

The Survivor
by
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As a child, my parents were your typical abusers of the system. The system—welfare—was an out for them never to face responsibility. After a lifetime of poverty, neglect, and abuse, I have decided that I will have what is necessary in life to give my children.

My mother divorced my biological father when I was five and my brother, two. Up until the time of the divorce, we lived in Miami, Florida. We lived in a three-bedroom house, that had hardwood floors, a huge back yard with a doughboy pool, and I had three dogs: a huge black lab named Cesar and two Irish Setters with beautiful reddish brown hair. All I can remember from that day at the airport was my father waving goodbye and telling me that everything was going to be okay. Little did I know, my life would see even more sadness.

After the divorce, my mother relocated us to California. We moved into a two bedroom duplex that had a really big front yard. I only saw my father once after that, distance I guess, our time together was a supervised visit for one hour. I talked to him on the phone a handful of times after that. My mother told me that I would try to sneak out of the house in the middle of the night after talking to him, forcing her to double lock the door really high and eventually stopping all communication I had with him.

At some point everyone tries to get on with his or her life no matter what comes her way and that is what my mother tried to do. After many different boyfriends—some good and some bad and a new sibling—my mother fell prey to a man she knew for seven days. She was a single mother of three and

decided to get married. This is another tragic memory in my life. My mother left my siblings and me with a sitter and came back the next day saying, “This is your new daddy and you will call him that.” The thought of this stranger replacing my father was so smothering, but what could I do? I was a victim of circumstances; I had to do what I was told.

From the time she married this man until the time I turned 18, we suffered. The man—to whom my mom gave complete control—turned the world, as we knew it, upside down. We lived in hotels—not nice ones, the ones where you couldn’t turn the lights out because the cockroaches would crawl over you; in the river bottoms—with a rope and a blanket tossed over to make a tent; in our car; and at one point we even lived in homeless shelters in Vancouver, Washington.

We also became slaves to the whims of their needs. I cannot stand the smell of coffee because of all the cups I had to make as a child. God forbid we didn’t do what they asked fast enough for them, because if we didn’t, we got beat. I can remember one time, that I didn’t do something or back talked and my step-dad chased me down, pinning me on the ground and started kicking me over and over again. The whole time I was screaming, “I hate you and you’re not my father.” When he was done, I remember seeing my mother standing there watching and all I could think was, how is it you can let this man do this to your children? She never did anything.

My parents also had the knack for playing on the goodness of mankind. Whenever they exhausted the resources available to them in one place, they would pack us up in a blink and on the road we would go. To find the next state that would give welfare to a two-parent family. I have lived in Florida, Washington, Nebraska, Utah, and in many different cities in California. On many different occasions we did not have money for food or gas. My parents—being the con artists that they were—had no shame going to churches and asking for help. I remember one time; our car had no brakes and a church put us up in a hotel and paid for our car to be fixed. They also gave us money for gas and made sure that we had food to eat on our journey. These journeys lasted for 10 years of my life.

After I turned 18, I ran from one hellhole to another. I ended up getting together with a man that was 15 years older than I. As sick as it sounds, thinking back, being with him was better than living with my mom. He was living on social security, an alcoholic and guess what, I ended up pregnant and in the famous welfare line. I was nine weeks pregnant when I got my diploma; I can still remember the overwhelming urge I had to cry sitting on the stage waiting for my name to be called. When my first daughter, Aimee, was born, I had no clue where my life was going.

Two years later, I found myself in a work program where I learned skills to ensure employment. I was placed at a work site where I was able to receive more on the job training. Two years later, I was working full time and not on welfare, but God had blessed me one more time. I was pregnant again. This time, I had the tools to provide for my children without asking for help.

When my second child, Camille, was born, I decided that I did not want my children growing up in an apartment complex. Instead, I wanted them to be able to play in the front or back yard of the place they could call their home. I saved my income tax refund and was able to buy a house when Camille was 11 months old. Over the next few years, I continued to work and take care of my children, but I was not happy. I was still with an alcoholic, who was mentally/verbally abusive, and I wanted more for my children.

Before, when I was 18, I did not know what happiness was, nor did I know where my life was going. Over the next eight years, I had grown up and realized that I did not have to stay in a relationship for my children's sake. I too, just like my mother, separated my children from the world they had known. The only difference was, I did not move out of the state. My children's father lives five blocks from us and always has some reason as to why he can't spend time with them. My girls have sadly gotten used to the fact that their dad always has excuse after excuse and they don't even count on him anymore. They will grow up and make their own minds up about him. Until then, I am supportive and always listen with arms wide open.

Now, I found myself in the same boat my mom was 25 years ago, single mother of two, but I will not sink like she did. Sure, I struggle from time to time to make ends meet, but that will not stop me from providing the necessary things that life requires. Things like a place to call home, clean clothes, a bed to sleep in, a bike to ride, and a parent that you know would do anything to protect you. I did not have these growing up, but my children will, even if I have to sell my soul to the devil—that’s what parents are supposed to do.

Once I had my own children, I realized what it was I was missing as a child. I have no relationship with my mother because I refuse to think that a man would be more important than my three children, as she did. With all of the help there is out there, there is no excuse to be living the way we did. She has constantly made excuse after excuse and is still with the man who doesn’t even provide her the quality of life she deserves. Sadly, the last I had heard, my mother was living at Second Beach in Knight’s Landing in a travel trailer, a place that we’d called home several times growing up. She is 53 years old, only has contact with one of her sons (the one who is, not surprisingly, living in the back of his car—like he was taught), has nothing to show for her life, and her grandchildren don’t even know her. Yes, my girls know how I grew up. Whenever we are on the subject, they are in such disbelief that they end up crying.

Okay, so you’re also probably wondering if I ever reunited with my father. Well, the answer to that is yes. After 20 years, I had the opportunity to meet my father and I didn’t have to do it alone. My brother and I flew to West Virginia where my father lived, to meet him after such a long time. He was late to the airport and he reeked of alcohol. Over the next week I observed my father’s life and came to my own conclusions. He was an old man suffering from liver disease, drank daily, but he took care of his son that he had fathered after we had been taken away from him. I had to ask myself if my children had been ripped away from me, how I would be. I had also asked myself, would my life have been better with

my father, and the answer to that was yes. I returned to California alone because my brother, not having anywhere else to go and wanting to know more about our father, stayed.

Today, I have no contact with my father after one conversation on the phone where he was trying to tell me how to live my life and called me a “little bitch,” as if he had the right to step into my life after 20 years and automatically become someone that I should listen to. I also harbor the sadness that my brother and I were not important enough for him to fight for. If your own biological parents don’t care, who does? The answer to that is no one.

We never know what the future holds, as I, too, have moved on with my life. In March of this year, I got married. I married a man that is good to my children, is a hard worker, and when I am with him, I feel like I am a princess. My girls have also come to know what it is like to have a positive male role model in their lives. He is not a replacement of their father and I will never force them to call him Dad; that will be their decision.

This is why I have made the decision to get on with my life; by getting a college education to provide the simple things that one needs to survive, with or without a partner. My educational goals are simple. I want to get my degree in social work or criminal justice. I feel that with my background, I can be a voice for someone. Or maybe I can help someone who is in the same situation that I was growing up because...I am a survivor.