



## Let Me Out of Here: A Story of Using Comics to Heal During the Pandemic

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This graphic essay details the hardships I faced during the pandemic. It highlights the importance of comic-making to combat present-day isolation and hardship and aid recovery from trauma. During the first year of my Ph.D. I experienced a miscarriage, my step-grandfather passed away with Covid, and, at the start of my second semester, I was sexually assaulted, resulting in a physical injury that has yet to heal. The emotional and physical trauma of these incidents put me behind in my coursework. To cope, I engaged in art therapy and completed a trauma recovery program. Often, my recovery has been aided by and expressed through the digital comics I create, which are generally poetry comics. By expressing the weight of these traumatic incidents in drawings and text, I acknowledged their significance and found some relief and self-consolation. In sharing my experience, I hope to impart the importance of comics in this moment by showing how creating them helped me process trauma created and exacerbated by the pandemic.

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## Introduction

In January 2021, I was assaulted twice in a four-day period, which resulted in trauma and changed how I view myself, my life, and those around me. These two incidents weren't the only traumatic ones I had experienced recently. Before January, I had also suffered a miscarriage, made worse by isolation (due to the pandemic) and abandonment. Shortly after, my step-grandfather passed away from Covid. But what occurred in January was a catalyst for a personal breakdown. I lost myself.

Being a woman is difficult enough. I always feel as if I am battling my femininity, always measuring myself against a distinct, un-feminine standard that I can never quite reach to have a voice and place in this patriarchal society. To love something about yourself that can so easily be used against you is hard. And the man who assaulted me used it against me in the worst way. Self-hatred and dissociation resulted. But I have worked hard to regain a sense of purpose.

Recovery is a choice but not an easy one to make—a confusing process with no map. Getting lost is easy and I do not judge anyone who gives up or takes detours along the way. I often feel that I am trapped by walls that I cannot go around or climb. I cannot break them down. But my art allowed me to glimpse through these walls, as if making these comics has made them transparent. I can see more clearly what happened to me and how and why I have reacted the way I have. I may not have found a map that can take me through my recovery process, but I can see my next steps.

Making this comic, and the art that came before it, has allowed me to make sense of my recent past. Comics are a technology for coping with myself and my realities. Making comics has calmed me. I wouldn't say I found happiness (and I'm not much interested in the pursuit of that emotion), but I do, at times, feel good. I have found a voice. I feel pleasure and a sense of relief, in sharing my voice with you in this comic.

# LET ME OUT OF HERE

A STORY OF USING COMICS TO HEAL DURING THE PANDEMIC

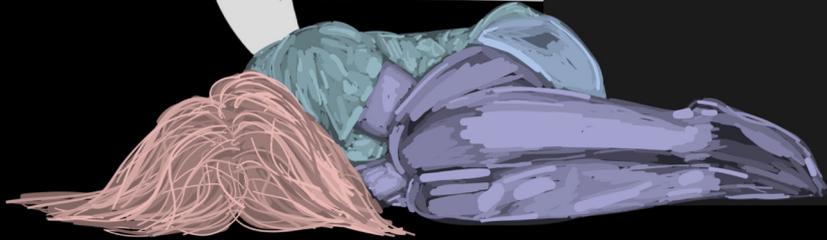
BY SYDNEY HEIFLER



IT'S BEEN WELL OVER A YEAR SINCE THE START OF THE PANDEMIC...

WHAT A MISERABLE TIME, FULL OF UNIMAGINABLE PAIN. MY INABILITY TO ESCAPE, PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY, MADE IT ALL MORE CHALLENGING.

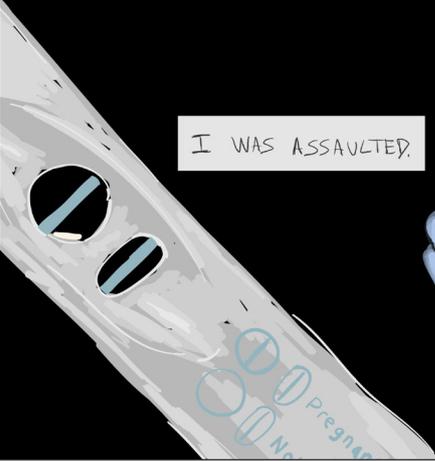
DURING THIS TIME, I WAS PRIMARILY STUCK IN A 600 SQUARE-FOOT APARTMENT AS WELL AS IN THE CONFINES OF MY MIND WHILE SUFFERING AND ATTEMPTING TO HEAL FROM SIGNIFICANT TRAUMA.



