

PREVIEW

The Child I Always Was

BOOK ONE
THE BASE REMAINS UNBROKEN

Neart Marthanóir

PREVIEW

ADVISORY STATEMENT

This memoir is based on the true story of one child's struggle with and recovery from childhood sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, exploitation, and neglect and includes graphic accounts of certain abuse situations that may be inappropriate for readers under the age of eighteen years old. Readers are advised that the content of this book has been crafted and kept intact for the purposes of providing readers an accurate and impacting visual-spatial journey into the minds and circumstances of abuse survivors, in an effort to build deeper understanding and connection with their struggles. Readers are also advised that some content may act as a trigger for survivors of similar abusive situations.

Foreword

*“Don’t judge a person by their scars;
and don’t scar a person by judging them.”*

Neart Marthanóir is Irish Gaelic for “survivor strength” and stands for the universal name of strength I have found in the soul of every survivor of childhood abuse and/or childhood trauma. It is not important that you walk away from this memoir knowing my name, it is more important that you walk away from it knowing that this memoir is a representation that transcends just my life - it is a universal memoir - one that is shared by the hearts and souls of so many other male survivors of childhood abuse that I have been privileged to cross paths with in my life. That is why I have removed my name and identity from this series, and replaced it instead with the universal survival spirit of all those the world over who struggle daily, as I have, with their traumas.

This memoir series is one of immense internal struggle that so many male survivors the world over have come up against; a shadowed world of secrecy, embarrassment, and judgment that maintains them in an epic battle to find their saving grace in a world that so often does its best to understand, but so often lacks the life experience or understanding to do so effectively.

We have, in this modern age, grown up in a world that reacts passionately (rightly so) to stories of child abuse, exploitation, and victimization, but that too often does little to understand the lasting and permanent effects that are caused by it and that too often go unresolved and

unaddressed as the child grows and matures into an adult. We spend so much effort stopping the abuse and protecting the child, but yet we still struggle to empathize with, understand, and help heal the mental imprints, pathways, and links a survivor has created in an effort to help them cope and survive, and which they often continue to cling to desperately as they grow and mature into an adult.

As an adult survivor of childhood physical, sexual, and psychological abuse and neglect I believe that we must have a better and more focused understanding of the significant and lasting effect such atrocities play in the lives of survivors; no matter how shocking or difficult these realities may be and regardless of how old they are or when the abuse took place. Abuse does not end because the perpetrator is gone or simply because the child is no longer a child. The child within remains affected, scared, and unwilling to trust the world it lives in.

The first book in this three part series, ***The Base Remains Unbroken***, invites you, the reader, to understand how the abuse came about and how it was processed, rationalized, and stored within the mind and body of the abuse survivor in a format that uses intense visual imagery to place the reader into the circumstances and inner turmoil the abuse survivor is enduring and suffering from. In the second two books in this series, ***Saving Grace*** and ***Long Nights Journey Into Light***, the reader is invited to travel further into the survivor's mind and life to experience, first hand, the reasoning process, thinking, and behavior patterns that were developed and adopted in response to, and as a result of, the abuse and the life paths and choices that were consequently played out because of

it.

In opening my life and mind, and the much larger universal life and mind of so many male survivors the world over, I hope that society may no longer be the cause of more scars, but rather the understanding and empathetic eye that finds beauty in the strength and surviving spirit those scars represent.

If we can begin to do this as a society, perhaps we can begin to open the doors to more informed and directed attention at helping and healing the many survivors who continue to suffer in silence as the vicious predatorial monsters of their past chip and gnaw away at their souls.

For my fellow survivors, may you know you are not alone in your journey. Know that I understand that your life is not just one mistake, one wrong action, one triumph, or one crowning achievement; but the culmination of a life of negative and positive moments of impact that no one but YOU will ever truly be able to understand, comprehend, and rationalize.

I know the pain you have suffered. I know the good you have done. I know the resilience you've built in the eyes of others that cannot understand.

I understand.

BOOK ONE

The Base Remains Unbroken

We are born into this world clean slates and it is from the roots of our childhood that a foundation is set for our lives. Just as a house must have a firm foundation upon which to build and support the remaining structure, so must a person's life have an adequate foundation. It is this foundation, this base, which allows a person to build a life for themselves upon. Just like a house, as we grow and age into adulthood, we build additions, weather storms that batter and beat our exteriors, and perhaps may even be consumed by pain and suffering so overwhelming that the framework we have erected is broken and scorched to the ground. But one thing remains, no matter what happens to the house itself: the foundation - the base - remains unbroken.

