

MORE TO TELL

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CRYSTAL BUI

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*For every person who can relate.
For every person who understands.*

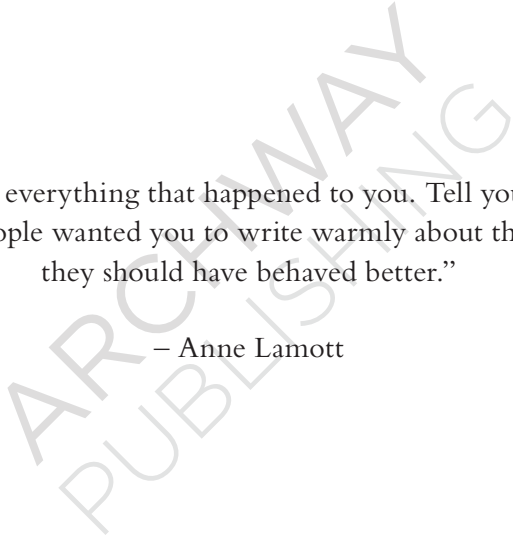
*And for every person who is questioning if
the way things are is how they should be.*

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“You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories.
If people wanted you to write warmly about them,
they should have behaved better.”

– Anne Lamott



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wish there weren't more to tell. But the truth is sexism and racism don't exist in a vacuum and the inherent discrimination George Floyd experienced wasn't isolated. Newsrooms may perpetuate the same injustice they condemn on the air. Despite wanting to forget the years I worked in Minneapolis as a television news reporter, the world deserves to know all sides of the story and what happened when the news cameras turned off.

To write about what I survived, I combed through videos, text messages, emails, audio recordings, transcripts, social media posts, photos, news articles, and reports—my own and others. Memories can be slightly hazy during traumatic events, but these pages are as accurate as I can recall. I spoke to some coworkers to ensure our recollections overlapped, and they corroborated these experiences.

While this story is about George Floyd and the men who killed him, it's also a memoir—an account of my trauma as a female Asian television news reporter and the arguably racist and sexist behaviors in the newsroom that contributed to that trauma. Some of the events, places, and conversations in this memoir have been recreated from memory. The chronology of some events has been compressed. When necessary, the names and identifying characteristics of individuals and places have been changed to maintain anonymity. This is not to protect the perpetrators but to keep the focus more on their actions than their identities.

This memoir is my take on some of the most challenging years of my life in the way I remember them. And I hope something in

these pages encourages others to stand up for themselves, speak up, and speak out so we can address racism and sexism at the source and prevent another George Floyd—or another Derek Chauvin—from happening again.

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PROLOGUE

All I wanted was to start a new life. I had worked as a television news reporter in different regions before becoming a reporter in New York City—the fourth stop in my career. Moving from station to station to build a portfolio and chase after journalism awards is not uncommon for a young reporter. We all had to work our way up. But the rose-colored glasses didn't stay on for very long.

I thought the station I worked for in New York City was discriminatory, especially towards women and minorities—like me. *The Los Angeles Times* would later uncover that I wasn't the only one with this opinion. They exposed other discrimination claims against my former station and its various affiliates in bombshell investigations. A couple of their headlines: One year after Moonves' exit, CBS TV stations also face harassment and misogyny claims; Inside CBS' fraught investigation into allegations of racism and misogyny. Those interviewed in the articles alleged newsroom leaders created a hostile work environment that included, among other claims, bullying female managers and preventing the hiring and retention of Black journalists.

One article said, among other significant highlights, “After a high-profile probe into Moonves' conduct and the company's workplace culture, independent law firms hired by CBS concluded that ‘harassment and retaliation are not pervasive at CBS.’ But a *Times* investigation has uncovered claims of discrimination, retaliation and other forms of mistreatment in an ‘overlooked but significant corner of the company: the chain of CBS-owned television stations.’”

More than two dozen employees came forward in *the Los Angeles Times* investigations, detailing the prejudice they said they experienced. Their stories were ugly. One CBS affiliate staff member told *the Los Angeles Times* an employee used the N-word when describing her and also slapped her on the buttocks. But a CBS attorney instead labeled her sexual harassment allegations as “frivolous” in a court filing uncovered by the newspaper.

