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I can't breathe!

“Mamma, get out of the car, I'll help you walk inside because no one is coming out to get you” were the words my friend Sergio said to me as he grabbed my hands and helped me get out of the car. “I just wanna go to sleep” I said with no voice coming out and drowning on my own blood. He helped me walk into the emergency room while everything was a blur to me and all I could see were drops of blood falling on the floor. When I got inside the emergency room, all nurses rushed to me and helped me get on the stretcher. As soon as my body touched that stretcher everything went black, I was so weak I did not fight it. After several minutes, I opened my eyes, and it was not a nightmare, I was still there. It was an unbearable pain and I was tied to the sides of the stretcher, apparently I did not let the nurses put the breathing tube through. To think that just thirty minutes ago I was at a playing pool and now I was lying at an emergency room stretcher with a breathing tube on and a bullet hole from one side of the neck to the other.

I could not process it, I could not believe something like that would happen to me, the “good girl” of the family. But it was happening, a Thursday night, March 27, 2009 to be more specific, I went out with my friends Sergio, Edwin,

and Myra to have a few drinks and play pool. As we were at the establishment, a fight broke between the bartender and a customer (two women), it felt really sneaky, and so we decided to leave. As we were leaving, my friend stumbled into one of the guys that was with the girl that was fighting with the bartender. The guy turned around and threaten to kill my friend and basically pushed him in my car. We were already on the main road when I heard gunshots, instead of ducking I turned around and BOOM!

Out of nowhere I started to feel chilly, light headed, tired, my right arm was numb, there was a beeping in my right ear, could not talk nor move, and worse of all: I COULD NOT BREATHE! My head fell on my friend's shoulder (Sergio, who was driving). Everyone checked if they were ok, but when they asked me I could not answer, and that was when Myra looked and saw it and yelled "Joenie got hit!" she started crying and she called her brother. We needed to find another car to get to the hospital because one of the tires had been shot, but Sergio kept driving. The whole ride to the hospital I felt I was dying and I knew if I closed my eyes I was not going to open them again, so every time they closed I fought to open them again, and again, and I kept repeating to myself "God please let me get to the hospital alive so that my mom can see me alive, I don't want her to have to identify my body". I was so tired, all I wanted was to go to sleep and wake up when it was all over. As Sergio was helping me get out of the car, I was looking for my ID, I mean they were going to need some type of ID to identify my body! I could not breathe, literally. I could not believe my life was slipping off my hands, it was so scary.

I had to be transferred to a different hospital because they did not have the right tools to help me. The ambulance took forever to get there. My mom was there with my sister and Myra (she never left my side). But my mom's face, she was probably more scared than I was, she had such a sad and desperate look in her eyes that made me feel so guilty for putting her in that position, her only biological daughter was between life and death. My sister was a nervous wreck and Myra was there, holding my hand but she was beyond scared too. When the ambulance got there I was barely conscious, but what I do remember is that the driver was an expert catching all the potholes! I felt each one of them on my neck! We got to Centro Medico (Medical Center in English) the primary and most complete hospital in Puerto Rico, and I was admitted to the Stabilizing unit. Outside there were my mom, my sister, Myra, and one of my aunts with her husband. They were all waiting to see me, who had just gotten shot by a piece of shit that I did not even see who he was (or they were). They left me there overnight while they figured out what they were going to do. I woke up the next morning and what I heard was "call her mother, we need to do surgery immediately", that's was when I started to freak out, literally, my heart was racing and that alarmed my nurse, who came running and tried to soothe me down saying "you're going to be fine, we are going to help you get better".

I went into surgery and out. I was placed in the recovery room, what they call ICU in the United States while they waited for a room to be available for me. The good thing was that I finally found out what damage the bullet did: I had a transversal fracture on two of my cervical vertebrae, a hole in my breathing

pipe (that explains why I couldn't breathe), one of my vocal chords was damaged, and some nerves (on my neck area) were damaged. I also discovered I had a hole on my neck also called tracheotomy and another hole in my stomach, a feeding tube also called gastrostomy. Oh, and it was all idea of the youngest surgeon, who came up with the idea of letting the hole in my breathing pipe close by itself and open again if I needed to get something fixed because I was too young (19 years old) and he did not want me to have such a big scar on my neck (the other surgeon wanted to open my neck from side to side to fix whatever tissue was damaged). They were giving me morphine and Benadryl (I had an allergic reaction to morphine) so basically I was "out of it" all the time.

It was so tedious, I even had to be bathed on the bed, and I could not get up for anything. I was in the trauma section (Trauma II), so the visits were limited to an hour twice a day and a maximum of three people at a time. It was amazing the amount of people who visited me. My mom was all day every day with me, and my sister took two weeks off from work and she went to every single visit with a big smile to make me feel better. Myra would come visit me and just sit next to me holding my hand, our friendship bond turned into more of a sister bond, and she had glass stuck in her hands from when the bullet went through the car's window. Friends and family were always there. My cousin's mom even travelled from Florida to see me because my cousin was desperate to see me and she could not travel because she was eight months pregnant. I remember how I told everyone they could not cry in front of me because that would make me cry and it was not good for me. The only person who I allowed to cry was my little

cousin Kristal, she could not help it but just fall on my shoulder and cry, poor thing, I felt so bad.

I was so uncomfortable, I just wanted to be home, in my bedroom with my TV, and just home. It was finally on April 12 that made me get up and made me walk a little, so they decided I was ready to be discharged. That day they took off the horrible tube I had on my neck and left a hole that was supposed to close on its own. Overall I was really happy I was going home. So, I went home, and I could not do anything on my own, I had to be bathed, someone had to go to the bathroom with me, I could not talk still, and I had to be helped to get up from my bed. After a few days, someone gave my sister a position bed so it would be easier for me to sleep and get up whenever I wanted to. The frustrating part was that I had to keep the feeding tube for another month, and I wanted to eat real food so bad! It was May 5th when I got the feeding tube removed, and I was allowed to eat real solid food. My vocal cord was still healing, so it was a little hard to swallow. The months went by and the back pain got better and the vocal chords too. The physical scars healed, it was not as easy to heal the emotional ones though.

It has been seven years since that horrible night. Sometimes I try to think it was all a bad dream, but I look at my scars and I remember it was not. Life changed, I cannot go to certain places or be in crowded places because I get anxious and afraid I am going to have a panic attack, and I freak out every time I hear fireworks. I never got back 100% to where I was before (health wise). I still

suffer from back pain and spasms, I developed a condition called Neuralgia which is migraine combined with sharp pain or electric shocks on my right side of the head. But above all, I am very thankful that I am still alive, that I am not quadriplegic (which was a big concern at the beginning because of where the bullet went through), because I can talk (the doctors were afraid I was not going to be able to talk again), and because I have had the ability of seeing this experience as one of growth. I read once a quote from my favorite author, Paulo Coelho, and it says: "The pain from yesterday is the strength of today", and I think this is pretty much what this experience was. I carry my scars with pride, knowing I survived something most people do not. My scars remind me how strong I was once, and how strong I know I can be. I learned to love more, love my family more, love my real friends more, love life more because we do not know when will be the last time we are going to be able to show them how much we love them...