*We found ourselves come into being,
never knowing where it started,
we hit the ground running head on -
till that day when youth departed.
Too dumb, too weak, too trusting-
where was our carefree time?
Times they can think of fondly,
why were they turned into mimes?*

*Attention, love, and safety
was the jewel we madly sought;
so freely given to them, but to us,
we clawed and fought.
In the bitter cold, we wandered
through that dark and lonely night,
Lost and cold and hungry,
we trudged forth with all our might.
Convinced that pain and loss and
hate was all that we were due,
this was our life and all we knew.
What more could a young boy do?*

*Then out of the blue, we heard the song:
the cruelest lullaby,
“Come step into my arms, young child”
, said the spider to the fly.
“What you seek, my boy, sweet boy,
is closer than you imagine.”
How could we know the warmth we felt
was but the dragon’s warning?
But winter was cold and the fire was warm-
relief seemed heaven sent;
we couldn’t know, and we shouldn’t know,
the future we’d lament.*

*We had no guide, no map, no rock -
no moon, no star, no clock.*

*With artful skill the trap was set,
and sprung forth to our dumb shock.*

*In velvet chains we were as slaves,
beholden by our guilt;
a crime not of our doing but it
was our tears that were spilt.*

*In those days, those "carefree" days,
we endured such painful pleasure;
If only we had known what came:
these wounds beyond all measure.*

*Battered, abused, and broken -
still we came on through;
we saw and did so much that
none should ever have to.*

*It wasn't fair, it wasn't right, but
one truth cannot be ignored -
that eternal night, with all its fright,
sure did what we implored.*

*We sought to learn, to grow, to see,
and the world had done its duty;
because, good man, we know the truth:
the world's devoid of beauty.*

1

The first memory I have of my entire life was when I was six years old. I sat in a small, white washed apartment living room on a cigarette-burned, frayed plaid couch. It was a warm, overcast, summer evening and the living room window was cracked open, allowing a warm breeze to lazily wander in.

I was your typical six year old boy - brown, moppy hair, large brown eyes still wild with interest and excitement, pink-tinged chubby cheeks, and freckles everywhere. My two year old sister sat next to me, giggling, as I tried to tickle her tummy. She could have been me if she cut her hair shorter - she had the same face, same eyes, same freckles. It always made me laugh when she laughed, and she would always kick and flail her arms when I tickled her. Whenever I stopped, instead of running away or hiding from me, she would just sit there smiling, waiting in anticipatory glee for my next attack.

Our mother, Kathleen, a slender and almost gaunt looking woman with large, eighties-style hair and piercing dark eyes glazed by years of loyal drinking - appeared next to the couch in between one of my tickle attacks with a can of cold Spaghetti-Os which she was spooning into a paper bowl as she stared at the small, fuzzy television screen in front of us. As she handed us the bowl and a food-crusting plastic spoon to share, she focused her drunken stare upon me and my sister. I shifted my eyes toward her rosacea ridden, pock-marked face as she remarked with a slight, all-too-common slur, "Better enjoy, this looks like your last meal - tornado is going to come and suck us all up any minute." Then, without another thought, she turned and walked away.

I still remember looking out the windows that

evening after her comment, admiring the wind rustling the trees across the street. I heard the sound of the refrigerator door opening and the familiar, strangely comforting sound of a crisp clink as another can of beer was opened. I handed the spoon to my sister, who was still smiling up at me, oblivious to my mother's impending death sentence, and watched her unsuccessfully try to feed herself from the bowl without getting sauce all over her. Feeling the summer breeze whisk around my face from the open window, I began to wonder what it would feel like to die, to suddenly no longer exist.

2

Blue. I have a strong sense of the color blue thinking back to that apartment of our apparent doom. No tornado came that day to whisk us away. But the thought of no longer existing lingered. I remember the solace I found in my room in this apartment, one of many apartments – but this particular room is the most vivid, the one that brings me the most tranquility and peace in its remembrance. It was painted in a rich, deep oceanic blue. I don't remember any toys in this room, nor playing with friends; nothing more than blue. This room was my escape, it was another world for me. Stepping inside this room made me feel at peace, at home...unaffected by the world around me.

