

Suffering: A Sombre Souvenir

When I was a little girl, my aspirations were simple. I wanted a healthy family. I wanted a beautiful home with large, arched windows where light flows through all seasons, illuminating the toffee-tones of wooden floors; two floors connected by a staircase—preferably spiral—and a front garage to hold my bike, a scooter, and a plethora of various toys. I wanted a dog, and a gigantic trampoline in the backyard, and a mother’s arms to run into, to be hugged and held when I inevitably fell off the trampoline, and a father to remind me he’ll always look out for his little girl. In those days, I wore variations of ponytails and pigtails to complement my unkempt bangs and followed around my only friend at the time; my older brother, Sunny. As I grew out my pigtails and people asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I told them I simply wanted to be *happy*, because I quickly learned that what I desired then, for the sake of happiness, would not become my reality.

I spent much of my childhood listening to the commotion of my parent’s marriage. It came in the form of extremity—they either bickered for days or refused to speak to one another for weeks. Nonetheless, it resonated through the thin walls and floorboards of bedrooms. Shortly after my 4th birthday, my parents decided for the first time, they were splitting up. Few and far between, the memories of my family packing up our house in Calgary and moving to India are vague. Briefly, my family and I lived with my father’s parents in Ludhiana, India, where I would watch my great-grandmother, who wore prescription glasses like Ben Franklin and always dressed in

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all-white, sit cross legged on the floor in undisturbed silence. She was either meditating or simply didn't speak for her lack of teeth. Regardless, when I knelt beside her, I felt the warmth of her gummy smile each time she'd unravel a piece of tissue for me, exposing a pile of a sweet Indian crystal candy we call mishri. It quickly became my favorite treat.

Aside from an older brother who understandably never wanted to hang out with his annoying little sister, the silence I shared with my paternal great-grandmother became all I had. Suddenly, the noise of unhappy parents resonating through the walls began to dwindle, along with their presence. My father began disappearing for days, on trips he'd never explain why he was taking, and when my mother wasn't arguing with her mother-in-law, she was either resting or searching for food to feed herself and two children, with another on the way in 9 months. I found ways to keep myself occupied with plastic toys bought from a toy salesman. In the morning, he would roam up-and-down the streets before the scorching heat came, wheeling around his cart full of colorful toys, repeatedly shouting, "KHILONA LELO!"

One morning, I found my new red ball sitting in the entry doorway, deflated and lifeless. I was too young to understand the concept of how cold weather could result in a reduction of air pressure, what I now know as the ideal gas law in physics. Instead, I felt as if in the void of light, darkness came and stole something from me. Later that day, when the sun had gone down and only the night sky blanketed our world, a fight between my mother, my father, and his family broke out. My mother is the middle child of

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two brothers, and both had just announced they were getting married. My father, along with his family, forbade my mother from attending. To this day, much of the details are lost on me, but after my pregnant mother was thrown into the streets of oncoming traffic by her mother-in-law, I helplessly watched her lay there for a moment; deflated and lifeless. She was told no more than four things that night: she no longer had a husband, her children no longer had a father, to leave immediately, and to never return. After this incident, my mother decided to take my brother and I, and we moved to her parent's home in Bathinda—a city in Punjab, India.

My mother, Sunny and I lived in a large full house with my maternal grandparents, great-grandmother, my two uncles nicknamed Happy and Kala, their fiancé's, and two dogs—a black Labrador named Blackie, and a German shepherd we called Sam. During this time, I attended my first Indian wedding—or any wedding for that matter. Within less than a month of us living there, both of my uncles got married, two days apart from each other, and uproar consumed our streets. Dressed in a sari, sparkling shimmering champagne, I was surrounded by all tones of crimson, cyan, and chartreuse, circling around music blaring, instruments singing, and relatives drunkenly dancing under a navy blanket, lit by stars, lights, and illuminating laughter. By this point, I had gotten used to not having my father around and seldom yearned for his presence, but I sensed sorrow in my mother's energy; endless nights of cheerful celebration were not enough to fill the void of not having a husband.

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Immediately, my uncle Happy decided to move to start a new life for his family. He asked my mother and my grandparents for support, to accompany him on his journey of new beginnings. Left with no other choice, my mother packed our bags, and we boarded our flight to Toronto. seven of us lived in a tiny, one bedroom basement in Malton, Mississauga, where I started kindergarten at Lancaster Public School and welcomed my favorite person, my little brother.

