There's no way I can do this. Holy shit, this is terrifying! I want to go home," and thinking that you can't do it, but you still do it, you conquer it, and you feel so good. When you come down, you just feel absolutely undefeatable and indestructible. Even if you had an easy climb, it doesn't matter. If you have that moment where you challenge yourself and overcome it, it's the most rewarding thing ever.

Scott

That sounds like great therapy to me.

Karen

It really, really is. COVID and a few other things have gotten away and I haven't been able to climb as much, but I grab every opportunity that I can to head out there. The other thing about rock climbing is that it's not a solo sport. Unless you're Alex Honnold, you need people with you. In a way, that's a sad thing because I haven't been solo hiking again. I don't think I will ever go hiking on my own again. I'm pretty sure I won't. I might go with my dog. That's probably the closest I'll get to solo hiking,

Scott

But there are other things you can do outdoors. It's not like you have to stay home all the time.

Karen

Yeah. That was the thing because, in the immediate aftermath, that is something that I was feel really bothered by and sad about. I've moved back to the Natal midlands and one of the great joys for me in doing that was, like, "Yes, I can get back into the mountains, back into nature, and back into these things that I've always loved and grew up doing that is being out on hikes and stuff," and then this happened. Like, what am I going to do? Just stay home and watch Netflix? So, when I discovered rock climbing, climbing and completing a route in that park where I was attacked was a bit too poetic of a victory. I felt like I had completely kicked this thing's ass when I climbed that day for the first time. I felt amazing. It was the best I'd felt not just since the attack but in years. I felt amazing.

Outro:

I'll bet you enjoyed this conversation with Karen. She's a strong woman and a fighter and I love that about her.

And if you liked this one, I'm pretty sure you'll also enjoy the conversation I had with Kira, back in episode 69. That episode is called "Kira was attacked by a serial rapist". Here's a short clip from Kira's story:

(Kira Clip)

I realized that he was standing in a weird position. He was so close to me and I didn't feel like I could really do anything. I realized that he was pulling his hand up in a weird way. I also had my hands up because I had my phone in one hand and the stun gun in another. So, my hands were full and they were up. I realized his hand was also up and he had a knife. He was holding it just right in front of my chest, sort of, at my sternum and in front of my heart. That was all that was between us - the length of the knife that he was holding. I don't know how to explain it but my heart just sank.

You can hear Kira tell that whole story at WhatWasThatLike.com/69.

The last episode, from 2 weeks ago, was called "Danny found a baby on the subway". If you haven't heard it yet, you absolutely need to go back and listen to that one. I've had so many positive comments about it. It's a wonderful story of love, and family, and it involves adoption. And after that episode went live, I got this message from a listener, Jenny -

(Jenny voice mail)

Hi, Scott. My name is Jenny and I have been an avid listener of yours for a while now. I love your podcast and it brought me so much joy in some really dark times in my life. I look forward to listening to new episodes every other week. I wanted to reach out about the most recent episode you played about Kevin's adoption story. One part stood out to me over the rest. At the end of the episode, you're describing Pete, saying he felt that he didn't have any skills of being a parent. Who are they to move forward with the adoption? The reassurance that any two people who have love to give can be parents really hit home. My husband and I lost three babies during pregnancy three years in a row - one per year. I have felt so helpless since the last baby was lost. I was not feeling that I was good enough of a person to be a parent and that those

miscarriages happen to us for a reason but it has been very difficult to figure out why. I have been apprehensive about beginning the adoption process but your work has touched me and made me realize that love is the most important thing a baby needs. I think our baby is out there somewhere and will be ready for us and we are ready to meet them. We will be able to figure out the rest together as a family. Thank you for giving me this positive message of hope.

Now is that awesome or what! Jenny, I think you're on the right track. And just like that baby was lying there on the floor in the New York City subway, just hanging out until Danny noticed him, I believe your baby is out there, somewhere, waiting to be found by you. And when that happens, please please call me back and let me know, because I'm sure everyone that just heard what you said will want to know when it happens.

Okay, a couple more things before we have our Listener Story.

We have a brand new Raw Audio episode – this one is episode #20. In this one, you'll hear the full 911 audio of the call that was made from the filming location of the movie Rust, starring Alec Baldwin –

Crew

Hi. I'm calling back from Bonanza Creek Ranch. We actually need two ambulances, not one.

911 Operator

Do you need two? Okay, give me one second.