That is not to say that I was a generally unhappy child outside of this space, on the contrary I was very happy from what I can remember and recall of my own

accord. Looking back at family photographs from this time, I appeared in my early childhood to act and look no differently from any other child. I was happy, curious, and always interested in the world around me. I was small in stature and build with round, rosy cheeks that puffed out whenever I smiled; a warm, genuine, playful smile with large brown eyes that complimented it with sparkling gleam. But, for all my outward appearance, I still remember feeling a deeper sense of dissatisfaction with life, a dissatisfaction I didn't really understand in its root form. For all the exuberance that I gave off outwardly, inwardly I remained a generally quiet, cautious, and contemplative child, as if in waiting for something I couldn't describe. Inside, I felt like I was caught in the still, silent eye of a volatile storm that was looming just beyond the horizon. Despite my early inner contemplations, there remained a part of me that wanted to ignore this complex and enigmatic thinking and instead yearned to explore and be creative.

I remember this blue room so well, even now, because it was here where my imaginative journeys and mindful retreats began - where my creative spark of self-preservation through imagination began. In the blue room I could do anything, be anyone, say anything... and nothing else mattered. In this room I was able to shut out the world and delve deeper into the recesses of my mind, unleashing playful banter with characters I had seen on television or read in books or created purely from the farthest reaches of my imagination. In this blue-hued cocoon no one yelled, no one hit, no one degraded, mocked, or disapproved. Anything was possible and nothing was out of my reach.

3

I can still see the blood-shot eyes of my mother seated on the toilet in a dark bathroom, rain striking the window behind her in sharp, rhythmic jolts. The storm outside created an almost strobic effect on the walls of the bathroom as the moon played hide and seek with the storm clouds that danced around it. The flickering moonlight streaming through the window illuminated the top of my mother's head with an ethereal, chilling white radiance. Her glare was fixed and unwavering, the blacks of her eyes big and devoid of any readable emotion. A cigarette dangled carelessly from the corner of her chapped, blistered mouth.

I had been summoned from the comfort of my blue room, and I was now standing in the doorway of the bathroom looking into those black eyes. I do not recall an initial sense of fear or terror, I cannot recall feeling any specific emotion. My mother raised a hand to my

shoulder and pulled me in closer to her. I went with shuffling feet. I stood so close now that as she exhaled, her sooty breath had nowhere else to go but into my lungs with each shallow inhale I took. I felt an uneasy sensation well in my stomach, a feeling I cannot recall having ever had before in my six short years of life.

From the rasps of her smoke-riddled vocal chords she asked me,

“Do you love me? Do you love mommy?”

I looked to the tub, avoiding her gaze and after a single blink I replied,

“Yes, Mommy, I love you lots.”

Searing, stinging pain coursed across the right side of my face, and without a thought my eyes automatically ejected a rushing of water. Before my hand could even move to my face to soothe the ache, it was in the vice of my mother's chipped nails.

“Don't you lie to me...”

She rebuked, grasping my face tighter.

“I am not a good mother, would a good mother hit her child? Would a good mother do this?”

In a time-stopping-motion, she twisted my arm and hurtled me against the jamb of the bathroom doorway, where the center of my spine met its mark on the edge of the wooden support frame.

My legs gave out and I crumbled like a damp towel thrown to the floor.

“I do love you, mommy, I promise,”

I whispered in between gasps of pain and tear-choked gargles. My mother rose from the toilet seat, flicking the remainder of her still burning cigarette toward my broken form, now pitifully splayed on the floor. I looked to her with pleading, desperate eyes. Without even a fleeting glance, she stepped over me and glided

out of the bathroom, as if she had been no more than an apparition before my eyes.

I curled myself into a defensive ball and surrendered to the cold, damp floor of the bathroom as a chill rustled through my body. In that moment, I knew that I had no one to turn to for comfort, to explain the sudden confusion, fear, and uncertainty that now raced through my young mind, except for myself.

“I’m sorry, Mommy,”

I whispered as I slowly, painfully rolled over on my other side in a feeble attempt to get up, stricken immobile by a pain that shocked me from the tip of my head to the balls of my feet.

