

raising myself

a memoir of neglect, shame,
and growing up too soon

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“Shame eats away at the core of who we are.”

—*Christine Caine*

foreword

I can't remember a time when I didn't feel shame. But I have evidence that there was once a time when I was, in fact, shame free. I have a photograph of me as a little baby, about six months old. In this picture I am happy and smiling, with a twinkle in my eye. In fact, I don't just look happy; I look radiant and filled with joy.

I have another photo of me at four years old. In this picture I am frowning and I look defiant and lost. The twinkle in my eye has been replaced with a dark, empty look.

What happened to me in those three and a half years? What occurred that had taken away the twinkle in my eyes and the joyous smile on my face and replaced them with darkness, emptiness, and hatred?

The answer: shame. Shame had replaced my innocence, my joy, my exuberance for life. Shame had caused me to build up a wall—a wall of protection and defiance.

The person I was defending myself against? My mother, a woman who was so full of shame herself that she couldn't help but project it onto me, her unwanted child and the constant reminder of her own shame.

This is the story of how I made my way in the world in spite of my mother's neglect, unreasonable expectations, and constant criticism; in spite of being sexually abused, first at four years old and then at nine; and in spite of being raped at twelve. It is the

story of how I came dangerously close to the edge of becoming a child molester, a criminal, a patient in a mental hospital, and suicide. And it is the story of how I battled my inner demons and struggled to keep my heart open and hold on to my humanity.

In *Raising Myself* you will see an open, compassionate, and loving child gradually begin to lose her humanity. You will watch as a child who cried and prayed to God to help the person in need each time she heard the siren of an ambulance or fire engine, a child who loved everyone and never saw race or economic status, gradually hardens her heart and builds up a wall around herself.

Most experts tell us that no one survives the devastation of severe childhood trauma unscathed. And many people understand that few, if any, victims of child abuse or neglect escape their trauma without experiencing some kind of addiction—whether it be alcohol or drug abuse, an eating disorder, sexual addiction, or a gambling or shopping addiction. But few know that most victims end up going down one or more of what I call the “six paths of trauma”: 1) addiction (alcohol or drug addiction or an eating disorder) 2) sexual acting out (including promiscuity, prostitution, and/or sexual addiction), 3) mental illness, 4) suicidal ideation, 5) criminal or antisocial behavior, or 6) becoming an abuser or perpetual victim. In *Raising Myself*, I tell the story of how I ended up starting down all six paths—and pulled myself away from the edge each time.

Specifically, in this memoir I illuminate a problem that is seldom addressed: how and why some victims of child abuse act out against society or become abusive toward others, while others become self-abusive or perpetual victims. As they experience my life through my eyes, readers will be able to observe how the drip, drip, drip of abuse, neglect, and constant shaming wore away at my humanity, gradually causing me to become numb,

stop having empathy for others, and think only of my own needs. The insights I offer here will be beneficial to those who went down a similar path, as well as those trying to understand a loved one who took the path of acting out sexually, becoming a criminal, or becoming abusive toward others as a result of childhood trauma.

The overarching issue addressed in the book is *shame*—how it is created, the damage it does to one’s self-concept and self-esteem. After being neglected and emotionally abused by my mother, branded a liar and a troublemaker, and then sexually abused and raped, I found myself riddled with shame and a basic belief that I was bad, unlovable, and rotten inside. The only way I knew how to survive in the world was to build up a defensive wall to keep myself from being further shamed. In order to stop other kids from bullying me I created a false bravado and acted like I didn’t care what they thought. After being sexually abused and raped, I turned my shame into rage and began acting out—against my mother and against society in general.

Instead of becoming a perpetual victim, as many people do with a history such as mine, I did what is called “identifying with the aggressor,” meaning that I denied my victimizations by blaming myself, making excuses for my abusers, and taking on those abusers’ personalities and tendencies. I reenacted my sexual abuse with other children in my neighborhood and almost molested a six-month-old baby I was babysitting. Although I didn’t act on this dark impulse, this was my lowest point. I came to believe that I was as bad as the man who had molested me—that I was the lowest of the low.

After being raped at twelve years old, I began to shoplift. I was angry at my mother. I was angry at all the men who had abused me and at all authority figures. I wanted to lash out—to get back at everyone who had taken advantage of me. After I

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was finally caught and brought home in a cop car, my mother gave up on me. She wanted nothing more to do with me.

Fortunately, I didn't give up on myself. I knew there was goodness in me and I struggled to find it, to return to that compassionate child I had once been. I determined to turn my life around, even though I had no guidance from anyone, including my mother. Through solitude and introspection I began to find pieces of myself I had discarded in my attempts to shield myself from further harm.

