

Play it safe

Recent rape demonstrates need to stay alert and cautious



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Earlier this month, a tall man in his late 20s stalked the walkways of a Lincoln apartment building around 9 p.m. on a Thursday before knocking on the door of a single woman's apartment.

After telling her that his car had broken down, the stranger asked the woman living in the 1200 block of Arapahoe Street if he could use her phone.

Perhaps this particular 30-year-old woman knew what it was like to be without a vehicle on a cold Nebraska winter night. Perhaps she sympathized with this man's problem, remembering a time in her life when people who didn't know her or owe her a thing extended themselves to her in a time of need.

In fact, the stranger was probably betting on it.

Because after the door was shut behind him and he found himself inside the home, he brandished a knife, dragged her to the bedroom and raped the woman in her own apartment.

Now, this story plays itself out thousands of times a day in the United States. Crime surveys estimate a rape happens every few minutes. And, according to the FBI's Unified Crime Report statistics, the rate for reported rapes has increased 65 percent more than the general crime rate in the last 10 years.

But officials are quick to point out the increase of reported sexual crimes are just that — an increase in the REPORTING, not necessarily an increase in the occurrence of the crime.

Moreover, many studies show violent crime on the decline. The Census Bureau's National Crime Victim Survey reported 140,000 rapes and attempted rapes in 1992 but maintain that the rate of rapes has remained

fairly stable over the last 20 years.

Some officials blame the media, a readily available and visible scapegoat, for inflating the general population's fear of violent crime. Commentators point out that nearly twice as many people die in car accidents every year in the United States than are murdered, and studies report people who watch too much television experience more fear about crime.

But despite these assurances that society's fear of violent crime is overblown, the fact that this woman experienced firsthand just how unsafe this world can be — and that she learned this horrific lesson only yards from my own apartment, where my daughter and I sat watching reruns just a few doors down — is still a bit unnerving.

It's not even the frequency of violent crime that fills some with dread, because it doesn't actually happen that often. It's the fact that it does happen; and in the relatively small circles my life has taken me, I've met too many people of all walks of life who have endured the violent expressions of a few disturbed people.

And I know in my heart that I probably would have greeted this stranger's knock upon my own door in much the same way as my neighbor did. I cannot deny that I regularly leave my door unlocked in the daytime.

And having been raised in a big, East Coast city, I should know better. Perhaps it's too easy to get lulled into a false sense of security in this 96-unit apartment building, where people are almost always around, going about their business, where the apartments all face each other and a central courtyard and the walkways are always fairly well-lighted.

Perhaps having lived in this area for most of my adult life, I've become somewhat comfortable with this city's small-town feel and relatively low crime rate. And despite Lincoln's shortcomings, perhaps I had even come to feel safe here, and realize what a good place this town really is to raise a kid.

But after a plain-clothes detective showed up at my building the following Saturday showing only a bland sketch of the suspect in hopes that someone would recognize him, the reality of how close this violent attack came to me slammed home.

After having once been a victim myself and now, a survivor, I knew



what I had to do. I had to realize that no matter how comfortable I may become with life, no matter how much I may want to lend a hand to a stranger in trouble, the world still is and always will be a potentially dangerous place. I had to accept the fact that safety is not something we can take for granted, allowing our attitudes about it to become lax.

That night, I sat down with my daughter after the detective left and explained a few things about what it meant to be a woman in our society. I had to tell her that as a young woman, she must take precautions most men normally don't have to worry about. I had to tell her that she should ALWAYS remain aware of who and what is around her, now and as she grows older — in the daytime, nighttime, whenever. She will have to rely on her best judgment when going out with acquaintances in the future and be careful of where they take her and with whom.

Now, she's been told all this before, too many times to count. She's heard the speeches about not answering doors when I'm not in the room. She's been told not to talk to strangers on her way to and from school as well as the rest of the whole nine yards of safety tips.

But this time, I think, that talk and its implications seemed a bit more firmly set in reality for her too.

Because another fact of life is that kids don't always do what they should or what they've been told to do time and time again. The fact is that kids are too trusting, and haven't learned the lessons that hopefully come with adulthood about carefully choosing the people they can and cannot trust.