When I wasn't playing with dolls from the local dollar store or doodling in my activity book from Mrs. Panesar's class, I helped raise and take care of my baby brother with my grandmother and have continued to raise him since. Due to the stressful conditions my mother was placed in throughout the duration of her pregnancy, Sukham was born with breathing complications, among other health concerns. It was during this time where I learned I had a love for children, the gift of empathy, and a natural ability to soothe and nurture; mothering came easy. Some nights, my grandmother would wake me from blissful slumber, and ask that I soothe him back to sleep. Sitting in a couch that shimmered in shades of blueberry suede, I'd cradle his head, soft to the touch of holding him close and near as I rocked him gently in my tiny arms; I became the secret weapon to make him snooze with ease. Some days, I would accompany my mother to his appointments at the hospital. On other days, my mother went to appointments alone.

After being kicked out of our basement suite for having too many people living under one roof, we bought a house and moved to Brampton, Ontario. The streets of Timberlane Drive screamed

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with the scents of butter chicken being shared among neighboring houses, and the collective laughter of children running through them. This was the first time in my life I felt I reached normalcy—despite not having a loving father, I had a big, growing family, a garage full of toys, all friends, and no foes. I didn't get a trampoline or a house with big windows, but instead I gained a place that finally felt like home, filled with people who loved me unconditionally, and a mother who learned how to smile again.

By then, I had turned six years old and although I was young, my desire to take in anything that felt like *love* was ever-growing. This didn't become a problem, until the teenage boy living next door took advantage of my childish yearning for touch, and affection. In his room, he'd make me sit on his bed, asked me to play "fun" games with him, and demanded I speak of it to no one. One evening when I laid victim to another one of his games, his sister unexpectedly walked in. She let out an audible *GASP* after the sight of her brother's dry lips locked on mine and ran down the stairs to tell our mothers. I'm grateful she did, because he stopped asking to play after that, and seldom came near me.

My world changed once again, nearly 3 years later, when my parents got back together to rekindle their marriage. My father requested we leave our life in Toronto and rejoin him in Calgary. Regrettably, my mother obliged. It's been 14 years since we've returned; since my parents first tried to mend their relationship and have failed countless times since. Trial-and-error did not fare well for them.

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Over the years, my brothers and I were subject to various forms of physical, emotional, and mental abuse from our parents. It's been difficult trying to navigate the path between having a toxic father, and a mother who is warm at her core, but turned cold because of him—it's even more difficult trying to accurately sum it up with words. She was a victim of abuse herself and became an abuser of her own kind. After years of ongoing childhood abuse and neglect, I began to struggle with undiagnosed ADHD, depression, anxiety, and an eating disorder, at the young age of 12. By high school, I was severely addicted to self-harm and attempted to take my life 3 times. Just before my 17th birthday, I was released from a group home I lived in after being hospitalized for my last suicide attempt. Here, I was officially diagnosed with major-depressive, generalized anxiety, and panic attack disorder, and began my journey of healing. At 19, during the first year of my undergraduate degree, I was diagnosed with ADHD. At 20, after years of failed attempts, my mother finally decided to leave him—for good.

Being both a witness and a victim of their toxic marriage, I have learned some of life's greatest lessons. Held responsible for the well-being of a new-born baby at 5 years old, I learned to master empathy and emotional maturity; how to put the needs of another before my own, and when to draw the boundaries. Having only myself to rely on for support, I mastered independence. I have worked meticulously to keep myself alive, to heal, and build a life I love to live. I learned, what I desired back then for the sake of happiness, would not become my reality, because happiness is created within, not found in external sources; it is up to me to create my own sense of fulfilment.

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Every morning before my meditation, I am blessed with the gift of being able to watch a brilliant blend of lilac and rose in sunrise, and if I'm lucky that day, I get to watch it set too. I study what I love—psychology, science, and art—with endless possibilities to dive deeper into my thirst for knowledge. I bought a dog of my own—the first of many—a Bichon Shih Tzu I call Milo, amongst a million other nicknames I call out of adoration. I continue to discover new music that fills my heart with joy, and new forms of artistic creation that soothe my soul.

My journey has given me: a tender heart as large as my capacity to love and be loved, kindness, creativity, compassion, optimism, patience, and a passion for art that fuels my being—I am eternally grateful for my suffering and all the gifts it's bestowed.

Every waking moment of mine, whether it was in pain or in beauty, has led me to exist as the incredibly beautiful, wise, and complex soul I am today. This is my biggest blessing, forever.