I began to cry, to sob. I could think of nothing else to do, and it was in this moment I began to cry for help, a cry that came from a place deep within me.

Having never been exposed to church or God by my mother as a young child, I had no name for the invisible force I now lamented to. Nonetheless, I began to

cry out to this unseen entity in the universe to help me and comfort me and love me. I cried out for forgiveness, so that my Mommy would no longer be angry at me; and the more I cried, the warmer and more soothing the bathroom floor seemed to become. I began to feel my consciousness ebbing away until, eventually, darkness surrounded me.

4

Crisp copper leaves sway gently in the cool chill of an early morning breeze in late November as I gazed out my bedroom window. A single scarlet leaf was suddenly gripped by the chill from its mother's arms and carried away in a final whimsical dance; beautiful, yet without the love and nourishment of its mother's life force it was doomed - dead. The beauty of autumn signaled the coming of winter, when the lifeblood of flowers and trees slows and stops.

The crisp breeze outside seeped through a crack in the window sending a blood-chilling shiver up my spine, snapping me out of my youthful daydream.

The blue room was gone. We were in a new place now; the bottom section of a two-family house. It was sparsely furnished, which was okay by me, since I spent most of my time in my bedroom, often getting lost for hours in thoughts of nothingness, staring out the picture window in my room that lent me a view of the

woods outside the back of the house. It was a stark, white-washed room with a single dresser, a twin bed, and a small wooden desk with a record player on it.

Moving away from the window, I switched the record player on and then sprawled out on my bed, singing to, and trying my best to impersonate, “Christmas Don’t Be Late” by Alvin and The Chipmunks. As the record played on, I reached for a brand new Fievel doll I had received a month earlier for my birthday from my mother, clutching him to my chest as I rocked back and forth on the bed in rhythm with the beat of the song.

I had fallen in love with the movie *An American Tale*, and I looked to the movie’s main character, Fievel the mouse, as a hero. He was so small, but had such big dreams that he made come true, even when everyone told him not to or told him he couldn’t.

The record ended, and I lay still in my bed, absorbing the sudden silence before I moved to a sitting position to stare out the window again, gazing upon the

vast expanse of grass browned by the early morning frosts signaling the imminent arrival of winter.

The smell of caramel and fresh apples wafting into my room pulled me away from the quiet stillness. I smiled broadly, my cheeks puffing out and burning with a pink tinge, as they always did when I was truly happy. I hopped off the bed, Fievel in tote, and exited my bedroom, walking up the hallway toward the light coming from the kitchen. The ambrosia smell I had hinted in my room now overpowered my sensations and sent a tingling feeling of excitement coursing through my body. Stepping into the patch of kitchen light, I saw my mother bent over the stove. She looked up to see me in the doorway and a rarely seen genuine smile illuminated her face. Just like me, her cheeks puffed out when she smiled, turning a rosy pink color. I couldn't help in that moment but wonder if she felt that same warmth that I felt when I

smiled.

She pulled out a chair next to the stove and I hopped up onto it, placing Fievel on the kitchen table so that he could watch. She handed me a wooden spoon to stir the sweet melted caramel mixture bubbling in a pot on the stove; a goofy grin plastered on my face as she advised me to carefully stir while she skewered an apple with a lollipop stick. As I stirred, she dipped the apple into the mixture and twirled it around, all the while smiling at me. When she pulled the apple out of the mixture, some excess caramel dripped down and landed on my hand. I reflexively dropped the spoon into the pot, and pulled back – stung by the heat of the caramel, immediately feeling a rush of tears.

My mother placed the apple on a tray and brought my hand to her eye level. Then licked the caramel off it and began to laugh, which made me smile through my dampened eyes. She stuck a finger into the

gooey mixture and swiped a dollop of it onto the tip of my nose before leaning forward to wiggle the tip of her nose back and forth against my caramel-covered nose sending me into a paroxysmal fit of laughter.

Even in this most happy memory, though, my gleeful eyes still peered into the same bloodshot gaze I had grown up with all my life. With our faces this close, they blurred before me into a hazy cloud of red...crimson blood red.

5

I awoke with a start from a deep, dreamless sleep by an unknown and unrecognizable sound coming from the front of the house, followed by a silence as sudden and quiet as death itself. My ears prickled and tingled with sensitivity as they strained to break through the eerie silence. Then, I was jolted from my bed as a painfully gasped yelp struck the tender membrane of my eardrums. I stood as stiff as a board, paralyzed in fear as the silence once again consumed me; not a creak, whisper of wind, rattling of trees, or even the chirp of a single cricket.