I SUFFERED A MISCARRIAGE.

I SUFFERED A SEVERE INJURY.

I WAS ASSAULTED.



AT THE START OF THE PANDEMIC, I WAS ALREADY USED TO ISOLATION. AS A HISTORIAN, BEING ALONE (AND LONELINESS) IS OFTEN NECESSITATED BY THE WORK. EVEN PUBLIC PLACES I CREATE PRIVATE SPACES IN WHICH TO WORK.

I WAS OVERLY CONFIDENT IN MY ABILITY TO NAVIGATE THE HARDSHIPS AND LOSS OF THE PANDEMIC.



I SOON FOUND MYSELF STRUGGLING WITH DEPRESSION, DEVOID OF MOTIVATION TO COMPLETE MY ACADEMIC WORK

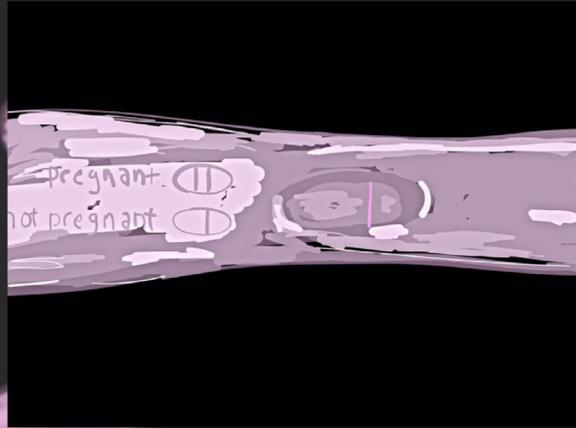


MY PERSONAL DIFFICULTIES WORSENERD WHEN I STARTED MY PH.D. IN A NEW CITY AND STATE, UNABLE TO EXPLORE MY SURROUNDINGS AND MEET MY FELLOW STUDENTS AND PROFESSORS.

I WAS PREGNANT AND ALONE.



I SUFFERED A MISCARRIAGE WITHOUT A SUFFICIENT NETWORK OF SUPPORT.



AT THE START OF MY SECOND SEMESTER



I WAS SEXUALLY ASSAULTED



RESULTING IN A PHYSICAL INJURY THAT HAS YET TO HEAL.



I COULD BARELY WALK.



PILLS DESTROYED MY MIND.



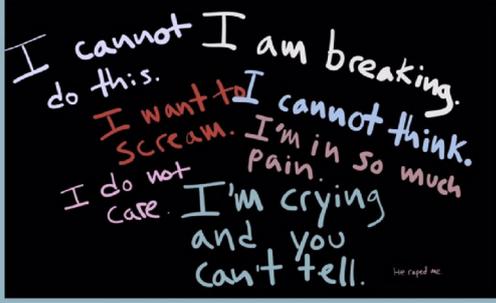
I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO ASK FOR HELP.



THE EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL TRAUMA RESULTING FROM THESE INCIDENTS PUT ME BEHIND IN MY COURSEWORK. ALONG WITH COVID RESTRICTIONS, IT ISOLATED ME FROM MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS AND MADE ME QUESTION THE PURPOSE OF MY LIFE. I WAS SCARED THAT I COULDN'T KEEP IT TOGETHER FOR LONG.



AS MY LIFE FELL APART, I STARTED SILENTLY COMPOSING EXPLANATIONS FOR WHAT WAS GOING ON— WHY I WASN'T BEING MYSELF, AND WHY I WASN'T CONTRIBUTING TO MY SEMINARS IN MY USUAL WAYS. I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO VERBALIZE MY THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS AND THE PRESSURE MOUNTED.



