

“Listen”

Even from my upstairs bedroom I could hear the jangle of my mother’s keys in the front door. My head snapped downwards and my heart started pounding in my chest. She’d be livid when she found the bright red stain on my carpet.

I stuffed the scissors into my backpack, rolled down my sleeve, and shifted my rug ever so slightly. As was customary, I ran down the stairs to greet her as she came in.

“Hey Mama! How was work?” I offered up a cheerful greeting hoping it would mask the slight tremble in my voice. I shouldn’t have worried though, she never paid much attention to anything before *he* got home.

He wasn’t my father, but Mama insisted that “Mister” was too formal for a man that had been living with us for as long as he had. My real dad was taller than my mom by almost a foot, had skin blacker than a crow’s feather, and laughed deep from his belly. Mommom always said I was his twin. I wish he had never left.

I was young when it happened, maybe 10 or 11, but I remember everything. The yelling, the cursing, the door slamming so hard it shook the whole house. See, my dad always slammed doors after an argument. Mama said it was just part of him trying to process his emotions. She said that we were lucky because most men with tempers like his would’ve gone “upside her head” by now! He would go for a walk, stop by the corner store, and then make his own funny smelling cigarettes when he came home. Whenever I asked why he didn’t just buy regular ones from the store he’d tell me these were different and helped with the migraines having to deal with my “batshit crazy mama” caused. I always laughed because he said it with a smirk; and after Mom smoked a special cigarette with him they always made up. “Love hurts sometimes, Blackbird,” he’d say.

One night, after a particularly volatile argument, Dad slammed the door. Instead of the usual shuffle down our gravel walkway, I heard the sputter of the ignition revving up on his old ’89 Chevy. I ran to my window and watched as he peeled out of our yard, down the street, and out of sight. There was a deafening sense of conclusiveness in the way his taillights disappeared. Yet and still, I waited. I waited by my window for hours. I waited to hear his truck coming back down the road and pulling into our driveway; so that he could pick me up, call me a bird, and tell me I could fly as high as my imagination could take me. But he never came back.

The pressures of family life were too much for him, and he was too young to be tied down. It was almost comical coming from a man upwards of thirty-five years old. His leaving was no joke to my mother though. No matter how many of daddy’s special cigarettes she made, she couldn’t seem to smile back at me. I overheard my aunts talking and they said she was “depressed.” It wasn’t in the sense most people would think though. She didn’t stop going to work or taking showers. Her weight didn’t fluctuate and she didn’t start losing her hair. It was almost as if the light inside of her just dimmed suddenly. Instead of living, she was just existing. Going through the motions without any real intent of progression. That is...until she met *him*.

He was short, light skinned, and had a real nasally laugh. He was nothing like my father. She met him almost two years after my dad left...and married him six months later.

“At my age you know what you want,” she’d told me as she caressed my face for the first time in ages.

“He makes me happy...don’t you want your Mama to be happy?”

At the peak of my tween years, I wanted my mother’s happiness above all else. She was finally acting like herself again. She cooked dinner at least three times a week. She would come home and ask about my day. Her sultry voice filled the house every Saturday morning as she sang along to Marvin Gaye and cleaned the house from top to bottom. My favorite thing though, is when she would kiss my forehead and call me her “favorite girl.” It seemed like when she started to love him, she remembered to love me again too.

They recited their nuptials the summer of my thirteenth birthday...the same season my hips spread and I traded in my training bra for a solid B-cup before school started. My grandma called me an “early bloomer.”

Amidst picking out a new book bag and refusing to wear stockings with my skirts, I remember eagerly jumping into the car so that we could go on one last trip to the beach before August ended. We drove to Sandy Point and began to lay out our towels. When my mother realized she’d forgotten the umbrella, she went to ask the lifeguard on duty about renting one.

Sunglasses on, I looked up abruptly when a shadow was cast. I was lying on my back and he was standing over top of me. He leered at me in my bathing suit, eyes lingering over my developing body.

“Such a pretty girl,” he’d said.

A shudder ran through me as I instinctively wrapped my towel around me to cover up. There was something unsettling in the way he smiled. It wasn’t the hearty, gap toothed one I remembered from my father. His held something more sinister.

I should’ve known then, but I was young. I was innocent...not like now. My uneasy feeling disappeared as the day wore on. When my mom got back, we had too much fun for me to be worried! She surprised me with an ice-cream cone and it was mint chocolate chip, my favorite! The sun felt so warm on my skin. My mother and I held hands as we laughed uncontrollably, jumping over waves. Full of excitement but devoid of energy, I fell asleep before we made it to the car.

My mother was charge nurse at the psychiatric hospital she worked at and was consequently, almost always on call. That day was no exception, because when I woke up and we were on our way home.... it was just him and I.

“Your mom told me to make sure you have dinner and a bath before bed.”

She was a stickler for routine, so I knew she would've told him to make sure I stick to my mine. He took me to McDonald's, and because he knew my mother hated for me to have fast food, he said he wanted to treat me to something special. He told me it'd be our little secret.

The first of many.

When we got home, he insisted on helping me undress even though I told him I could do it myself. He said my mom specified that I should take a tub bath, even though I'd primarily taken showers for years. He watched from the doorway as I submerged myself into the scalding hot water. As I washed, I sang my new favorite song. I'd learned it in "Tween Saints Church" the week before.

