

Little one with
Frayed christening like dress
And dirty tiny toes
Buckled wee fist
And eyes which don't seem to know

I tucked you away
In some bedroom
Chamber in my mind
Locked the door
To keep you safe
From angry tongues
And ice stoned hearts

And now I stand trying to coax
This torn little soul
With black and blue bruised spirit
To come out from
That darkened room and
your timidness
makes me want
to cry

To gather you up
dead bolt the door
weave a cocoon
knot it tightly about ourselves.

Instead we sit quivering
Afraid of our own fears
Lost in our own voices
Spent by our own breathing
Longing to stay in a gentle tender
Moment forever.

January 7, 1988

I remember. Now I know.

When I was young

When I was very young, somewhere between 3 and 7, my parents drank and argued. I couldn't make sense of the words: cheating, Canadian soldiers, affairs, words mixed with lots of swearing. Threw them across the room at each other like grenades.

I was awakened by loud voices and a crash. Woke up to see my Mother sprawled on the floor and my father standing above her. His look was as vicious as a cobra.

At 10 I woke up and saw a man who was a friend of the family holding my mother in a bear hug from behind. My mother cursing and swearing and yelling to be let go and to let her at him. I could hear my father snoring in the other room. There is a knife on the floor.

One night after returning from a party my partner and I began to argue. After firing my own grenades, our fists began to fly. Walls pox-marked with holes. We began wrestling. She was bigger than me and began to choke me.

In another relationship. The woman is smaller than me. I am drinking. I am flirting with another woman. My partner is standing in front of me refusing to move and asking me to stop fooling around on her. I tell her to get out of my way. She stands her ground. I pick her up and move her two feet and walk back to the other woman.

It is clear to me the violence I witnessed and experienced taught me to respond to pain with anger. I became tough; no one, nothing, could hurt me. I alienated myself...pushed others away if they got too close. My rage often was turned inward. Self deprecating, pushing the limits of my body, alcohol and drug abuse and sometimes found relief in cutting.

Today the anger, tempered by wisdom and therapy, makes me a strong advocate for the underdog. A survival skill gone awry is now an asset I use in my employment.

No Control

Grade 3. The pain in my bladder as I lined up to leave the classroom. The Teacher instructs:

"Two by two." (my bladder finds a moment of relief as I feel my underwear get wet.)

"In a straight line." (another dribble - pee leaks through my tights.)

"No one leaves until those who are talking are quiet." (rivulets of pee run down my leg, into my shoes, I can't stop it. I have no control.)

Finally she lets us go. Only a puddle of pee remains where I once stood. I pray to the Blessed Virgin and to all the Saints she won't remember who was standing there.

I wet my bed into my teens. As an adult - a drunk - I've pissed in gardens, beside cars, on the grounds of the Art and Culture Centre and on myself. Mumbling all the time to myself "Fuck it."

I had no control in childhood. Now I see lack of bladder control was directly linked to helplessness I felt. I couldn't control my parents fighting, I couldn't control siblings from doing whatever they wanted to me. In my 20s I abdicated any control. I embraced lack

of control like an old friend. Drugs and alcohol slammed me from one brick wall to another.

Even the Smart Ones

Grade 4, there is a poster on the wall. It has a column of all our names. Each row is a week. It's called the Top Speller. Every week after the spelling bee or test, Sister Mary Regis puts a star in the box of the person who did the best.

Unbelievably I have the most stars. More than even the smart ones in the class. I'm transfixed.....my name begins the row of stars stretching across the poster....way ahead of all the others.....like Northern Dancer in the last ¼ mile. No one can catch me. I make sure not to be caught staring at the poster. I'm so proud of me yet to draw any attention would be dangerous. Someone will come and knock me off my horse. Eventually the poster came down. I returned to being one of slow pupils like an old mare.

In grade 7 I was placed in a special Math class. We joked and self deprecating called it dum-dum's math. Somehow it took the sting and shame out of being placed in the class. In grade 8 was when you were placed in the Classical or Commercial Program. The Classical program was for the smart kids who were expected to go to college and university. Commercial was for the slower kids. They did typing, shorthand and bookkeeping whereas the Classical kids took Latin, physics, chemistry and biology. The principal, Sister Mary, came to the classroom and asked who wanted to do Classical. Most all the kids stood up including me. Methodically she went through the various subjects purposely to weed out the kids she believed should do commercial. She said anyone having trouble with math should do commercial. All those who were in dum-dums math sat. I was the only one from that math class to stay standing. The next proclamation pushed me back in my place: "Anyone who is already having trouble with one language shouldn't try to take Latin too." She looked directly at me. I had failed every French exam since grade 5.