A door slammed and before I knew what had happened, I found myself running down the darkened void of the hallway that led to our living room where my mother slept on a pull out couch. Thinking, as any young child would, that a monster was in the house, I desperately wanted to run to the comfort of my mother's

arms.

In a moment of transcendence, I saw but could not feel my body come to an abrupt stop in between the darkened gap of my mother's bed and what little light shone from the moon through my picture window down the hallway. It was the darkness of childhood nightmares where anything could be lurking. I paused a few more tentative moments, contemplating in my mind if the risks that could be waiting in the darkness outweighed the benefits of safety and security in my mother's bed. I listened intently for any other noises or sounds from the unseen monster, unsure of whether it was in front of or behind me.

Then I heard it; my mother's voice begging, pleading, garbling something I could not make out. My eyes widened as I realized that the monster must have gotten to her. Looking down at the stuffed replica of my childhood hero clutched tightly in my hand, I rationalized

that I had to act; I had to save her. I had to be brave now, just like Fievel had been in the movie I so adored.

Slowly and quietly, I crouched down at the corner wall and cautiously poked my head out to glance into the living room and waited a brief moment as my eyes adjusted to the darkness.

It was everywhere.

Blood - on the sheets of the bed.

Blood - on the carpeted floor.

Blood - on the window next to the pull out bed.

Blood - dark and fresh.

Taking another step forward, I scrunched my nose up in revolt as the strong stench of metallic iron filled my nostrils. My heart began to pound faster, ready to leap out of my throat, held down only by my vain attempts to swallow and lubricate my uncomfortably dry throat. I inched closer to the only light I saw on in the house, coming from the bathroom. The door was partially ajar and I could hear running water. Thoughts began to

race through my young mind,

Did the monster eat her?

Was it washing her blood off its claws?

Was it taking a bath?

Where is my mommy?

I froze in the doorway as my eyes came to rest on the horrific reflection visible in the bathroom vanity mirror. The unmoving and bloodied form of my mother sprawled out in the bathtub naked, her hair wet with blood. My heart jumped and my breathing came faster. As if suddenly teleported, I was back in my bedroom, door closed, tucked tightly under the covers of my bed, heaving inaudibly.

Had the monster seen me?

Would I be next?

Would this be it?

*Was it this monster that would show me what
it would feel like to no longer exist, instead of
the tornado that never came?*

Eventually, I succumb to the warm enveloping safety that every child feels tucked underneath their blankets, and drifted into an uneasy sleep full of monstrous nightmares and the bloodied and unmoving, naked form of my mother.

Early the next morning, I was awoken by a uniformed police officer and new fears immediately consumed my exhausted and innocent mind.

*Did he think I had done it?
Was I in trouble?*

As he escorted me out to the place where the monster had attacked my mother the night before, I was elated to see my mother - split lip, blackened eye, and battered body - sitting on the couch, holding my whining sister in her arms as she talked to another police officer.

I would come to find out later that the attack was no monster, but an angry ex-boyfriend of my mother's. The first of many that would continue to pursue my mother and subsequently haunt my dreams.

6

A few months after the nightmarish attack on my mother, we moved... again. This time, to the second floor of a two-family house in a new neighborhood. One day, while I was playing Superman on the front porch - which consisted of me jumping off the top step and pretending I could fly - a boy of about thirteen walked out of the first floor doorway. His name was Richie. He was one of two brothers that lived in the house underneath ours. Richie was lanky with blond, buzzed-cut hair and emerald-green eyes. I turned around to climb back up the porch stairs for my next valiant leap as he walked down the steps to meet me with a slanted, mischievous closed-mouth grin.

“You want to play a really cool game?”

He asked. I was ecstatic. Even though I was almost seven years old, I still had no real friends or

people even remotely close to my age, or any age really, to talk to or play with since we were always moving to avoid landlords or angry boyfriends. Now this *older* kid wanted to play with *me*!

I nodded my head like a bobble head doll on the dashboard of a car traveling down a cobblestone street. He took me by the hand and led me to the side of our two family house, where there was a small alley way blocked on one side by a small row of privacy bushes and the cemented base of our two-family house on the other.

