

I've stopped sleeping at night. Our constant news cycle bringing the realization of all that's been going on in the entertainment industry has kept my brain from any possibility of rest. Don't get me wrong, the exposure of sexual abuse is exactly what's needed. My sleeping problems seem to be because I know there's so much more than the entertainment industry that must be addressed to bring healing and change. My own past and the non-traditional way that I was raised begs me to speak to other areas holding this great evil.

As a child, we traveled a lot. Moving so frequently that my age is usually foggy in memories. I seem to judge time better by which town we lived in and what grade I was in at the time. Because of this, summer months are particularly difficult to really pin down.

The summer I was 10, I believe, we lived in a trailer in Morehouse. My mother didn't drink, smoke, or do illegal drugs, but she would hang out in the bars with my aunt a lot because the bars had air conditioning and kind men would buy her a Pepsi. She was incredibly beautiful but very much needed the attention.

She always had a boyfriend. Most of the time they lived with us and she went from one to the next, typically breaking the heart of the one who was headed out. Almost always turning into fights of valor for all in the trailer park to see. I was usually glad to see the old one leave, but never excited about the new one. Morehouse was worse than usual.

It seems like it was mid-day, Mama was up at the bar and my sisters and I were just hanging out in the trailer. My older sister is two years older than me so if I was 10, she was 12, our birthdays fall on the same day. We lived in a much different culture, at this age she had already begun smoking weed and trying different things.

I will never forget this day. My mother's boyfriend shows up, his name was Jesse, and I remember thinking it was odd because I couldn't imagine one of her boyfriend's letting her sit up at a bar without them.

Jesse was a big guy. He seemed to tower over us and was just larger than her typical picks. He told my sister he had just picked up some new pot and wondered if she wanted to go walking and smoke some, to which she happily agreed.

My mother returns sometime after this and asks where my sister is. I explain she left with Jesse and she freaks out. Apparently, she had broken up with him earlier at the bar because there's someone else on the line and now demands to know why my sister went with him?

Well....we didn't know.

And I wasn't about to tell her she was off smoking pot.

Soon after my sister returns. Alone. And crying. Very roughed up as if she's been in a fight in the dirt and weeds. I remember the cockleburs stuck throughout her hair.

Jesse had taken my sister walking, down the railroad tracks, where raped her to get back at my mother.

I remember the police. I remember them talking about the hospital to have her checked and I remember them using the word “sodomy” a lot. I didn’t understand why they didn’t just go arrest him? We knew who he was. It was clear what he did to her. My young brain simply could not understand.

I had so many questions. What was “sodomy”? If she had not been high would she have been able to run? Why didn’t they just go arrest him? My mother was always over the top with emotions and this was off the charts for multiple reasons. Asking questions would only add to our trouble so I didn’t.

I looked “sodomy” up in our dictionary and then knew what all she went through. My heart broke for her.

We packed up and moved soon thereafter so to my knowledge, he was never arrested. She told. Yet there was no justice.

The summer that I was 13, my mother worked at a local club as a waitress. My little sister and I would walk to the city swimming pool everyday as Mama had some dollars from tips to keep us busy during her day shift.

Turning down our street on our walk home one day, an old brown car ripped around the corner, scaring us both, and drove very recklessly past. Before I could yell in response, they squeal to a stop in front of our house. I remember so vividly as the car door flew open and I heard my mother’s screams as they kicked her from the car into our front yard.

I ran towards the house as they peeled off and squealed down the street. I don’t remember much more than just sitting in the front yard and holding her as she screamed and cried. I’m sure the police came. I’m sure she filed a report. But she didn’t know the men who had done this to her.

Someone must have put something in her Pepsi before she got off her shift. She had started feeling disoriented as she began the walk home. Some men she had been waiting on offered her a ride instead. They didn’t take her straight home. They took her somewhere else where multiple men raped her. Then they brought her home.

To this day, I would know the car if I saw it. These are moments that never leave. They are burned into your soul.

Again, she told, yet there was no justice.

The most painful abuse to me personally came at the hands of someone I loved, and honestly, the only person in my world that I trusted. My pillar. My security. So what happens when your perpetrator is someone you’ve loved and admired your entire life?