Even though I often felt like giving up, there was something inside me that kept pushing me forward. I knew there was more to life than the hellhole I found myself in and that there were better people to be found in the world than the degenerate ones I found myself surrounded by. And I knew I needed to keep myself together long enough to escape. I wasn't going to let that town or its people get me down.

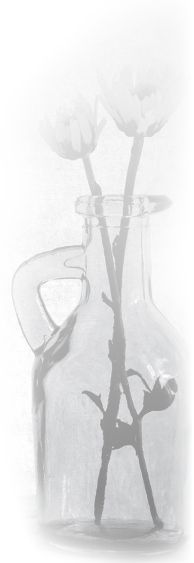
I learned many lessons along the way, and I share them openly with my readers. I hope these "takeaways" will help those of you who have struggled as I did to recover from the debilitating shame that comes with childhood neglect and abuse.

part one

looking for mother

“You don’t know what it’s like to grow up with a mother who never said a positive thing in her life, not about her children or the world, who was always suspicious, always tearing you down and splitting your dreams straight down the seams.”

—Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*



chapter 1

When I was three and a half years old, I went looking for my mother. I'd been waiting for her in the babysitter's backyard, along with about five other kids. I looked up each time the back door opened, as one by one parents came to fetch their children. But she didn't come.

As time went by, I became more and more anxious. The sun was beginning to set and the afternoon shadows were growing larger and more ominous. Soon I was the last child left playing in the yard. Still my mother didn't come and didn't come.

Finally, I decided to ride my tricycle home. I opened the back gate, let myself out, and headed home. I knew it wasn't too far, and I also knew my way. I had to cross a highway and some railroad tracks to get there, but I was determined.

When I reached the highway, I looked both ways like my mother had taught me and patiently waited for the cars to pass. Then I rode as fast as my legs could pedal to the other side of the highway. Feeling triumphant, I continued on my path.

A few blocks farther on I reached the railroad tracks. I had to push and tug my tricycle over each track, struggling so hard that I fell down several times on the gravel that lined the tracks. But nothing was going to stop me from getting home to my mother.

When I finally made it home, I burst into the house—only to find it hauntingly empty. My mother wasn't there. Where

was she? I'd never been all alone in our little cottage before, and I didn't like how it felt. It seemed strange and scary. I imagined boogeymen hiding in dark corners and lurking behind the curtains. I went outside and sat in my sandbox, letting the still-warm sand cradle me.

Later, when my mother told others about this incident she told them how she arrived home scared out of her mind to find me nonchalantly playing in my sandbox, as if nothing was wrong. She was infuriated. Here she had been worried sick, and I was oblivious to it all. She saw me as a selfish child who didn't care about her. She later told me how she beat the daylights out of me for worrying her so much. I don't remember that part.

It seems we'd just missed each other. She'd been inside the babysitter's house all along, talking—as she often did—with the women in her life. When she finally decided it was time to come get me, I wasn't there.

My mother and I would repeat this type of scenario all our lives, me looking for her even though she was physically there, her misunderstanding my behavior and reactions and assuming the worst about me.



Oh, how I loved my mother in those days. I thought she was the grandest lady of them all. With her delicate features and creamy complexion, she looked like the beautiful china dolls I had seen in shop windows. She was a regal woman with silver-highlighted hair piled on top of her head and swept away from her face. She walked with her head held high and her shoulders back, conveying an air of dignity and fine breeding.

Everyone else loved her too. She was quick and articulate, always impressing people with her knowledge and wit. As far back as I can remember, I noticed how people warmed to my

mother immediately upon meeting her. Their faces softened, their eyes showed a keen interest, and they smiled broadly—far different from the reactions I seemed to elicit in people. And my mother’s face, in turn, was transformed in the presence of others, her typically tight-lipped mouth softening and turning into a knockout smile. Her eyes sparkled, sometimes with mischief, as she told one funny story after another or laughed contagiously over someone else’s tale.

It always took someone else to bring out the best in my mother. When it was just the two of us she seemed to always be sad, worried, anxious, or tired. I was horribly jealous of the people who made her laugh, and always, always I carried with me the feeling that there was something wrong with me because she never laughed that way around me.



Of all the places on this lush, beautiful earth to grow up in, I ended up being raised in Bakersfield, California, located in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley, two hours north of Los Angeles but millions of miles away, and considered by many to be a “hick town.” It is sizzling hot in the summer, with temperatures as high as 115 degrees, and freezing cold in the winter—not cold enough to produce beautiful, white snow, just enough to freeze the ground into a dirty, slushy mess and numb your nose, lips, hands, and feet if you had to be out in the air for very long.

Bakersfield has a dry, desert-like climate, so the summers aren’t hot and muggy like they are in the South. Instead it’s an intense heat, the kind that takes your breath away when you open the door to leave your air-conditioned house or car, the kind of heat that makes the asphalt soft and the land hard.