And there's a call where two people come back to an Airbnb where they're staying, and a man literally follows them into the house –

Woman

He's in the house!

911 Operator

What is he wearing? What color are his clothes?

Woman

It's a black T shirt.

And there's also a call involving a man who actually contacted me, to tell this story on the podcast, and it involves a parent's worst nightmare –

Woman

It's my baby! Please send some help here!

911 Operator

Ma'am, I'll get you some help there!

You can get that full episode, and all 19 of the other Raw Audio episodes, by supporting the podcast for just \$5 a month. And you also get a personalized note and a What Was That Like sticker from me by mail, and a personalized audio message from me, and you get all the new episodes of the show without any ads. Right now, there are around 170 people who support the show each month, and new ones are coming in all the time. I'd love to get that up to 1000 supporters, and that is definitely going to happen. If you'd like to be one of those amazing people who support the show, you can sign up at [WhatWasThatLike.com/support](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/support). And I greatly appreciate it!

And the story you just heard, with Karen, is the last episode of 2021. We're about to go into a new year, and I have some plans and goals for the podcast in 2022.

One goal is to move the podcast listener community from Facebook to a different platform. That is mostly set up already, I just have a few more things to get in place, but that's gonna be happening pretty soon. If you want to be one of the sort of "beta testers" for that new group, drop me an email and I'll get you in early.

And the other sort of big project I have planned is that I want to have transcriptions for each episode. I know there are some listeners who have limited ability to hear, and it would make it so much easier for them just to be able to read the text of each episode. So I'm looking into the various options for getting that done. With 97 episodes, that makes this a pretty big project. And a fairly expensive one – I can't do this myself because of the time involved, so I'll be hiring someone, or several people to do this. So for the listeners who support the show, that's where a big part of that money goes.

And of course, for 2022 I have some amazing stories to bring you! Some of them I've already recorded, and I can tell you right now you're gonna love them. Because I want this to be your favorite podcast. I want you to get to the end of every episode and be thinking, "Wow, that's a story I'll never forget". I even want you to cry sometimes. I know, that sounds a little weird, that I would want you as a listener to cry when you're hearing a guest talk about what happened to them. But I know when someone on this show is telling a story like that, a story that brings out some deepfelt emotion, it's a good thing. And it's not always because of tragedy – we have some happy crying here too!

So I'm looking forward to starting a new year. 2021 was a great year of growth for the podcast, and I have no doubt it's going to be found by lots more people this year. And you can help that happen by telling your friends about it. I know you already do, because that's how a lot of people discover the show.

All right, let's get on to today's Listener Story, from Garrett. Stay safe, and I'll see you with the next episode, in 2022.

Listener story

Garrett

Oddly enough, in my headphones, I was listening to some courtroom analysis of a high-profile shooting case when the commotion started. Three consecutive bangs and then a fourth. Immediately, I knew there were gunshots and they sounded very close. So I went to the window and I appeared out on the street in front of my home. At first glance, it looked like a pile of laundry spilled onto the road because I didn't expect to see a body. A man had been gunned down and was sprawled out on the asphalt and his legs were still on the sidewalk. He wasn't moving. I ran down the stairs to get a better look at what was happening and I wasn't the only one. My landlord had just come down as well and we spoke on the porch. People poured out into the fast food restaurant parking lot across the street. Some were frantic and others were calm. From my porch, I've briefly remarked about the dire situation with my landlord as we watched a passer-by administering CPR. Suddenly, I realized, "Perhaps, I could help." So I ran upstairs to get the towel. Then, I ran back down and I darted across the street between the cars stalled in the traffic. I stood over the dying man and handed somebody a towel. When I looked down, I didn't see any obvious wounds but he did have blood on his face. While one person on the ground was pumping his chest, others were gathering around. Background voices were making emergency calls and asking each other questions, like, "What happened? Did you see anything? I was just inside. I heard shots." Most clearly, among the voices, a very distraught woman - evidently from inside the restaurant - pleaded and cried to no one in particular, "Over an order?! Over food?!" I returned home and watched for another 20 minutes before an ambulance finally had him loaded up and drove away. My own vehicle is still stuck inside the yellow tape that marked off the crime scene. It became clear from the witnesses inside the store that an argument had broken out between a customer and an employee, and when they took it outside, the worker pulled a gun. Unfortunately, the man was pronounced dead at the hospital. I don't know what happened to the shooter - over food, over an order.