



My House is Burning Down

-Nicole Cermak

As a victim of child sexual abuse, I find that one of the most common misconceptions is the tortuous memories and suffering will disappear with a survivor's childhood. That's simply not true. The psychological aftermath of my abuse has stayed with me as an appalling reminder. The best metaphor I can use to illustrate those repercussions is a family home that catches fire. Perhaps a faulty wire ignites the attic. The house then burns at no fault of its own. After the fire is extinguished and the home is rebuilt, you will always remember the horror of the flames consuming its roof.

Growing up in a small, rural subdivision outside of Huntington, West Virginia, I witnessed a neighboring home burn. Late one summer night, while the mother of the house had stepped out to pick up her husband from work, she'd left her young children in the care of her two teenagers. In the brief time she was gone, their dishwasher's electrical system malfunctioned and ignited the house.

From my bedroom that night in frozen horror, I witnessed chaos and heard screams of panic as the children's names inside were called out by other neighbors. One woman used her purse to smash the children's bedroom windows. She then helped pull them and the family pets from the flames. Our community watched helpless, in shock, and mostly in silence as that house burned under the fire's raging abuse. Eventually, the fire department arrived and extinguished the flames. The charred remains of the walls and the roof, and the scars upon the family's hearts, none of it would fully recover.

In my adult years, I've passed through that neighborhood on occasion. Every time I see that now-renovated home, flashbacks haunt my soul. The noxious scent of smoke and the panicked wails of the people spiral me



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into a darkness that I connect to my abuse. Although the house has since been updated and modernized, the structure still represents a moment of fear, panic, dread.

As a young girl who battled a deep sense of fear from the sexual violence delivered upon me between the ages of two to five, that fire and the chaos in our community became the metaphor of my abuse that I discussed at the beginning of this story. A home is a shell, a housing to provide comfort and protection from the outside world. My body is the shell for my soul. That house, just like my toddler body, suffered great violence at no fault of its own. After the years of depraved violence inflicted upon me, fear of unpredictable brutality had taken vacancy in my life, much in the way that family would forever hold the memory of their material lives burned to ruins.

The legal and medical experts of the 1980s did not handle my abuse in the same ethical manner I've witnessed of modern professionals as a child advocate. I am thankful a forensic interview was conducted to ensure my testimony was heard in court at such a young age. Unfortunately, mom did not trust the therapist the state referred me to and declined any therapeutic services to help me handle the aftermath of the abuse. The lack of care spiraled me into years of silence and internal conflict.

My mother once told me a friend advised her not to worry, that I would eventually forget what happened because the events of my abuse happened when I was so young. Ignorant, and without a psychological vocabulary, many people preferred the old adage: time heals all wounds. How blatantly false that is astounds me to this day.

As a child, I was expected to stay silent and forget the unforgettable. It is sad that some adults actually believe a child can shoulder this burden. I did not have the words and skills to articulate what was happening to me, but I do remember the embedded horror. I remember the physical pain. I remember the shame and guilt. I remember shivering in fear as I was locked in my abuser's bathroom, anxious of what would happen to me when that door opened. I could hear the other children playing in the living room, but no one came to save me. My house was burning down and no firefighters were called. There would be no trained help to guide me through the cleanup. I had no tools or skills or materials to repair the damage. The community watched on helpless as my spirit smoldered, yet they behaved as if the fire never existed. I was abandoned.

How naive and irresponsible it is of our society to allow children to face this devastation alone. You do not have to have a Ph.D. in childhood development to understand that traumatic events are forever burned into a child's mind. In college, a basic psychology class taught us that humans start to retain memories on their own around the age of three.

To this day, horrific memories of my abuse cleverly project themselves in my mind. At times I least expect, flashes of my abuser's hands covering

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my face, the sounds of sinister laughter, smells of malted candy they regularly consumed, all of it overtakes my conscious mind.

I didn't know what to make of the flashes when I was young. They scared me. I couldn't control them. I was afraid to talk to anyone about them, so I tried for years to suppress the violence in my mind. Little did I know that as I continued to grow into a young woman, the memories also grew more sophisticated, and in my twenties, they drove me toward madness. Eventually, I sought therapy. After a long, hard road of trying different therapeutic techniques with varying therapists, I finally found ways to take control of my life.

Child sexual abuse is a far too common reality. Those of us who've survived must find therapies to help us contend with the fires inside each of us. That's why I'm honored to help others along their healing journeys.

The End