

Life and Learning to Survive



My magic trick when I was a kid was to be invisible. It wasn't your traditional 'abracadabra' sort of Magic, but the staying out of sight, out of mind magic. If I wasn't being thought of then I couldn't get in trouble.

I was nine years old the first time I got pushed through a window. It was Christmas day and my brother and I were so excited to open gifts. We got up to find our father passed out (drunk) on the couch. On a normal day we would never dare to wake him, but since it was Christmas we just knew he would not mind. I should have known that he would be angry, but when you are nine years old you don't think things through. A couple of "Daddy wake ups" later and I got backhanded so hard that I stumbled over something on the floor and into the single pane window. Fourteen stitches later and I could officially say it was the worst Christmas of my life.

When you grow up in a household where Vodka is the focal point of happiness for the only parent you have around, you quickly learn how to take care of yourself. By the time I was in fourth grade I had taken on full responsibility of the household chores including, but not limited to, caring for my younger brother. My mom had already been in and out of our lives more times than I could count and even though I loved her, I lived in fear when she was around. I woke up countless times in the middle of the night to her screaming for help because my dad was beating her so badly. I always knew by morning she would be gone. Again.

Even though I missed her it was better than being terrified he was going to hurt her. I can still remember thinking that I would rather him hurt me than her. No child should ever have to be scared of increased volumes or just life in general. It was always the start of the inevitable and I hated that.

I was raised that a child should be seen and not heard. If my dad said no it meant no. There was no begging or bargaining with him. Talking back was not tolerated and unless you were a fan of having your face smashed into a corner, having your hair pulled while being dragged from one place to another, or being beaten so badly that you had bruises and couldn't sit down, you quietly bit your tongue and did what you were told. It was yes sir, no sir. It was please and thank you. You kept your elbows off of the table and you didn't hold your fork like Fred Flintstone. You didn't chew with your mouth open or eat too quickly and you ate everything on your plate. Fear. That

is what we lived in.

They say that kids are resilient. The years passed and I learned to duck and dodge. My brother went to live with my mom out of state, but I stayed because someone had to take care of my dad. Despite the abuse I loved him, lived for the good moments, and took as best care of him as I could. Despite the abuse I loved him and lived for the good moments.

When I turned eighteen I got a job in a nursing home as a certified nurse's assistant. Sometimes the job was messy, but the overall feeling I got when I went to sleep each night was one that could not be replaced. I was doing good deeds and I liked the way it felt. A couple of years later I started to volunteer at a battered women's shelter. God knew I owed my time to those kind of places because of the amount of times my mom took us to one when she had nowhere else to go. I quickly fell in love with that place no matter how hard it was to see some of the women go back to the life they came from. I was to fix all of the lives I came into contact with and when I couldn't it bothered me. I saw so much ugly growing up. All I wanted to do was make it beautiful for everyone else.

The women eventually started to trust me and tell me about their lives. I would like to think that I helped some of them because if so then the hell I went through as a child made it seem almost worth it. I had a baby boy when I was twenty-four and got married when I was twenty-five. My husband was in the military and when he got orders to Langley, AFB. In Hampton VA. We packed up and moved there from Arkansas. I said I would never be anything like my par-

ents and I worked hard not to be. Statistically I had more of a chance to be an alcoholic or drug addict than the next. I beat the odds. My son was my only drug and my entire world revolved around him and my husband. When my daughter came along she joined them in the center of my universe.

As they got older I started volunteering at another shelter near where I lived. I took my kids with me because I wanted to humble them by seeing that some people didn't have it as well as they did. I wanted them to see that there are good people in the world who want to make a difference.

The new shelter was for young mothers and their kids. Most of the girls were drug addicts. I went three days a week before I was incarcerated for an accidental second-degree murder charge. Being here completely hindered my ability to be the type of mom I wanted to be, the type of person I wanted to be. I had given my time, my heart, my all. It is hard to define and reflect on what kind of person I am now. Instead of a happy heart, I have an angry, bitter one. I can honestly say I'm still a good person though. All of the pain I went through as a child gave me absolute clarity on life, but left me hungry for love. It taught me to nurture and be independent. It molded me into the "I'll fix it" type of person that I am.

This was the first time I couldn't fix something despite all of the begging, pleading, and bargaining I tried to do with God. Being here is hard. Being here and trying to remain a good person is even harder. It makes it difficult to be what I never say in anyone growing up, but I put forth the effort to maintain my good heart. Even

though life took a turn I never expected, I'll always try to take this bad experience and turn it into a positive one. Just like I did my horrible childhood. You never really stop trying to survive no matter how old you get. ▲