*"O the blood of Jesus washes me
O the blood of Jesus shed for me
What a sacrifice that saved my life
Yes, the blood, it is my victory"*

I was so preoccupied by my own singing, I didn't realize he'd entered the bathroom until he was sitting on the edge of the bathtub.

He just watched at first. Told me to keep singing, to keep washing. Told me I was a prettier, younger version of my mama.

I didn't know what was going on, but I knew it was wrong. I knew he shouldn't be in the bathroom while I washed up...and I knew he shouldn't be touching me. Shouldn't be telling me to relax, telling me to sssshh, and telling me that my mama liked it when he touched her like that.

Days passed and I still hadn't gotten the chance to talk to her about the incident. She was so busy. When she was at home, it seemed like we could never get a moment alone. He was always around.

One night, he passed out on the couch downstairs after a late football game and I knew I had to make the most of my small window of opportunity. I crawled out of my bed, knocked timidly on her door, and entered only once she told me I could.

"Little girl you should be asleep. What's the issue?"

Anxiously, I rocked back and forth on my heels as I tried to describe to my mom the unnerving experience I'd had. My head was down as I spoke. There was a tense silence as the last "touch me" fell from my lips.

I looked up and tried to catch her eyes, expecting them to be full of sorrow and sympathy. I thought she'd run downstairs, pack his things, and throw him out into the street. I wanted her to fling her arms open and allow them to act as my safe haven. I wanted my mother to protect me.

"Liar." She spat the word at me and finally made eye contact.

Confused, I searched for the warmth that I'd once reveled in. There was none. The icy glare she gave me made me nauseous. My head was spinning. She didn't believe me.

I pleaded with her silently as we stared at each other. Begged her to see the truth in my words. I wanted to scream at her but I couldn't feel my face. I was numb.

After sending me to my room, it was as if the conversation had never taken place.

It happened again.

Once after my mom had worked two back-to-back ten hour shifts. She was too tired to hear my muffled grunts. And again, after I had been allowed to have a male friend come over to hang out. He told me I'd never get the kind of pleasure I deserved from a little boy like that.

I recently had another birthday. I'm going into my junior year of high school. I thought it would stop once I got older. When it didn't, after the fourth time, I just stopped counting.

"Hey honey, work was work and I have way more of it to do! Just came home to get what I forgot this morning." she rushed in, grabbed her nurse's bag and made her way back towards the door.

"Tonight is gonna be a late one, so please don't make life difficult and go to bed when you're supposed to do. It's a school night."

"Yes ma'am."

She gripped the door handle and stopped momentarily.

"He'll be off work in an hour or two. Make sure you throw something together for dinner."

My heart jumped into my throat. Consciously or not, my mother had made sure that he and I were rarely alone together for extended periods of time. She wanted me to be here when he got off of work, tired and irritated. She wanted me to make dinner. To serve him as I had in so many ways before.

"Mama, I—"

"I don't have time for your excuses or made up stories! I have to get back so that I can continue to put food in your belly!" And with that, she was gone.

It wasn't until I tried to take my cellphone out of my back pocket that I realized I was shaking. Whether with rage or fear, I couldn't tell.

"How could she?" I spoke out loud, to no one in particular.

“HOW COULD SHE?!” I screamed and allowed my emotions to engulf my consciousness for the second time that day. Kneeling on the floor I began to cry.

I cried because I knew the undeniable truth about what was going to happen when he came home and realized my mother would be working late. I cried because I knew I wouldn't fight back; I would just check out. My body would be enduring the physical pain but my mind would be searching the infinite cosmos for any kind of escape. My life was not my own. I was a slave to the pain. To the fear.

But there was one thing I could control. I couldn't force him not to touch me. I couldn't make my mother believe me. But I could control something.

With still trembling hands, I unzipped my backpack and pulled out the scissors I'd put away moments before. Opening them slowly, I deliberately rolled up both of my sleeves and after a second thought, decided to just take off my entire shirt.

I pressed the edge of the silver blade directly onto my forearm. The cold metal was a nice contrast against my warm flesh. I got goosebumps. I was fully in control. Anything that happened after this point was up to me. I could decide where, when, and how deep my wounds would go. There was no uncertainty, no surprise, no shock. I could control this.

I pressed harder and harder, until sticky red droplets began to form around the blade's edge. It hurt, but I was expecting that. Lifting the blade, I placed the scissors in my other hand and repeated the same process on my right arm. A searing pain shot up my spine and I grimaced out loud.

It was almost as if with every swipe, my thoughts were wiped away, and liquefied into the red river that flowed down my arms. I wanted them all to stop, so I had to keep going. Faster.

She hates me. *Swipe.*

I should've told someone else. *Swipe.*

He hates me. *Swipe.*

He says he loves me. *Swipe.*

It's my fault. *Swipe.*

I hate me. *Swipe.*

I felt darkness overtaking me. I was losing too much blood. I was losing consciousness.

I saw my father. I heard his laugh. I saw my mother. I heard her tears.

*“O the blood
Crimson love
Price of life's demand
Shameful sin*

*Placed on him
The hope of every man”*

*O the blood of Jesus washes me
O the blood of Jesus shed for me”*

Oh, the blood. The blood.

If only she had listened.