As far back as I can remember, I always felt like I didn’t

belong in that God-forsaken town. Mostly it was because my mother was so out of place, so different from the people we knew there. The majority of our neighbors were from states like Oklahoma and Arkansas, many having settled in Bakersfield after escaping, like the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*, from the dust storms of the 1930s.

My mother was born and raised in Missouri, and somehow that was supposed to be better than being an “Okie” or “Arkie.” Even though my mother and I were actually poorer than our neighbors—she was a single parent, after all, raising me without a husband to help her—she felt superior to them. On hot summer evenings we’d sit on our little front stoop, trying to cool off from the heat of the day, and she’d look around at our neighborhood and sigh. “Those Okies and Arkies don’t have any manners or pride in themselves,” she’d say. “Look at the way they park their cars on their front lawns. It ruins the whole neighborhood. They act like country bumpkins, walking around bare-footed. And who wants to see some man’s hairy chest and beer belly all the time?”

My mother hardly ever spoke of her own childhood or her life before I was born, but she often spoke of Missouri: “Poplar Bluff was a beautiful town, full of the loveliest trees you ever saw,” she’d tell me. “In the fall all their leaves turned red and gold and it was the most wondrous sight . . .” Then she’d look around at our little court with its dry lawns and scrawny little trees, and once again she’d sigh.

I spent most of my childhood twisting myself around in order to please my mother, take care of her feelings, or at the very least not upset her. Then I would act out my misery and loneliness when I was away from her. In some ways, she never knew me because I was two different people: the Beverly I was with her and the Beverly I was without her. It seemed I had to be away from her in order to find myself.

When I was around my mother all I could see or feel or hear or smell was her. It was only when I was away from her that I could finally breathe. My eyes would clear and I would see that there was a whole world out there, separate from her. But my relationships with other people were uncomfortable and strained, because I didn't really know how to interact with them. I only knew how to act in order to get along with my mother.



One of the first significant connections I made in Bakersfield that spring of 1951 was with a woman named Ruby, our landlord. Ruby's court consisted of four little attached apartments lined up in a row, each with its own small porch, walkway, and yard. At the far end of the court, facing the street, was a larger apartment meant for the caretaker or owner. That's where Ruby lived with her dog, Muffet, a black cocker spaniel that spent most of its time curled up in the shade of a large oleander bush just outside Ruby's front door.

Ruby was a bountiful woman in her fifties with wild red hair and an equally wild spirit. Even her name seemed romantic to me. She was what I would later come to think of as a "free spirit."

Ruby was very different from my mother. She didn't seem to have a worry in the world and, most important, she didn't care what other people thought. My mother lived her life worrying about her reputation and she was raising me the same way. "If you don't have a good reputation, you have nothing," she would always tell me. But Ruby didn't seem to care about her reputation. In fact, she seemed to delight in shocking other people. I liked that about her.

Ruby took a liking to me as well. I sometimes thought she might feel sorry for me because I was out in the yard alone so

often and wondered whether she, like so many others, merely tolerated me as a favor to my mother. But other times I knew she was enjoying my company by the way she smiled at me and how she'd laugh at some of the things I said and did.

For the most part, Ruby kept to herself. She didn't join my mother and the two old-maid schoolteachers, Zelda and Kinney, who lived on either side of us, when they sat outside talking. She had a grown son who came to visit her once in a while, but other than that she didn't seem to have any family or friends.

Ruby had a red Pontiac convertible that she called the "Magic Carpet." It had an Indian head on the hood that really impressed me. It made the red carpet feel all the more exotic and magical. The Indian head itself would turn out to be a portent of things to come, when Steve came into our lives—but that came later.

Sometimes, out of the blue, Ruby would say to me, "Come on, sweetie, let's go for a ride on the Magic Carpet," and we'd get up and go, just like that. The first time she suggested this, shortly after we moved to her court, I couldn't believe how spontaneous she was. My mother had to plan everything ahead of time, and seldom was anything done "just for fun." But today, Ruby got the idea in her head and within minutes we were driving down the street, the wind cooling our faces, laughing and feeling grand.

Ruby didn't care how she looked. When she decided to go somewhere, she just wore whatever she had on. Whenever my mother was going somewhere, in contrast, she needed at least an hour to "pull herself together." This meant full makeup, jewelry, stockings, and high heels. It didn't take me long to get dressed and ready to go, so I often had to wait around for what seemed like hours when the two of us went somewhere together.

One day, Ruby and I were walking toward the Magic Carpet when all of a sudden a gust of wind blew up her skirt.

“Whoops!” she said, laughing. “I better be careful, I don’t have any underwear on.”

