Hurt Child, Fractured Adult

Karina Garcia

My grandfather’s hand was wrapped tightly around my neck, his fingernails carving pink crescent moons into the soft flesh of my throat. I had spilled a glass of fruit juice onto the living room carpet, and he was pushing my head into the scarlet stain, his twisted red face gleaming with sweat, as if he were boiling up from the inside. “Puerca,” he spat out. I was six years old, and for the first time in my life, I felt like I wanted to die.

What was so fatal about that moment? Perhaps it was the sudden realization that this was not a one-and-done-deal; at any moment I could be the victim of someone’s rage, someone that I loved and trusted, someone who was supposed to protect and guide me. As if it were a taut rubber band, time snapped loose. I could see previous instances of abuse unspooling backwards throughout my life, only to turn my head and see even more such moments stretching into the future.

No end in sight, no relief. Not in my child’s body, infuriating in its helplessness and lack of agency; the inhuman anger on my grandfather’s face, as unreachable as if he were a violent stranger; or my grandmother’s tragic expression as she looked on, crying silently, wringing her hands in her lap, knowing any interference on her part would paint her as a target, escalate his anger more than it would help.

Growing up in a Hispanic family, physical abuse was normalized and often made into a joke. “Watch out for the chanella”, a common cultural quip that makes light of being hit with a shoe, fails to recognize the inherent terror of facing a parent or guardian with the earnest intention of hurting you. With my culture’s heavy emphasis on family and respect for adults, to
outwardly question the discipline I received—no matter how emotionally or physically damaging—would be a sign of disrespect, and incite more anger.
So I began to play a sick, secret game that would have serious consequences for the rest of my life: I promised myself that I would kill myself, eventually. Whenever I faced a barrage of blows and obscenity-laden insults, I’d retreat into the recesses of my mind, finding solace in my eventual self-inflicted demise; a moment of total control, in which my body would belong to no one but me. I kept this silent covenant throughout the rest of my childhood, always planning my eternal escape, taking comfort in the ever-present option of complete annihilation.

At seven years old, I avoided my mother’s gaze, my cheek stinging from a fresh slap. Her voice was a distant blur; I was far away, reminding myself of my secret, liberating promise.

“Are you upset that I hit you?” She yanked me closer, poked her finger into my chest. “I made you.”

You have no idea what I am going to do, I thought to myself, almost biting back a smile. Eventually, eventually.

At eight years old, I watched my grandfather lunge at my mother as he ordered us out of his apartment, his face contorted in anger, hers resigned and distant, even when his hands closed around her throat.

I can stop this whenever I want, I thought to myself. Eventually.

At fifteen, my mother apologized to me.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her eyes full of tears. “It wasn’t right, and I want to change.” I held her hands and tried to feel something. I told her I forgave her, but that wasn’t true; not because I didn’t want to, but because it was already too late, I had made a promise to myself, and I couldn’t put it off for much longer.

When I headed off to college, I didn’t know how to cope with still being alive. I was immensely privileged, with a scholarship that fully funded my housing and education and
afforded me the freedom to pursue whatever academic interests I desired. I cut off my family, moved in with a boyfriend, tried my best to play house- but I couldn’t shake off the feeling that I’d forgotten something.

It was as if there was a shackle clasped around my ankle, yanking me back with each step I took. I picked up the chain and found it led back to a sad-eyed little girl with a dark secret. 

_Don’t forget,_ she whispered, and my heart sank. The promise I’d made as a child had caught up to me, demanding its due.

I can’t even remember the attempt I made on my own life; I can only remember waking up in the hospital the next morning, eyes blinking against searing, fluorescent ceiling lights. I never said a word, even as they shuttled me to a psychiatric facility, pumped me full of medication.

When I was released from the facility, my mother was waiting right outside the entrance. We hadn’t spoken in months. For a moment, we just stared at each other.

I wish I could make a profound, succinct statement about how, in that moment, I discovered the secret of enduring life when it feels more like a burden than a gift. Truthfully, there are still days when I want nothing more than to curl up on the floor of my closet, flashbacks flickering through my mind, thinking of my mother and grandparents and mourning the children that we were, the pointless pain we endured and inflicted on one another. Our trauma did not make us stronger. It served no purpose but the perpetuation of a violent, dysfunctional cycle of abuse, as if were were all threads woven within a grand tapestry of pain.

What I did realize, in that moment, was that to end my life would not destroy or remove myself from the tapestry; it would simply weave another tragic thread into it.
I reached towards my mother, closing the gap between us, and she held me tighter than she ever had. Something within me loosened and gave way; I recognized that the sick promise I’d made as a child was not a solution, but a curse, and I was finally free from it.

I’m sharing my story in the hopes that people like me, who were hurt as children and carry that hurt within them like a dark weight, can feel seen, can know that someone has walked this path and emerged with a newfound appreciation for life. I recognize my many privileges, and that there are many who don’t get apologies from and reconciliation with those who’ve hurt them. There are unique threads of pain woven within us all. But I genuinely believe that mending is possible through the sharing of our stories with one another, if no one else; as if we are all extending gentle hands to each other, saying, See? *This happened to me, too, and this is how I made it through.*