The news reporters and staffers who spoke out in different investigations weren’t the only ones who believed they were targeted based on race and gender. There were those of us who felt similarly but faced it in silence out of fear of retaliation. I used to be one of those reporters.

The warning signs managers weren’t exactly welcoming were all there. Once, a high-level manager screamed at me in front of the New York City newsroom packed with dozens of people. He told me to put on more makeup. But after reporting in front of the camera for almost five years at that point, I knew how to follow industry standards of looking professional on air. I knew there was enough lipstick, eye shadow, and foundation on my face—and that there didn’t need to be more. But what I didn’t know was how to respond to public shaming. I was treated differently and singled out.

People in the newsroom looked down, careful not to make eye contact as the manager yelled at me. The men looked uneasy witnessing me being targeted; some put on their headphones, and others closed the doors to their editing rooms. This manager knew what he was doing. He used me to set an example, instill fear among other reporters, and flex his power. I was mortified.

After he was done yelling, I walked away humiliated. I knocked on the door of one of our edit rooms knowing there was a male coworker inside who, if nothing else, would gently tell me the truth.

“Hey,” I said.

“What’s up?”

“Question for you,” I said. “Am I wearing enough makeup?”

“Yeah, you look normal to me. Why?” he said.

Normal meant my appearance was consistent with the other on-air talent.

“Oh, I just got yelled at in front of the newsroom.”

He told me he heard the commotion and closed the door because it didn't sound good. We talked a bit more, and the editor tried to cheer me up. While it provided some reassurance, he wasn't the one responsible for my paychecks, so I didn't linger for too long. It was already uncomfortable enough having to admit to another male coworker that your boss shamed you in front of your peers.

Being a news reporter wasn't easy. Professors don't tell you about that side of the news when you're choosing your college major. It's not glamorous, but it appears to look that way—sensational, urgent, relevant—so viewers won't change the channel. But, behind the scenes, it can be an absolute horror. Every year, a new batch of reporters goes into the industry thinking they will change the world and fight the good fight. But, once they're on the inside, like I was, it feels that the industry perpetuates the same sexism and racism it pretends to work against.

Why didn't I quit? I was young. I thought I had no other options. My hands were also tied. There were ways to blackball a young reporter from the industry, even if every allegation against the reporter was baseless. Unlike other industries where giving out too much information about a former employee is illegal, newsroom managers can engage in a “whisper campaign.” They talk to each other “off the record” during the application process and can make outlandish claims against their former employees, claims I would never know about to be able to set the record straight. One wrong move and a malicious manager could sabotage my hard work by preventing another manager from hiring me. It wasn't difficult for managers to be vindictive.

I also didn't quit because reporting was supposed to be my calling. There weren't enough Asian women in newscasts and being the first

American-born daughter of Vietnamese immigrants, I thought my perspective would give me an advantage. I could more easily go into disenfranchised communities and be an ally, sharing those stories in a sensitive and empowering manner. I tolerated the industry because I wanted to make a difference—to advocate for the little guy, expose wrongdoing, and give the voiceless a platform to talk. I wanted other Asian girls to turn on the television and see themselves represented in a “high-profile” profession. I was delusional.

Once it was clear my time in New York City had run its course, I signed with an agent, hustled interviews, and a news station in Minneapolis offered me a job. It wasn’t my first choice but waiting on any pending offers wasn’t wise. I resisted the idea initially and told my agent Minneapolis seemed like a cold and lonely city. But the station beat everyone to the punch with an offer only good for 24 hours. I took it.

Happiness genuinely seemed possible for a few months following my move to the Midwest. After the volatility in New York City, I desperately wanted happiness.

The lifestyle of packing up my bags every few years made it hard to balance a social life. FaceTiming with best friends who lived in completely different states and knowing I couldn’t drive to their houses on a bad day because thousands of miles separated us hurt a lot. My dating life was worse. When boyfriends asked about the exact end date of my two-year contract, I was upfront about my dreams. I wanted to work in a top ten news market—like Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C. My honesty revealed the expiration date of each relationship.