And so, while trying to avoid filling her with paranoia, I admit I did want to scare her just a little. I wanted to get it through to her — and to myself — that no matter how complacent in our safety we may become, we must remain just a little vigilant.

No human being can live for long in constant fear. Our world demands that we function, and that we go out once in a while and earn a living. Our nature is that of a social animal, and we must have some kind of meaningful interaction with other humans in order to flourish emotionally and mentally.

But the truth of this world is that not even a child can indulge in unbridled innocence for long. The truth is that we MUST at some point rid ourselves of at least some of that innocence in order to feel safe and never, NEVER, become too complacent or too comfortable if we want to live long enough to fulfill our dreams.

And a bigger, more difficult truth is that even if we do attain caution and maintain it consistently, we are offered no guarantees of safety, no assurances that we won't forget and open the door for that stranger with a knife or that forceful, violent acquaintance.

That's just life, and it's no joke.

A show of respect

Before time runs out, let loved ones know just how important they are



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Last Saturday my uncle died. He was in Germany, I am here in Lincoln, and this fact is killing me. Every day since then, I have stared at the phone, tempted to call a travel agency to get a flight home.

I am not used to members of my family dying; it has not happened since I was a little kid, but since Thanksgiving I have lost two relatives, my uncle and a great aunt, who have meant the world to me. Both times I

was not there for them to comfort them in person, and this adds to my pain. I know that they both would not have wanted me to interrupt my education to fly to Germany, but I can't help but feel that I have betrayed them or let them down in a way.

Some people suggest the phrase "carpe diem," to seize the day, and live life at its fullest as if every day was the last. Today I urge you to treat every other person as if it was their last.

There are so many things that were left unsaid between me and my uncle and my great aunt, and I would give anything for the chance to let them now how much I loved and admired both of them. Just one last time I would like to hug them and say my farewells.

I am an atheist and don't believe in life after death, and this means that I will never have the chance to tell them these things. They will remain unsaid because I let opportunities slide by, disregarding the future and being fixated on the present.

Faced with death in my family for the first time since early childhood, I

have decided that I will never go away from loved ones for any considerable amount of time without saying a proper farewell.

I am not talking about a sentimental "It has been nice knowing you" type of thing, but rather, I want to let my family and friends know how much I care for them and what they mean to me.

This might sound silly to some, but if you were to know what has been going through my head these last few days, or if you would even be able to look at my face while I am writing this, then you would understand.

I remember the times when my uncle would play the piano for my family on Christmas. He was a very gifted musician, and I have been in awe of his talents. I loved his deep voice and the stories that this voice told me when I was a kid. There are so many little things that I will remember him for, and I guess that in this way he will live on as a part of me.

It is impossible for me to describe how I feel about being so far away

from him when he died. It is a mixture of guilt, denial and loneliness.

Guilt, for not having held my uncle's hand on his deathbed, for not having been able to tell him directly how much he has meant to me.

Denial, because it has not really sunk in yet that the next time I'm going home, neither he nor my great aunt will be there.

Loneliness, because I have never felt as displaced in my life. Right now, I don't belong here. I should be with my family and not paying my respects by writing about him in a college newspaper.

His death has also made me aware again that family members share bonds that are much stronger than a similar genetic code. Just like a part of him lives on with me, a part of me died with him on Saturday.

Right now, I'm looking at a picture of my uncle, and I simply can't believe that he is gone. He wasn't even looking at the camera; it is a photograph of him, repairing a camera with the very same and talented hands that he used to play

piano with. It is incomprehensible to me that I will never, ever see him again.

Another thing that really bothers me is that I am not just physically absent from the funeral to pay my last respects, but I am also not there to support my family — my aunt who lost her husband and my mom who lost a brother. Hopefully they are holding up all right.

The passivity of being here, several thousand miles and seven hours of time differential apart from them, is a true torture. Right now, my mom might still be awake in Germany, remembering one of those stories about her childhood — like the one when my uncles made her jump from a diving board, which I used to love hearing — and I am not there to comfort her.

Because of not believing in any kind of afterlife, I will not make a lengthy dedication to my uncle and great aunt at this time. I'd rather dedicate these words to all of my family and friends because they mean the world to me and I would be nothing without them.