It's funny the type of details you remember at certain "pivotal" moments in your life. I remember I was wearing jean overalls and a red and white striped colored t-shirt. Richie was wearing gray sweatpants and a sleeveless white t-shirt that looked several sizes too big for him. I remember the sun shining down from behind him, peeking over the roof of the neighboring house, not enough to blind me but enough to focus my attention to

the older boy's blond crew cut hair and skinny outline, just barely able to make out the defining features of his face. My usual moppy brown hair was slightly matted to my head and I distinctly remember a bead of sweat running down the side of my face from the mid-afternoon heat of the summer. Richie took a step toward me and bent over so we were almost touching noses and gave me another smile, which I reciprocated enthusiastically.

“This game is called Show and Tell,”

Richie explained. I smiled again, even more excited. I knew about Show and Tell from school, but I was confused because it didn't look like he had anything to show and tell about, and I didn't either.

“In this game, we show each other parts of our body and clothes and stuff,”

He explained, as if he could read the confused look in my eyes. That made sense, I thought. At least

now I knew I would have something to show and tell about.

Then, he asked me to show him my underwear. I remember the exact underwear I was wearing; red waist and leg bands with a picture of the marvel comic book hero Spiderman across the backside. Except for the colorful cartoon design, they were sparkling white.

After unbuckling and sliding my overalls down to expose my superhero underwear, Richie then had me turn around like I was a model on display; minus all the poise and polish.

“Now take off your underwear,”

He stated huskily. I paused. A brief moment of hesitation crossed my face as I looked into his eyes, which were now glazed with a strange and wild look in them that I could not quite place or register.

“We’re both boys, right?”

Richie stated matter-of-factly. As a child, no one had ever sat me down that I can remember at that point in my life to explain to me about good touch and bad touch and private parts versus public parts and who was allowed to see and do what with parts of my body. I suppose that is why when he asked me to do all this, I found no fault in it or even hesitated for more than a few moments to do as he asked. Unknowing, naive, and desperately craving friends or children to play with, my mind lacked any resource to consider running away or telling someone.

No, I gave a simple, nonchalant shrug instead before lowering my new Spiderman underwear down to rest in the grass. Richie again had me turn around and as I spun to meet his wild gaze once more, I saw that his face had grown into a goofy, full-toothed grin.

He patted my shoulder and lavished,

“Cool. You got a real neat body, kid.

You’re really good at this game.”

I was the happiest boy in the world. I finally had a friend, someone who thought I was *cool* and who thought I was actually *good* at something!

Then, he bent down and helped me redress myself, running my underwear back up my hips and helped me rebuckle the snaps on my overalls. He never revealed himself to me and I never asked him to. I figured it was like the teacher in school, who never did show and tell herself.

I began to look forward to when he would ring our doorbell. This game he played with me on so many occasions became my only concept of what “normal” play between friends was. How could I know any

different? My mother's constant shifting from place to place left me without a friend to play with until him. I considered him my first friend and from what I remember of my childhood to that point, the only friend I had that was not a stuffed animal hero or figment of my active imagination.

As an adult, I look back on the show me game I played with the neighborhood boy and can't help but wonder if he sensed my vulnerability or saw myself in him somehow, or if someone had done the same thing to him. While my empathy remains for the unknowns of Richie's life and mind, I look at those show and tell sessions as the true beginning of the end of my childhood, what little there was of it.

So often I wish that at this point someone had been there to step in, to set things straight, to help clear up the jumbled confusion of feelings and mental concepts I was developing. Up until that point, I had accepted and adapted to living with a drunken, drug-using, neglectful mother; poised in the art of seduction and able to lure men into her bed only to rob them blind to support herself, and myself and my sister - if even as an after thought. I had no parent setting up play dates, encouraging proper social

behavior, or even being present on any comforting or emotional level. Where else was my young six-going-on-seven year old mind supposed to turn to for acceptance and affection than into the crafty hands of friendly spiders?

7

Two months after the show and tell sessions with my neighbor began, the landlord of the two family house came knocking and we were once again out on the street. This time, my mother's parents put us up in an apartment they had originally been leasing to my great-grandmother, who had recently moved in with them. It was a very small one-bedroom apartment with floor to ceiling mirrors on a wall in the living room. I used to stand in front of those mirrors for hours on end, thinking about... nothing and everything at the same time.