The summer I was 11, I would eat at the DEAOC lunch program every day. Through this program two of us were selected for an area trip to 6-Flags, which was in fact, the coolest thing of all time.

Only caveat was you had to have a ride to and from a town 30 min from my home to catch the bus. I contacted my Papa and explained that I had been chosen but I had to have the ride to the bus and back. He agreed to make that happen even though we had to arrive very early and we would be getting back pretty late.

When we pulled into town it was very late and I was exhausted from a super exciting day. He told me we would just stay the night at his house before taking me the next morning the rest of the way home. No big deal. My Papa and his house had been my only steady my entire life. Being there was a good thing.

We got home, I went to my grandmother's old room that I'd slept in on and off for years and was out like a light.

I'm not sure how long I was asleep. All that I know was it was very dark when I woke up to all that was going on to me and around me. I prayed. I kicked and I squirmed as I felt like every ounce of air had been stolen from my lungs. He left the room apologizing. I just laid there and quietly cried the rest of the night. My only security in life was not. My safe place was no longer safe. My whole world had crashed down around me and my heart was ripped in pieces lost somewhere in the rubble.

As soon as the sun came up I washed my face and brushed my hair. My things gathered from my fun day no longer brought a smile. With a stern face and a completely hollow chest I announced I had to go home right now. It was the longest, quietest drive we had ever taken.

He took me to my great aunt's, his cousin, where I had been staying temporarily. My mother had moved to Kansas, or maybe it was Indiana. I honestly just don't know.

Much can be said about the way my mother raised us. For someone who suffered with mental illness from many reasons, I think she probably did the best she could. She loved us. What I did learn from watching her though was that I would never be their victim. They had broken her. Mentally she succumbed to the pain of her past daily. That would not be me.

I told. I told my great aunt when I got home. Turns out she had been his victim too. When my sister called I told her. Another person was staying at my aunt's at the time, I told him. Neighbors who lived behind us? Yes. Told them too. Our family's little secret was no longer in the shadows and I be damned if he would ever feel comfortable enough to lay a hand on me - again.

But he was my Papa. And I loved him with my whole heart.

When these things happen at the hands of someone you love. You trust. It's hard to mentally walk the landmine of feelings. I'm sure it's different for everyone. He agreed to get help, so I

agreed to quit telling. I eventually forgave him. But I never allowed my daughter to be alone with him. When he became ill with cancer, I moved in and cared for him. I know he loved me.

Should I have known and protected myself? Probably. I'm not sure how old I was when I started hearing about my mother's sexual abuses but it always seemed to be a narrative in our home. She had been raped by an uncle and her brother since she was 4. Her mother passed at about 9 and she was put in an orphanage. She was then adopted by her great uncle and his wife. He also sexually abused her. That was my Papa. So yes. I guess I should have known. But I was 11, and in the crazy world I grew up in, he was my solid and I never once feared him.

Maybe I thought he'd found forgiveness. Looking back there were many things I now know were wrong and flashing signs. But I was a child and children trust and love unconditionally.

I grew up that day. I now understood things my mother's words could never explain, but a story her actions told daily.

These are a few of these moments in my childhood. I've explained them to say I have seen and felt the devastation of sexual abuse; as a sister, as a daughter, from my own experiences, and even from the insurmountable guilt as a mother who failed at protecting my own daughter. One day maybe she will tell her own story.

I know my experiences pale in comparison to what so many go through.

We carry so much guilt and shame wondering if we would have done this or that, could the outcome have been different? There is no right or wrong response to sexual abuse. Survival comes in many forms.

I write this to say, it's up to those of us who have been there to speak up so that the others in our lives can see they are not alone. Just as we have seen in the entertainment industry this month. When we speak up, we become a beacon of light, that safe place maybe, to those who need it. A place that maybe you didn't have. You can now be for someone else.

There's power in telling. Whether you receive justice or not. It's a cleansing for your soul that words simply cannot explain. You will stand a little taller knowing that it's no longer protected by the darkness.

For every person out there, young or old, what you are going through, or what you have been through, does not define you. Find your voice. Tell someone. Even if your abuser is someone you love. Their power lies in our silence.

But for all who simply cannot yet...for you, I say #metoo.