“I just wonder if this is what you do,” a boyfriend asked once.

“Do what?” I asked.

“Go from city to city. Fall in love. And I’m just one of those guys who happen to be in that city who you love before you leave.”

It was a sad thing to hear, but he was right. I also was tired of saying goodbye.

These breakups initially created a deep desire to call Minneapolis my forever home. I wanted to find a fulfilling newsroom with kind coworkers, meet the right person in a few years, get married, and have kids. The truth of how things played out in Minneapolis was far from that dream.

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CHAPTER 1

Minneapolis is Burning Down

I'm screaming.

His hands are trembling as he frantically shoves the keys at the ignition. If we don't move quickly enough, we won't get out.

As Evan struggles to start the news van, I know cameras from television stations around the world are recording us, following us closely, and streaming this near-hostage situation live and without hesitation.

Evan and I are not part of that world—far from it. We are the scrappy, small-budget, local family-owned news station run by stingy multi-billionaires. And we are sitting in a nearly broken down, rusty, off-beige Chrysler Grand Caravan with too many miles on it. It is running on a prayer. It's a pathetic excuse for a news van that rattles and has trouble starting on an average day. But the motto behind doors, I imagine, is "Profits over people."

Here I am, a news reporter with her video photographer trapped in a minivan parked between uneasy law enforcement and unpredictable rioters. The national news crews are safely stationed down the block with their private security guards, state-of-the-art microphones, and high-definition cameras recording us for the world to see. Their news vans all look new, shiny and equipped with the latest technology. Meanwhile, the whole situation is touch and go for us, a ticking time bomb we are still determining if we can diffuse.

It's a dangerous game of cops and robbers. The cops: Minneapolis police, Minnesota State Patrol, the National Guard, and whoever else the federal government sent for backup. The robbers: protesters and rioters, all after blood in the name of justice. And we are sitting in the crosshairs of it all.

In front of us, there's a line of men wearing riot gear waving their batons. Police tonight are outfitted to look menacing, intimidating, and vicious. And they're heading right toward us. Minneapolis is burning down.

From inside the minivan, I lock eyes with a state trooper. Fire reflects off his helmet; the flames are the backdrop, and so is the thick smoke. It has a strange fog-like effect: lights flash against their uniforms, and the flicker appears in sync with the sound of steady militant marching. I feel like I'm in a movie, except this is live television and real life.

I'm not sure if my eyes know how to beg, but maybe these officers know mercy. Do they see us as necessary collateral damage or will they have some pity before they strike? Do we look terrified, trapped inside the minivan moments from an inevitable violent clash?

I know what comes next: tear gas and rubber bullets—the state's form of defense to control violent protesters. At this point, police don't seem to care who is with the media and who is not. Our bright yellow, crumpled press badges are useless. It doesn't matter who you are. We're all the enemy once it's dark.

Behind us, the rioters use our news van as a shield. They're pounding on the trunk, taunting the police, and yelling the familiar battle cry, "Say his name! Say his name! Say his name!"

Every microaggression, racist comment, and injustice these protesters have ever felt or witnessed is unleashed. The oppression and discrimination ignored and held inside for years have boiled over. They're after revenge. The crowd has lost control.

"Go!" I shout to Evan. I don't know that he can hear me over the chants behind us. "Back the car up. Now!"

But Evan is so frantic behind the wheel that he forgets how to reverse the car. He hits the gas anyway and the engine is revving. It's in Park. The state troopers are closing in on us, but we're not moving.

"Fuck," I think. "We're about to die."

I'm yelling at him to hurry up. Get us out of here.

He yells something like, "Back off, Crystal."

I'm not helping the situation because he is freaking out even more. Evan has never been the type who's calm in high-pressure situations. I've worked with him on big stories: officer-involved shootings, SWAT standoffs, and homicides. I've seen Evan anxious while reporting. He gets testy, raises his voice, and snaps at people easily. After a tense interview or report, he needs a cigarette break. He knows I hate seeing him smoke, but that's how he copes.

