

I stand here with a strong look of disdain on my face and a relief of the deep-rooted hatred I've concealed all these years dissolving within each molecule of my being. Hatred of this magnitude was capable of starting wars and responsible for the massacres of entire peoples. It was the type of hate that fueled pure rage like throwing barrels of propane on a sparking match.

It controlled my life for many years, even after her absence became permanent, her voice still rang in my ears. I could hear the insults everywhere I ventured, so I began to believe that every passerby in the subway shared those same cruel opinions. I knew I'd never be skinny enough, yet somehow I knew I was too skinny. I knew I was beautiful, but my beauty was somehow artificial, although I never wore makeup or anything of the alternative. I've secured three separate college degrees, yet I'm still naive and ignorant. No matter what I did, the mockery of her face haunted my nightmares and there was simply no escape.

She was a prostituting drunk junkie, plain and simple. She'd shoot up, or snort, whatever was available and take off for the night. There wasn't a time I could remember her trying to get a real job, just claiming 'This is the only way to keep us off the street'. She'd wait on some dark corner, or in a shady alley for whatever John was willing to pay her. She'd make the money we needed for bills and return home, to drink away her sorrows and forget her disastrous choices just a few hours before. By noon she was purely belligerent and would pass out in any random spot around the house for the next few hours. She'd just get up around dinner time, get herself ready, and restart the night all over again.

She worked every single night, and some might call that respectable, but she shouldn't have had to do so. She'd drink, snort, shoot, and smoke most of her profits away just to cope with the transactions themselves. So we lived in a rent-controlled one-bedroom apartment her

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father had secured in the sixties. Nevertheless, four hundred dollars a month entailed rats, roaches, and unsecured door locks.

I'd heard many unsettling things through the paper-thin walls of the fifth floor, from the pimp upstairs beating his tricks to the home health aide beating Mr. Grayson down the hall. When things got too rowdy in the building, I would take my younger brother and sister, Maximus and Delayna, into the bathroom where we'd cuddle up in the bathtub with our stuffed teddies and wait for the commotion to pass.

And as I stand here now, mentally reliving the past, I realize I don't truly know the woman before me. I indeed know nothing about her, where she grew up, what her family was like, if she ever went to college, or how she ended up like this. Even my earliest memories contain her absence throughout the night, without a single glimpse of other adults in my life. I was seven years old when she had Max and nine when she had Delayna, old enough to be certain we were left home alone every night.

I hadn't been enrolled in school until the second grade, yet I seemed to excel far beyond the other students. I'm unsure if she just didn't realize I needed to go to school or hadn't wanted to send me, but she was forced to make a change once Max came along. Not to be confused, this wasn't for our well-being but for her own. I must've been a quiet baby because I'd always been relatively close to her in the apartment and running errands. Nonetheless, Max was the exact opposite. He cried and cried as a baby, and the whiskey method didn't seem to work on him as well as it had on me. She couldn't endure the interruption to her mid-day sleep time, so she placed him in a daycare and to avoid suspicion, I was enrolled in the public school.

After leaving Williamston Elementary, I would head three blocks south, then 1 block east, where I would arrive at the steps of Little Tykes Daycare & Childcare Center where Max

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attended until he transferred to Williamston for kindergarten. Delayna enrolled a week after she was born. Although against the traditional protocol, I'd always figured the administrative body knew what would happen to her if they hadn't.

We'd walk home from school, complete our homework together, assist my siblings where needed, and read all parental notices and slips they brought home. We would have about 2 hours of playtime, the only time we were actual children, and then Max and Delayna would begin their chores while I got dinner ready. Afterward was bathtime and bedtime, where I'd read their bedtime story and tuck them into the queen-sized bed. I would then grab a book, shove the chair up under the handle of the door, grab my bat, and retire to the couch for the night, reading until my eyes gave in to the slumber my body so desperately deserved.

My radio alarm would let me know it was time to get up and I would jump in the shower. After getting myself ready, I'd clean up the house a bit, putting my bedding back into the closet and putting the rest of the toys away. Pack backpacks and lunches for the day, and lay out outfits before I went into the bedroom to wake them up. Eat breakfast, brush teeth, wash faces, get dressed, and be out the door. I'd drop them at their school, and continue to mine for the day, then the cycle would repeat.

On weekends, we would take the money she'd given us for bills and groceries, and run down to the landlord, the utility companies, and the market on the corner. I always kept us out of the house for the hours she would sleep, unwilling to subject them to whatever negative mood she was in the day. We'd play at the park, walk through the mall window-shopping, and attend whichever attraction hosted 'free kids day'.

When I was eighteen years old, I went to the Child Protective Services office and explained our life. By this point I'd been waiting tables in the diner around the block for 3 years,

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and all of the proof I could take care of the kids on my own. Ironically, she didn't even fight it, she just signed over custody of the little ones to me without a second thought and absolutely no remorse. We could keep the apartment, and she signed it over into my name that day. Shortly after, I graduated high school a few months later and was promoted to assistant manager.

