

## The Power Within

*Izadora Lopez McGawley*

“Dad, can you stop talking to me? I’m working right now.”

“Calm down Iza.” He teases.

I just finished walking in the pride march. This year, I got to help organize, but that’s irrelevant. Right now I’m frustrated. I don’t explain, but I put my poster, crumpled as soon as I saw him in the crowd, back into the wagon. I drag the supplies over to the organizers and ask if there is anything else I can do for them, hoping my dad got the point and would walk in the opposite direction. He follows anyway and introduces himself. A big smile stretches across his face, he seems proud of me. Proud that I have a job, he doesn’t know the other thing. I don’t really care to tell him. He’s not homophobic, he probably wouldn’t care, I just don’t want to bring it up. So I don’t, and that’s that, but I still feel the bits of discomfort lingering. 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.” I take a deep breath. *You hurt his feelings. He was just being nice.*

My skin is slimy as I wipe the sweat from my cheeks onto the back of my hand. My shoulders are reluctantly bare, something I am not well acquainted with and really don’t like. *Where is he?* I stretch my aching feet, holding onto the stop sign to keep balance. The uber driver will be here soon to take us back to the car. I’m tired. I’m cranky. I’m self-conscious. I want to go home and shower. A dark grey car with a

circular logo on the windshield pulls up by the orange cones across the street. I throw in my backpack, then fumble with my dress as I sit down in the back seat. "My dad will be here soon. Can we wait for him just a little while longer?" The lady smiles and nods. I see him walking down the side of the blocked off street.

What he said exactly, I'm not sure of. All I know is that I hated every second of that car ride. Slurred words, bad breath, and Spanish speaking. He marked off the whole list of things a white man does while drunk. The last one was especially awkward. Our uber driver, a black woman who did not know a word of Spanish, had to tolerate my father acting as though she did not speak a word of English, all while being asked excessively personal questions and being called sweetie. I get out of the car with the ground still moving below us and avoid any eye contact with my dad as I head straight for where we parked. He has to unlock the door twice because the first time I pulled too soon. I put my things in the back seat and try to get in. The door swings open behind me.

"Get in the front seat."

My empty stomach somehow manages to fill itself to the point where I think it might just overflow. I know exactly what is going to happen, but I do what he says anyway. *You'll be fine.* I say to myself. *You just need to get home.*

I sit down with my arms crossed in a protective shield. "Why did you try to sit in the back?" His breath is warm and the smell of alcohol, moist, saliva mixed alcohol, catches in the back of my throat with each inhale. I wonder if he realizes that I have

switched to breathing at his same pace so as not to taste his rotten exhale. He turns the key in the ignition.

*I'm taken back to the first time it happened...*

*The sensation slithers around my small body, suffocating me like a boa constrictor does it's 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 stop yelling and 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.*

My hands are bigger now. I am still sitting, trying to hear the waves, but this time, I am in the eye of the storm, and the thunder is much harder to ignore.

"Dad, I was just tired I promise. Nothing else. I'm sorry you're not my chauffeur I won't do it again."

"Oh my god. Oh my GOD! I cannot BELIEVE YOU! Do you have any idea how entitled you are?"

"I'm sorry dad."

He repeats his phrase a few more times. My breath becomes shakier

“Look at everything I do for you! I work my ass off every day for you and your brothers. You’re just like them. Lazy. Ungrateful. Spoiled.”

He drags out the “s” in spoiled letting out a long breath directly into my face. I turn my head.

“Look me in the eye when I talk to you!”

He almost stops looking at the road completely as he says this, causing the car to drift out of the lane.

“Can you please focus on the road!” I yell through my teeth, tears now streaming from my eyes.

He swerves back into the lane. The yelling resumes and I sink into a fetal position.

*I'm back*

*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. I wonder if it how bad it would hurt to jump. My mom tries to control the car from the passenger seat. “Get your hands off the wheel!” My dad 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. I am 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, "HOOOOOOONNNNK" 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"*

*"Can you just let me out of the car?" I say to him, trying to catch my breath. "I just want to call mom. I'll have her pick me up. It's fine." I prepare for more screaming.*

*"Fine. You wanna get out? Get out." He stops in the middle of the road. Cars zoom past us from both sides and honk from behind. I sob harder, struggling to calm*

down enough to navigate the streets still swarming with traffic from the march. It would be safer to just leave. I reach for the door and he speeds up. I lurch forward, my seatbelt no longer saving me from his choppy accelerations. He speeds up faster than he was before. "Now why are you crying?" He shouts.

"I'm not, it's nothing. Just leave me alone and drive please."

"You are crying! I can see it. Tell me why you are crying!"

"You know why I am crying. Please just stop and focus on the road!" I yell with all the anger I had been holding onto from the very beginning. He mumbles his comments, finally keeping them to himself.

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 body and my headache, still pulsating from the tension of holding back my screams, 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 when I was little. 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.

*All we need to do is get home*

*I close my eyes and start to remember*

*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 releases my own and I wake up startled. I'm defenseless. Sitting in my carseat, I am brought back into the chaos.*

*I hear my dad yelling "She is my daughter! You can't take her away from me!"*

*"Come on Iza. Get out of the car." my mom motions.*

*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?" He says. "Fuck you." A cloud of exhaust catches in the back of my throat as he drives away full speed.*

I open my eyes when I feel us go over the steep hump on the beginning of our driveway. My tears have softened, but continue to dribble nevertheless. He parks the car and slams the door after getting out. I stay behind.

“Mom?”

“Hi mija! What’s up? I was just about to go get some fish tacos with your brother and your cousin. Wanna come?”

I let go of my self control and cry into the phone.

“Just let me grab the keys. I’ll be right there.”

*It comes back again*

*The sky is grey and I shiver. Light sprinkles tickle my skin; I wonder if it will rain soon. My mom asks a woman if she can borrow her phone. I hear 3 numbers being dialed. I hear her telling the person on the phone about a drunk driver on the freeway. I hear her asking her own mom to come and get us. We spend the next week at my grandma’s house.*

“So what happened?” My mom asks, I still haven’t explained. We park in front of my grandma’s house and I tell her everything.

She looks down and sighs. “Do you think I should ask him to leave?”

I take a moment to think. “I don’t know. It’s not like he’s just gonna stop.”

“I know.” She responds, “I’ve been thinking about it for a while”

“So have I.” I whisper

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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
  - Input more backstory in first paragraph, less focus on actual situation, more on day before, he is not evil
- More detail and flowery language in june scenes
- Close eyes and remember - solidify triggers. How are my transitions?
  - What will bring us back? Different each time, or will I always notice that my hands are bigger, etc.
- Say it just a little
  - Did I do this enough or too much?
- Say it first, then sprinkle
- Exaggerate good dad more in beginning
  - Proud of me, loves me, smiling, joking, drove me all the way here
- Brother?
- Significance of deciding *with* mom - power
  - Did I highlight this enough?

- Put some curse words
- Delete story from a few months ago
- No pride thing
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