I was shocked and secretly impressed. *What would happen if we were in an accident and she had to go to the hospital?* I thought.

On this particular fall day the wind began blowing really hard. So much dust was being stirred up that we could hardly see.

“Oh, it looks like we’re going to have another one of our dust storms,” Ruby said, laughing in her robust way. “The whole house will be covered with dust.” But instead of turning around and heading home, or even putting the top up on the convertible, she just continued to drive.

Tumbleweeds raced alongside us and darted out in front of us. “Let’s see how many of those suckers we can hit!” she yelled above the whistling of the wind.

As we drove, one tumbleweed after another attacked the Magic Carpet. They reminded me of bulls charging the red capes of the Spanish matadors I had seen in movies. The dust burned my eyes and crunched in my teeth, but Ruby just kept on driving. Sometimes the dust was so thick we couldn’t even see the road, but still she drove on, laughing at the top of her lungs. By the time we got home, we were covered with dust and you could hardly see the red color of the Magic Carpet. But we didn’t care. We’d had fun.

Breathless, I ran to our little apartment and burst through the door. “Momma, you’ll never guess what Ruby and I just did—”

“It’s about time you got home,” she snapped. “The dust is getting in everywhere. Help me put these towels under the doors and around the windows.” She didn’t even notice the dust all over me.

I understood my mother’s concern about the dust because I normally hated it too. We both had allergies, and dust made

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us cough and wheeze. But that day with Ruby, the dust hadn't bothered me at all.

I looked forward to my outings with Ruby. It was the only time I felt truly free and alive. For Ruby, there was always another adventure around the corner, while for my mother there was always another problem. I liked Ruby's way of thinking better.

chapter 2

My mother was a woman of secrets. She kept the stories of her life to herself, hording them like precious jewels, doling them out over time depending on her mood. She had an air of mystery about her that made her all the more intriguing to people. Even though she seemed to enjoy talking to people, she rarely talked about herself and would evade their questions. This caused them to make up stories about who she really was and where she had come from. I'd sometimes overhear the neighbors talking about her:

“I heard she was married to a rich man but she just up and left him one day.”

“I heard she ran away from a rich family who tried to control her.”

“I heard her husband died, leaving her to raise her daughter all alone.”

All this speculation was the opposite of what she'd intended. She'd wanted to keep a low profile, to fit into this small town and not make any waves. But because she dressed like someone who had come from money, she stood out. There she was, a single mother living in a tiny apartment at Ruby's court, working as a sales clerk at Thrifty drug store, but she had all this expensive jewelry and she always looked like someone from a fashion magazine.

She also stood out because of me.

“My goodness, isn’t she a little old to have a child?”

“She looks more like the child’s grandmother than her mother.”

“And where is the child’s father?”

The sad truth was that I didn’t know my mother much better than the neighbors did. I knew little of her life—her past or her present. She was an elusive ghost of a person, someone who lived a life separate from me and who could not or would not join me in mine.

My mother’s secrecy was calculated to protect herself, and, as I would learn much later, to protect me. It also lay at the very core of our misunderstandings. In her attempt to protect me, she alienated me. I interpreted her withholding of information the way I experienced her withholding of affection—as rejection.

I couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t tell me about my father or my grandparents, or even about her childhood. Each time I asked her, she found another clever way to avoid answering me. She was a master at it.

“Mom, tell me about what it was like when you were growing up,” I once ventured to ask.

“Oh, you don’t want to hear about that,” she said. “There was nothing interesting about your ol’ mom’s childhood.”

If my mother was close-mouthed about her childhood, she was even more so about my father.

“Do I have a father?”

“Of course you do.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s dead.”

“Is he in heaven?”

“Yes, of course he is.”

“What was he like?”

“He was a nice man.”

raising myself

“What did he look like?”

“He was a tall man, a big man. You resemble him.”

“What did he do?”

“He was a salesman. That’s enough questions for now. I’m tired, I’m going to take a nap.”

Like the neighbors I, too, sometimes wondered whether my mother was really my grandmother. After all, she had gray hair like an old lady and she was so much older than other kid’s mothers. Or maybe I was adopted. Surely she wasn’t my “real” mother.

I always had the nagging feeling that I had another mother somewhere. My real mother would be in the kitchen cooking some delicious dish, singing quietly to herself. She would smile sweetly when I came home from school—happy to see me. Then she would bend down and give me a big hug and kiss and ask me how my day had been at school.

This woman couldn’t be my mother—or anyone’s mother, for that matter. This woman hardly ever cooked and if she did she ended up burning the food because she wandered off to do something else. She didn’t smile when I came into the room; instead, she gave me either a blank look or an exasperated one. And she never asked me how school had been or what I was learning in school. She really didn’t seem to care.