I sat. Resigned.

Psychiatric Merry-go-Around

I left home at 16. Started different schools and dropped out. My father died. My mother moved. I moved in with her. Started secretarial school. Got introduced to drugs. Listened to Alice Cooper's "I'm 18" Simon and Garfunkel "Sounds of Silence". Made morbid collages thematically catching how I did not want this life. I was suicidal. I took overdoses. I ended up on psych wards. No one wanted to deal with me. I was described as non-compliant, malingering, aggressive, and attention seeking. As well as diagnosed with Manic Depression, Schizophrenia, Inadequate Personality Disorder and whatever their flavour of the month was from the DSM.

After being admitted to a psych ward for the umpteenth time, I realized they might send me to the mental hospital. I had already been committed once to the Hospital for Mental and Nervous Diseases (HMND). I knew there was no signing myself out of there. A committed person in a mental hospital has absolutely no control - from when you bathe to drugs administered. I didn't want to go back there.

It's late at night. I dress and go and tell the nurses I want to sign myself out. The nurse tells me to go to my room while she gets the papers.

An orderly comes with me and we make small talk while I wait. When I get antsy to go he gets me talking about something else. About a half hour later the nurse comes to the door: "I've been talking to Dr. Frost (real name) and he's decided to send you to the HMND and there are two officers here to take you there." With that said, two RCMP officers, another nurse, and another orderly appear and come at me. There's nowhere to run...except to the window. They get hold of me.....I'm fighting for my life.....it takes 6 of them to hold me down. Poke and fill me with paraldehyde. The cops carry me from the hospital. I'm nothing but body and bones. Put me in the back of the car. When we get to the station they put me in a straight jacket (they call it my pajamas), open a cell door, drag the mattress off the bunk and put me on the floor. They lock the cell door. Through the haze. Lying on a straw filled mattress and the tightness of the straight jacket biting into my bicep, I thought. "They must think I'm Charles Manson."

A nurse from the hospital came the next day and gave me another shot before she and a non uniformed RCMP officer escorted me to HMND. The airport was about an hour away. We drove in a cop car with all the bells and whistles going. (I was Charles Manson). Once I was committed I asked for something to help me sleep. The nurse returned saying I had enough drugs in me to knock out a horse and to give me any other medication would be dangerous.

While I was in the Hospital for Mental and Nervous Diseases there was a classroom. Two teachers. An army of patients signed up for class to break the monotony of the day on the locked ward. I was given a test, then given booklets of 4 or 5 pages. One for math, English and science. We were to do them during class or on the ward if we wanted. The booklets were at the grade 5 or 6 level. When I looked at the booklets I thought to myself the teachers know I am a bit retarded. After all, why give a twenty year old grade school level tests to complete? That weekend I completed the pile of little booklets they had given me. The following Monday I took my bible thick group of booklets and placed them on the teacher's desk.

Later, the teacher asked if I had actually completed all the booklets myself. I told them I had. I thought who in their right mind would even think about sharing these booklets when there is absolutely nothing, nada, zero happening on a locked ward over the weekends? In many ways the booklets kept me sane. The male teacher kind of scolded me for having done so much as this was a lot of correcting he would have to do. He told me to only do 2 or 3 over the weekend from now on.

During another admission to the hospital, they gave me an IQ test. I surprised everyone and mostly myself when I did very well indeed. I remember my social worker telling me I was smart enough to go to university and that even though I hadn't finished high school I could apply as a mature student.

I was astonished that I wasn't retarded.

In Need of Attention

Did I tell you I am the youngest in a large family? The baby of ten. Everyone is older and bigger. My siblings call me a spoiled brat, a show off. A cry baby. I am picked on. I make a cubby in the cupboard above the fridge. They don't know when I'm up there and when I'm not. I listen from inside the cupboard. I am safe.

I'm in my late teens during my first admission to the HMND. They keep telling me I'm exhibiting attention seeking behaviour (a medicalized word for show off). They strap me down. They plunge drugs in my ass....stings going in.....can taste it in the back of my throat. Fill me with haldol, valium, surmontil, anti-psychotics, anti-depressants, anti-anxiety, anti-life. Zombie. Threaten they will give me shock treatment put me in seclusion. I am afraid and comply with whatever they want, even if I have to lie. I sit and knit in the corner like women who have been there for decades. I blend into the paint on the walls.

