

The Power Within

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I remember...

The sensation slithers around my small body, suffocating me like a boa constrictor does its prey. My muscles tense behind my ears, on the fleshy part of my shoulders, and in a circle around my chubby, 4 year old waist. Pressure builds up in my forehead and, without thought, I feel a few warm tears cascade down my cheeks. I shake regardless of my intention to remain as still as possible. *If you don't move, maybe he'll just drive normal.* The attention isn't on me. It's like watching a storm through a foggy window; There is something surreal about it that makes you feel like you're not quite awake. They always play the same scene. Dad will open his mouth, out falling a slurred argument and a wave of toxic stench. Mama will follow, first with eloquent, rational statements, but eventually all reason will be lost under the sound of her sobs. She gets louder and so does he. I cup my small hands around my ears. If I hold tightly enough, it sounds like the ocean.

I remember feeling powerless. I am sitting in the back of his work truck. It's oversized to fit all the tools he needs for the construction site, and in it, I seem to shrink. I look out of the window, stretching my neck to see the road beneath us. "Get your hands off the wheel!" He demands. He always spoke with an intensity that made you feel unsafe. He has never laid a finger on any of us, but in moments like now, I can't help but feel like he might. strapped into a booster seat, holding my brother's hand, like always, never saying a word. I just watch.

He pries off her fingers one by one to regain control of the car.

“You’re swerving all over the road! PULL OVER!”

“Deana, will you stop!”

“No, you are going to kill us!”

“We’re fine”

We swerve left into the next lane. The car next to us grabs onto their horn, letting out a prolonged, “HOOOOOONNNNK” I whimper and break into a loud, snot filled cry. My brother squeezes my hand, trying to help me catch my breath.

“AHHH! You just almost hit that truck!”

“But did I?”

“No but-”

“I didn’t think so.”

“But you might hit the next one! Ed, get off of the freeway. Please, your daughter and son are sitting right behind you. Look! You made your toddler cry. Just think about them. Please!”

“I can make my own decisions Deana, just sit back!”

My mom reaches her hand toward the back seat and grabs a hold of my little foot, still fitting in her palm.

She turns her attention toward me. “It’s going to be okay mijita”

I exhale in short bursts. I let out my fear in loud whines, but I know I need to regain my composure. My diaphragm contracts and my lungs open up for a full breath. Oxygen fills my blood and my headache, still pulsating from the tension of holding back

my tantrum, fades away. There is a burning on the tender skin below my eyes. I touch my icy fingertips against it, and even though it's only momentary, the bit of relief helps me to calm down. I come to a steady rhythm. *Breathe in....2....3....4. Hold....2....3....4. Breathe out....2....3....4....5....6.... Repeat.* My mom taught me how to do this. She always told me, "No one can focus on their bad feelings while they're counting their breath. There isn't enough room in your brain to do both." So it became my routine.

Finally, we pull over into a parking lot near the side of the freeway so that my dad can drop us off. The 5:00 sunlight and the exhaustion from so much crying have me practically asleep. I hear them arguing like a soft rumble in the distance. White noise. My brother's hand release my own and I wake up startled. I'm defenseless. Sitting in my carseat, I am brought back into the chaos.

"She is my daughter! You can't take her away from me!"

"Come on Iza. Get out of the car."

I remember that my brother and I used to do this with the dog. We would sit him in between us and call him. We'd pat our laps, click our tongues, and make kissing sounds to try and get him to come our way. We wanted to prove to the other sibling that the dog liked *us* more. He always took a little while. He'd look us both in the eye and wag his tail. He'd keep turning around and around, trying to figure out the best decision. I keep sitting in my car seat, looking at my parents. I am four years old, and although I know that when he is bad dad, he does things that make me scared and make my mom yell, I also know that I love him. He's just sad right now and he will get better. He'll go back to good dad.

My mom is still calling me. She reaches her arms out to get me out of the back seat of the work truck. My brother is holding onto her waist.

“Really? Fuck you.” A cloud of exhaust catches in the back of my throat as he drives away full speed. The sky is grey and I shiver. Light sprinkles tickle my skin; I wonder if it will rain soon. My mom is preoccupied with her search for a stranger willing to lend her their phone. She finds a nice lady in a bookstore. I hear 3 numbers being dialed. Then, I hear her telling the person on the phone about a drunk driver on the freeway. We spend the next week at my grandma’s house.

“Dad, can you stop talking to me like that? I’m working right now. I don’t want them hearing you treat me like a kid.” I drag the wagon full of supplies over to the organizers and ask if there is anything else I can do for them. He follows and introduces himself. I feel myself getting red as he talks to them. The conversation is brief, but long enough for me to be embarrassed. “Can you just go?!” I tell him. He scoffs in disbelief and stomps away. “I’m going to go to the bathroom and then we are leaving.”

- He is gone for more than half an hour
- He comes back smelling like alcohol
- We uber back to the car and he speaks spanish to the driver, a black woman who spoke 0 spanish. He keeps calling her sweetie for some reason.
- We get to the car and I am mad because he is drunk, I try to sit in the back seat so I can stay away from him while he is like this.

- He gets really mad and starts yelling at me. He makes me sit in the front seat.
- He keeps yelling at me, calling me entitled and a brat. I understand where he is coming from but in my mind am defensive.
- He keeps yelling and now I am crying. This makes him yell more.
- He swerves all over the road and I ask him to pull over so I can call my mom. He gets even more mad and is now screaming at me.
- He stops in the middle of a super busy road and tells me to get out of the car. We are a 30 minute freeway drive from home.
- I try to get out and he starts driving again, this time his yelling is focused on why I am crying. I tell him I am fine and try to hold in my tears. He doesn't stop. Eventually he quiets down and drives. I stay as still and silent as possible.
- I get home and stay in the car while he leaves. I call my mom crying and tell her to come out to the car. She drives me to my grandma's house.
- We decide that this has been going on too long and that he needs to move out.

Concept ideas

1. Weave my second story with the first to show close comparison and differences
2. Leave my story side by side but not interwoven
3. Messy ending: Does the separation happen? What now?

Writing Goals/Needs

- Capitalize on how I have grown and changed, but don't idealize the situation or my behavior
 - Differences - Less aware of situation when younger, not as cautious about my own safety.
 - Similarities - Ending at my grandma's house/away from home, tensing up, staying still and quiet, being in a car, etc.
- Use joyluck club story as a model, don't make my dad evil, give him a brief backstory
 - Where do I input his backstory?
- Ground quicker
 - First description, is it the first time?
- Close eyes and remember
- Say it just a little
- Say it first, then sprinkle
- Exaggerate good dad
- Dialogue
- Brother
- Significance of deciding *with* mom - power