After a while, I'd saved up enough money for us to leave the shithole finally. It only took one trip on the subway to transport everything we owned a few miles north to our new home, a beautiful two-bedroom, peacefully quiet, apartment. I transferred the kids into a much nicer school two streets over and landed a clerk position in the DMV office. I was even able to put Max in basketball and Delayna in mixed martial arts.

I'd attempted to contact her before we moved north to provide a current address, but I never found her. She'd left the CPS office that day after signing my siblings over and never went back to our shithole. We'd checked all her go-to spots; the alley behind Donahan's, the corner of Elm and Hesner, under the Stockholm Bridge, inside The Everything But Gentle Gentleman's Club, and a few others. I'd spoken with some familiar faces, asking them to let me know if they saw her, but I never received that call. I searched for her again before we moved out of our homely apartment, and still without any luck.

Over the next several years, we made such major accomplishments, you'd never expect the upbringing we had. I enrolled and graduated from a community college, and later a university. I bought us a three-bedroom home with a large yard, and we adopted two puppies and a cat. I furthered my education in law school with dreams of becoming a juvenile attorney, speaking for those who don't have the legal standing to speak for themselves.

Max was captain of the boys' varsity basketball team and got a full-ride scholarship, he now coaches an NBA team and trains underprivileged kids through a program he founded to help

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guide them toward a better life path. Delayna took a liking to the arts and graduated from a university for the liberal arts, which led her on multiple international trips to infamous museums and sites of artistic significance. She's now a world-renowned sculptor with clients ranging from your friendly neighborhood grandmother to monarchs and world leaders.

Now as I stand over her grave, with only my brother and sister at either side, I understand why I held onto all of that hate for so long. We had to work harder than everyone else around us, I slept on the couch for years to ensure my siblings had a bed to sleep in when I was only a child myself. She'd never once cared for us and threw us away like we were disposable. I'd always had to worry, 'Will this be the time the trauma catches up to one of them' or 'What if there's something they remember, so horrific, they won't even talk to me about it'. The constant thought of how depressed they may be, or if they've been carrying insufferable weight that pushes their hand in suicide.

Thankfully, none of those things ever came. They turned out to be great kids and wonderful people. When we spoke about this as adults, they tearfully expressed their gratitude to me. Max told me everything he'd ever become was due to my sacrifices and always supporting every goal he tackled. Delayna admitted that I was her mother, regardless if I hadn't birthed her. They live happy, wholesome lives and I am responsible for that, I know this. But I also know how badly Max wanted to quit basketball in middle school, and how I pushed him to look beyond the bullies and towards his future. Delayna, on the other hand, came out to me as a lesbian during her sophomore year of high school. And although I wasn't even surprised, it wasn't particularly easy for her at school. She'd lost her best friend of six years because the girl had felt betrayed and lied to, and her petty little click made it just that much worse. Nevertheless,

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she now marches at LGBTQIA+ rallies and organizes fundraisers to assist abandoned children in the community.

So I'm letting this hatred go, I will no longer hear or see the terror she has ingrained within me, and I will live this life for myself. Releasing all of the memories and pain, and accepting that this is life. It's just now, twenty-some years later that I'm realizing she did accomplish one thing for us. There was one choice she'd made that entirely turned our lives around, for the best, regardless of what the underlying intent was. She gave up on us, and maybe she could've done it knowing we would be better off without her. Perhaps she remained missing to ensure she could hurt us no more, she couldn't traumatize us worse than she had.

It's looking down at my mother's coffin, about to be lowered into the ground that I have these actualizations. She did her absolute best and was selfless once in her life. She'd only ever made one right choice when it came to us: committing to never seeing us again and letting us thrive into the successful people that we are today.

"I remember that last day we saw her." Delayna broke the silence we'd been holding for quite some time now. Her voice was soft, reminding me of the small child she'd once been, and she continued her thought, "Do you think she ever got better? Like, change her life around, at all?"

I pondered for a brief second, and I even considered telling her the truth. I don't think she ever changed, and I don't think anything about her ever got better. But I would always watch out for these kids, I will always guarantee their happiness.

"I think she might have. She probably got into rehab and worked at the supermarket." It wasn't too convincing, but it wasn't the words that mattered, it was the idea.

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“I love you Rochel, and I’m grateful to have had you. However her life ended up, ours was better, I’ll put money on that.” Max cockily exclaimed, in his own touching way.

“Yeah, you did it Chi Chi, you raised us man, I love you and owe it all to you,” Delayna added.

“I love you both, so, so much.” I hugged my siblings tightly and we turned towards our cars. As we left the cemetery, and headed our separate ways, I silently thanked my mother for the opportunity she gave me. She let me nurture them, and myself, she allowed us to be so much better in this life than her. That’s really all I could ever really ask of her.



Chronicles of AP