I THOUGHT I COULD HIDE AWAY FROM EVERYTHING IN MY APARTMENT FOREVER. YET, MY INABILITY TO WALK MADE ME FEEL TRAPPED. THE ONE PERSON WHO MADE ME FEEL SAFE STOPPED TEXTING ME.



THE ISOLATION GOT THE BEST OF ME. MY FEARS GREW AND FESTERED, UNCHECKED BY THE ROUTINE OF LIFE. THEY BECAME AN EXAGGERATION OF THE EXTREME.



HELP

I FELT MY ATTACKER COULD COME BACK FOR ME AT ANY TIME. IN MY MIND, EVERY NOISE INSIDE MY APARTMENT COULD HAVE BEEN HIM.

I TURNED TO ART AND BY Juxtaposing IMAGES WITH WHAT WORDS I COULD MASTER, I BEGAN TO FIND A WAY TO EXPRESS WHAT HAPPENED.



BUT I DIDN'T FEEL I SHOULD COMPLAIN — EVERYONE WAS SUFFERING.

MARCH 19, 21



I'M NOT SCARED  
BUT I'D LIKE  
SOME EXTRA COMPANY



I'M NOT SCARED  
BUT MY PILLS  
KEEP CHANGING COLORS



I'M NOT SCARED  
BUT I FALL DOWN  
SO EASILY

MARCH 20, 21



I'm in  
A Nightmare

MARCH 31, 21

You have me  
in your lap.

You hold the  
cup to my  
mouth.

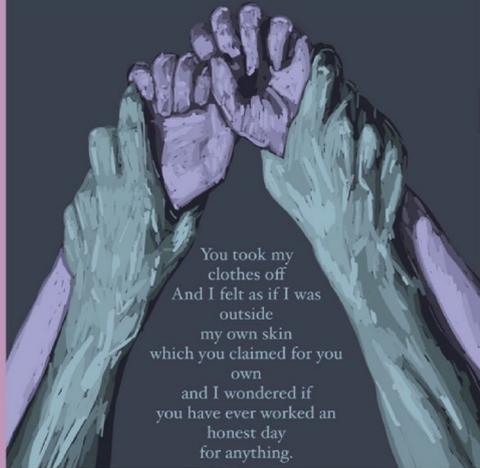
I want  
to scream.



But I  
drink.