We now find ourselves in this life-or-death scenario where Evan controls the wheel. There's a slim chance we're making it out. From our working relationship and arms-length friendship, I know Evan has good intentions and will do what is needed to keep us safe. But can he pull it off? That's an entirely different conversation. We have yet to move because he unintentionally puts the stick in neutral.

When you're panicking, your automatic response and reflexes shut down. You forget how to do an action you've done thousands of times before. For Evan, it seems as if he's forgotten all of his teenage driving lessons, and for a split second, I think about shoving Evan aside and backing up the minivan myself. But he's so close to snapping I assess the situation and decide it's better to stay in the passenger seat. I don't know why, but I buckle my seatbelt. As if that would make me any safer.

Even though I'm fairly close to my coworkers, I don't tell them anything too personal. If I did, they'd know tonight I'm loaded up on low doses of anxiety medication my Minneapolis psychiatrist prescribed me to use "as needed." I've been popping the round white pills in my mouth while covering these riots, swallowing them like candy and hoping they'll work. This is an emergency.

I usually fall asleep after taking the medication and wake up the following day with the best sleep. The pills are supposed to take away my anxiety, making me feel drowsy. But the prescription drugs do nothing for me tonight as I see more and more fires surrounding us. Evan finally figures out how to reverse the car, but now he screams we can't move.

"What the fuck do you mean we can't move?"

I'm becoming unhinged myself. Evan looks concerned, scared even. He tells me if we back up, we might run over protesters hiding behind our news van who are using it as a shield from the incoming tear gas and the rubber bullets. I know Minneapolis doesn't need more bloodshed. And for some reason, the Charlottesville car attack in 2017 pops up in my mind within the chaos. Probably not a good idea to run over a protester, I think. We don't need another Charlottesville. I don't want to kill anyone, but at the same time, my survival instincts say if it's them or me, it will be me. Evan better back the car up immediately because I refuse to die tonight.

The station's cameramen (called "photogs" in the news industry) tried to prepare me for this exact moment when we huddled before heading out. It was almost a group prayer. They told me bluntly: if you die tonight, the company will post your job in two weeks, and the wealthy owners will hire some crisis communications consultant and legal team to write a generic statement about your death.

"Do not let that happen," they said.

One photog told me sternly, "I better not hear about you doing anything idiotic to try to get the best shot. Do not go for an award tonight. I mean it, Crystal."

In the minivan, I start holding my breath. If police begin firing tear gas, we'll suffocate inside this makeshift gas chamber. I close my eyes, concentrate, and fill my lungs with air. I refuse to exhale. I won't breathe. I can't breathe.

My anxiety is heightened and physiology kicks in. After the amygdala in your brain sends a distress signal, your glands respond by pumping adrenaline into the bloodstream. I only know this because

of the years of therapy I've had. It's all part of the "fight or flight" response, which means I'm about to blackout.

If you've never blacked out from stress or bingeing alcohol, that's impressive. How it works: you lose track of time. It affects your memory, and you essentially have amnesia, however brief. The adrenaline overtakes the system. The heart races too much and accelerates too fast. It can be dangerous and deadly.

Please help me. Get me out of here. Please keep me alive.

I'm praying with all my might. I start frantically thinking about any deals I can make to negotiate with God.

My cell phone starts buzzing, and the incoming call lights up the minivan and snaps me out. It's the newsroom. They don't know what's happening because we cut the feed. We haven't been on the air in a while. All they know is we've gone dark.

My boyfriend is back at our tiny Minneapolis apartment watching this unfold on live television. I imagine he's flipping between channels trying to keep track of where each reporter is in the city. He's a powerless, captive audience, like the rest of the world. There's nothing he can do to save me. Frankly, it's riveting television.

Our ratings are probably through the roof tonight. With more eyes on the coverage comes more advertising revenues; the company owners' net worth keeps growing while their reporters are fighting to stay safe during a dangerous assignment. They're raking in money, benefiting from one of our time's most significant social justice movements.

This is the night of riots following George Floyd's murder.