One night, shortly after moving in, me and my sister were sleeping on an air mattress that was barely inflated. The moonlight shone through cracks and breaks in the window blinds casting mystical patterns onto the walls. I was lying on my side, painfully conscious and aware of the hardness of the floor beneath me, caught up in the paralytically hypnotic state of half-sleep when my

sister rolled over in the midst of a dead sleep that only young children, unaware of the world's horrors, are able to succumb to. While attempting to curl herself up into the safe, protected, and unaffected world of dreams, her knee struck the small of my back, steering me off the road to dreamland; my senses now reactivated and on high alert.

I heard a strange, muffled moaning sound coming from the living room on the other side of the wall my sister and I were sleeping up against. The living room of the apartment was where my mother slept at night on a small pull out couch my grandparents had left.

My mouth went dry, my breathing quickened, and my heart began to pulse in my head. I swallowed hard, shutting my eyes in a desperate attempt to fight off the nightmarish visions now flooding my memory...

...razor-sharp claws...

...gnashing teeth...

My eyes snapped open and I hurriedly stumbled to a standing position, the metallic iron smell of fresh blood consuming my nostrils once more, and though I was fully awake my vision clouded over as the dark room seemed to shape-shift into the unmoving, bloodied form of my mother sprawled out in the bathtub, naked; her hair wet with blood.

I shook my head violently back and forth, working to remove the memory from my brain like a child might shake an Etch-A-Sketch to get rid of a flawed drawing. My heart hammered against my ribcage, desperate for escape, my breath rickety and stuttered. I moved to a sitting position on the floor, groping for Fievel and gripping onto him with a shaky, unsteady hand.

As the world around me came back into focus, my ears picked up the continuation of the muffled sounds from a few moments earlier. What I heard was foreign to me, not like the shrieking and garbling sounds I

remembered from the other attack. Concerned just the same for my mother's safety, I walked toward the closed bedroom door and haltingly opened it. My grip on Fievel tightened as I poked my nerve-wracked body around the corner to peer into the living room, closing my eyes momentarily in preparation for what I was expecting to see - blood splattered all over the place again.

There was no blood. Instead, I saw a man I had never seen before doing something my almost seven year old brain could not really process or understand. To me it looked like he was biting or eating my mother's private areas. Coupled with the strange look on my mother's face, contorted almost as if it were in pain - like when you try to hold back a cry but know you aren't going to be able to – and the guttural moans coming from her mouth; I thought he was hurting her.

In a lunging motion, with Fievel raised high, I charged my mother's assailant and swung with all the

might my little body had in me, landing what I felt was sure to be a fatal blow right to the strange man's back. My mother's face no longer looked in pain and the moaning had stopped.

I smiled proudly, feeling as though I had saved my mother from this monster of a man who had been hurting her. The man turned, his eyes widening in puzzled shock to see me standing there. He looking to me and then to my mother, unsure what to do or say; unsure whether to run or not. My mother's hazy red eyes focused on me, her legs obscenely splayed open. In her state of ecstasy she had not noticed my presence in the room until that moment.

I heard it before I felt it. A loud slap echoed in the room and a moment later I felt as if an electric shock was ripping through my face. My mother, the person I had come to protect, had just swung and slapped me, open-handed, across the face with such brutal force that

Fievel went flying out of my hands and I landed sprawled on my back.

I couldn't feel, see, or hear anything for a fleeting second and thought I might have actually died. My world closed in around me, turning black. Then, as if exiting a vacuum, the entirety of my senses burst forth, thrusting me full-throttle into a heightened state of awareness. The tears welled up in my eyes and I immediately began to shake uncontrollably, seeking out Fievel, seeking out anything that I could hold or grasp to. My mother was upon me, completely unaware of her nakedness to me.

I could smell the acrid odor of rotted, unbrushed teeth and alcohol on her breath; her all-too familiar bloodshot eyes so close that my eyelashes could have brushed against her irises. Her knee jammed into my stomach as she pinned me down against the carpeted floor. Her hands began wildly slapping, hitting, and punching every inch of my body as I rolled from side to

side and raised my hands and arms up in fruitless defense.