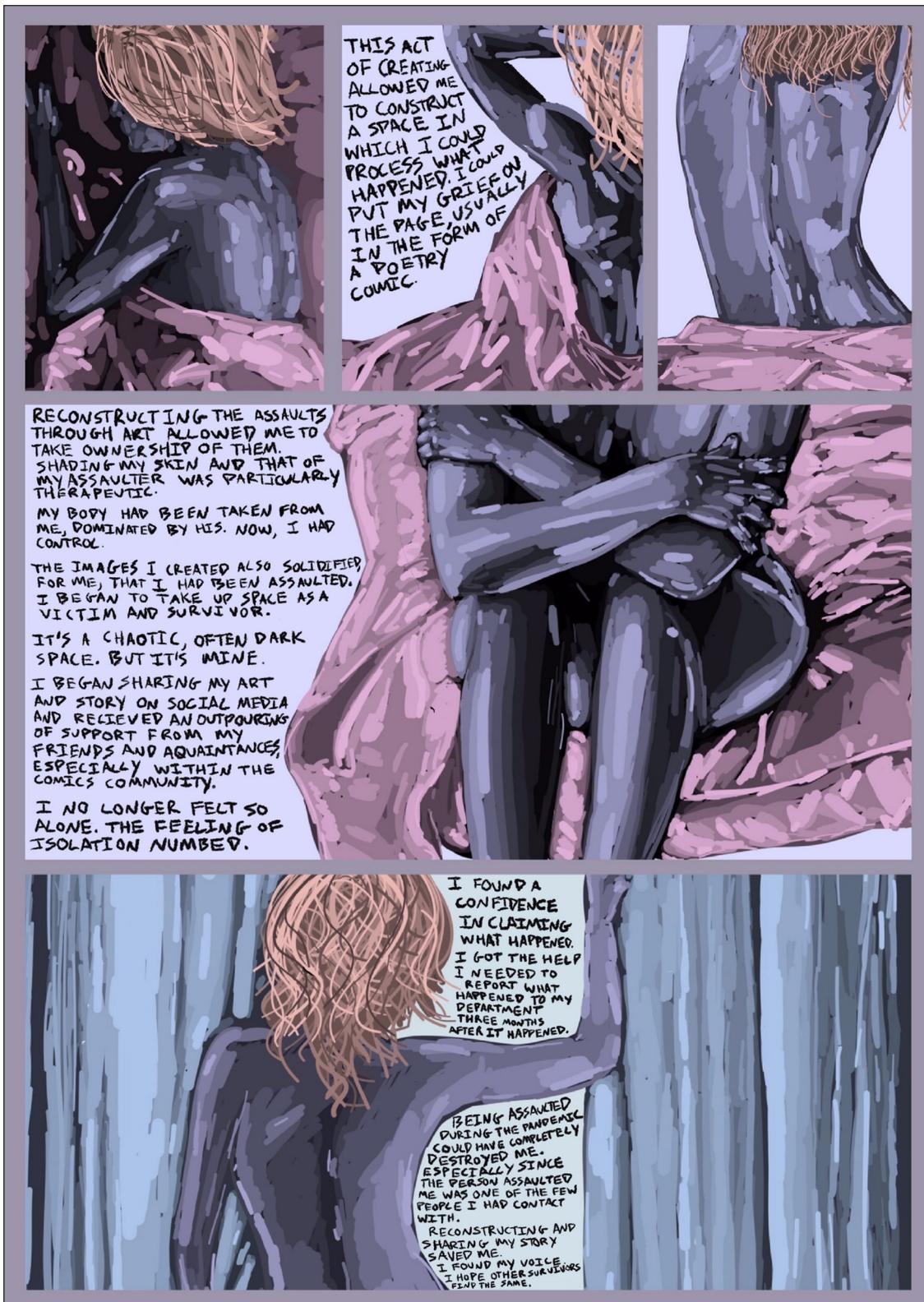


MARCH 25, 21



You took my  
clothes off  
And I felt as if I was  
outside  
my own skin  
which you claimed for you  
own  
and I wondered if  
you have ever worked an  
honest day  
for anything.

I'VE BEEN TOLD THE SUBTEXT IS DEAFENING, AND IT'S TRUE THAT UNDERNEATH I BLARE LIKE AN ALARM.



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I HEAR  
A  
WHISPER  
OF  
FREEDOM

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AS I  
RELEARN  
WHAT  
TO  
DO

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WITH  
MY  
HEAD  
MY  
HEART

---

AND MY  
HANDS



### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my editors Kay Sohini and Jeanette D'Arcy, as well as Lauren Chivington (2021), Henry Barajas, Andrew J. Kunka, and Rachel Miller, who all looked over several pages of this comic (several times) and gave me feedback and support.

### Author's Note

I first came across poetry comics at a panel at the MSU Comics Forum in 2020. As someone who enjoys both comics and poetry, I was intrigued. I started writing poetry and drawing to deal with the trauma of an abusive relationship but didn't decide to put the two together until after I was assaulted. To write down exactly what happened was too difficult and often impossible. Creating poetry, in both image and word, allowed me to convey the truth of what happened while still grappling with the very facts of it. I sometimes fail at executing the form, but it started me on the journey and let me come forward with what happened.

The empty speech balloon sequence was inspired by a conversation with Lauren Chivington and their work on the speech balloon.

### Editors' Note

This work is part of the Comics in and of the Moment Special Collection, edited by Jeanette D'Arcy and Kay Sohini with Ernesto Priego and Peter Wilkins.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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### Reference

Chivington, L., 2021. Signifying Silence: The Empty Speech Balloon. *Image Text* 12. <https://imagetextjournal.com/signifying-silence-the-empty-speech-balloon/>