One night I'm playing checkers with another patient. And then my next memory is waking up in what is called the Observation Room....about 20 beds in one large room. It is where they bring you when you are admitted. Once someone decides something about their observations, you either stay there or get moved to a double room along the corridor. I had earned a bed in one of the rooms along the corridor.

Thinking what am I doing here? Usually the room is staffed 24 hours. There is no nurse now. I get up and head down to my room. I have to pass the nurse's station....they see me and call me in.

"Where are you going?"

"Down to my own room. Why did you put me in the Observation Room?"

"How do you feel?"

"Fine."

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"Playing checkers with Sheila in the Observation Room."

"What happened after that?"

I don't have an answer for them. All I can remember is playing checkers then waking in the Observation Room. Now I'm a bit scared but don't want to show it. They are the enemy.

"What does the inside of your mouth feel like?"

My tongue begins to feel around like a kid playing hide and seek. Slowly my tongue finds great pieces of skin shredded in my cheeks. Both sides. I become aware that my jaw, teeth, tongue and the whole inside of my mouth hurt.

"What happened?"

"You had a grand mal seizure. You were playing checkers, then you started to fold the sleeve of your shirt, you kept doing it, the nurse asked what you were doing, you ignored her, you ignored your friend who was playing checkers. We thought you were fooling around. Then you went into a seizure and fell on the floor. We paged Dr. Gillespie and put something in your mouth to stop you from biting your tongue. Gillespie ordered medication, you stopped seizing and we gave you a shot and put you in the Observation Room to keep a check on you. Go back to bed in there. You've been given a lot of medication and you still should be asleep. You'll have to stay in there until the doctors decide what to do."

I go back to the bed. I'm afraid. I can't believe it happened and I can't remember. They change my medication and put me on anti-convulsion meds (dilantin and phenobarbital) call in a neurologist to examine me. He has me do stuff like follow his finger, stand on one leg - all of which I do without any problem. The last test he has me do is smell something and tell him what it is. I take a whiff and am surprised that I can't

smell anything. He asks what it is? I tell him I don't know. (I don't let him know I didn't smell anything.) He said it was cloves do you know what cloves are I say yes. From that day since I have lost my ability to smell.) They send me for an number of electro-encephalograms. I am diagnosed as having idiosyncratic seizure. I interpreted it to mean I was an idiot. I am accused of attention seeking. They keep me on the anti-convulsive meds. And for years later I had sporadic seizures. Now, I know the meaning of idiosyncratic. They were the idiots who couldn't find what caused them. Very simply, the prescribed medication caused the seizures. I was over medicated. I was chemically assaulted. Assaulted by the system.

I was a victim of childhood violence and trauma. My experience in the hands of the helping professions reinforced what I had learned. I was powerless, I had no control, and I deserved to be treated badly. I continued to have a low opinion of myself for years and didn't see a way out. I had not completed high school, my concentration level was minimal, I was heavily medicated and went through the world in a zombie state doing the Back Ward Shuffle.

Cookie Cutter questions: "Where do you work?"

Society measures an individual's value on employment the contribution/employment made to society. It does not value the work I have done to survive and fight my way back to myself. I honour the work people have done and the contribution they make while living on public assistance. I know the struggle of poverty. Financial poverty and worse, the poverty of self worth. Lack of education and gainful employment deepens the already declined sense of self esteem.

I know it has taken more than ½ my life time to heal from my yesterlives. The wounds from childhood have taken (and are still taking) a mountain of salve to heal. I have claimed my life and during my recovery have completed my education, found employment, and have broken the silences that had gagged me.

Violence and trauma annihilate.
and we welcome death.
We are the voiceless.
emotional zombies.
Spirits dead.....some at birth.

We are in the back wards of mental institutions
drugged to vacancy.
Somehow some survived.
Drugs and alcohol our anesthetic.
Prisons and jails our sanctuary.
Stay with abusive relationships to keep us in our place.

Somewhere, somewhich, sometime, somehow,
some of us caught a momentary glimpse of a fleeing potential
The cosmos belched us from our black holes,

Stars aligned,
goddesses intervened,
the world brightened
a teacher appeared.
We dared to dream.
Our journey of discovery and recovery began.

truth witnessed and validated invaluable.
Being seen scary yet healing.
life knowledge appreciated (cornerstone of self esteem unveiled)
Failing school decades pass
does not equate to a failure through life.

I know
Sometimes I walk into the future looking backwards
Unable to see beyond my past.
I need someone to hold my hopes
...Like a child crossing the road...
As I write my Ph D thesis of self

I know
My life experience is somebody's reality today.
I know
Beneath and beyond within
"I" yearns to be born again.

Carol
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