Like a savage wild beast, she came down on me, too drunk and high to show any restraint or control. Each strike sent jolts of electricity coursing through my body; tissue began to balloon and swell. Her nails dug into my battered and bruised body like talons as blood began to pool in the ridges and valleys she carved into the surface of my skin. As each of her assaults found its mark, she growled, hissed, and roared - pure animal instinct had consumed her. The weight, the pressure, the pain - the humiliation to be treated like this after feeling I had saved her; all while this man watched, taking leisure sips from a beer can.

When she let off me, I scampered away like a wounded stray dog with its tail between its legs. I raced into the bedroom on all fours, shut the door, and crawled into the closet; trembling and alone. Even Fievel had abandoned me, still out there witness to whatever horrific

things were taking place as the animalistic groans and moans of earlier continued in a frenzied, insistent manner. It was as if my beating had revved my mother into a sex-crazed demon. The sounds continued throughout the night, reaching ever greater crescendos as they pierced the hollow walls of my closet retreat, until at last the sounds rumbled every bone in my body like a jet breaking the sound barrier.

My heart throbbed so violently it hurt to breathe. Each vein in my body pulsed with fear. I felt every beat of my heart in the swollen and open wounds that scarred my body; like hundred of little wildfires raging across my skin. I closed my eyes and sunk down in the closet, doing my best to dim the hellish sounds coming from the living room with my hands - and just as on the bathroom floor nearly a year earlier, I began to cry out my pain and anguish to the universe. I again cried out to the unseen forces and powers that be, asking again for forgiveness

for making my Mommy angry, asking for someone to help me, to comfort me, and to love me.

In the midst of my soulful appeal, the closet door hesitantly creaked open and I did my best to push myself through the back wall of the closet as to not be seen. A small hand reached through the darkness, coming to rest on top of my sweat-soaked hair.

“Silly,”

I heard the sweet, angelic tone of my sister’s voice.

“Why are you in the closet?

The bed is over there.”

Even at this dark midnight hour, I saw the pearly smile of my sister as she giggled at me and ran back over to the air mattress, where she laid down and then waited expectantly for me to rejoin her. The apartment was now quiet, the air still - and for the first time in what seemed

like hours, I breathed in and out with a sigh of much needed relief before slowly crawling out of the closet and slithering back up onto the dilapidated air mattress next to my sister.

8

Peter.

To this day, the very name overwhelms my senses, driving them into a whirlwind roller coaster of feelings – feelings of warmth, happiness, safety, joy, friendship, and acceptance with equal measures of fear, anger, hatred, sadness, isolation, and despair. How to describe a person, or any single thing, that could evoke such a multitude of confused, jumbled feelings....

My first memory of Him was at a park. I was on a swing and he was sitting on a bench. I was a month shy of my seventh birthday and school has just started again. My mother had been seeing Peter for a while at this point, but I do not recall him as any significant part of my life or memory until this particular moment in the park.

I pumped my legs furiously, challenging myself to go higher and fly freer than I ever had before. The fresh

air whipped around my face. I closed my eyes, feeling the excited lurch of my stomach as I was lifted off the seat of the swing in midair, clinging loosely to the hot metal chains. The pendulous momentum of the swing dragged me backward and I opened my eyes in fixed concentration, my tongue sticking out of the corner of my mouth, focused on the playground sand in front of me. As the swing rocketed me forward, I released my grip on the chains and felt the rush of free release as I launched myself into the air. All too soon, my sneakers made contact with the sand and I fell forward on my hands and knees; the gritty sand sloshing between my fingers. Smiling to myself, I rolled onto my back and sprawled my body out, staring up into the pristine expanse of never-ending blue sky, giggling gleefully as I wiggled and wagged my body, carving a sand angel around me.

After the adrenaline coursing through my body was expended, I haphazardly rolled onto my side and saw Peter looking on after me, giving me a thumbs up signal of approval. I do not remember my mother or my sister with us, just him and me. I do not remember anything else about the park except for him smiling at me on the bench and me on the sand, smiling back at him; transfixed by the intimate understanding radiating from his dark eyes, piercing the depths of my love-starved soul.

PREVIEW

THIS IS THE END OF THE PREVIEW

I wish I could say that the worst of this story has occurred, but alas the true horror and hurt has not even begun to break the surface yet. The stage has merely been set as the curtain rises on the first act of my childhood.

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PREVIEW