



## Tomato Soup

-Nicole Cermak

For more years than I care to count, I couldn't eat tomato soup or even bear the smell of it. I simply didn't prefer the taste as a child, but more importantly, the thick, red liquid represented a haunting memory. You see, I was often fed tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch at the home of my child sexual abusers.

Alone and in poverty, my mother had to work, so she placed my older brother and I in the hands of a sinister married couple employed by a state-operated babysitting service in Huntington, West Virginia. The wife used me as a sacrificial lamb in her sadistic relationship with her husband. When that man came home from his job, I was escorted into the bathroom of their rather plain, sterile house. That's where he regularly revealed a twisted form of romanticism, and where he released his intimate destruction upon my young body.

Although the husband was usually gone during the workday, I remember one cool, sunny fall afternoon when he stayed home. The sun warmed my back as its rays streamed through the large kitchen windows while I quietly ate my tomato soup and grilled cheese.

The doorbell rang. From the looks of surprise on the faces of the abusers, the visitor was unexpected and an air of alarm filled the room. As the husband answered the door, I heard a voice I had dreamed to hear inside that house of horror. My long lost father stopped by for a visit. He'd moved to Texas and remarried after leaving my mother when I was a toddler. I rarely spoke to him, yet there he was in the doorway of my abusers' home. Perhaps he'd come to rescue me.

I jumped out of my chair in the kitchen, spilling the tomato soup on the table and floor. The wife glared down at me as if I'd committed a heinous crime and would soon be punished in yet another vicious sexual



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assault. In fear, I ran into the living room as my father knelt on the floor to embrace me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and hugged him with all the strength I could muster. My soul silently screamed, "Please take me away now! Get me out of here, dad."

The sun filled the space behind my father and warmed my cheeks during our embrace. Along my spine, I felt the cold stares of abuse from that husband and wife. In villainous patience, they stared and waited for him to leave. Dad said he couldn't stay for a longer visit, and he wasn't going to take me away from the nightmare. He'd come by just to say hello.

After the front door closed, the wife glared down at me in disgust as if I was about to pay for the great sin of my father visiting me. That was one of the earliest forms of hatred I'd ever experienced. My mind then shut down. I blacked out.

Later in life, I began blacking out in the throes of healthy sex, just as I did during the moments of my abuse. I fought to be present in those loving moments with supportive boyfriends and then my husband. That defense mechanism, however, is so ingrained in my being that I couldn't control it. While that kind of disassociation is challenging for a spouse, when people are equipped with knowledge, we are able to overcome challenges together.

Over the years of therapeutic exercises, I've grown. Because of honest discussions, empathy, and patience, I now enjoy those intimate moments with my husband. Unfortunately, the scars of my abuse will always remain on the little girl inside of me. As is true with most survivors of child sexual abuse, I will always struggle with feelings of shame and the subconscious response to flee.

The End