Trapped in a Passing Storm

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Author Bio
Chandra Kirkland grew up in a solar-powered, dad-built house deep in the forest of Mifflin, Pennsylvania. She survived three brothers who taught her how to "be tough", and she looked up to an older sister who inspired her to write stories. As an English minor at Gettysburg College, Chandra enjoys having the opportunity to share her work and improve it through the helpful eyes of her fellow writers.

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TRAPPED IN A PASSING STORM

CHANDRA KIRKLAND

Corners. There are several things to be said about such places, but one thing in particular is important to learn: if you are being attacked, do not get yourself trapped in a corner. Getting into one is easier than getting out, and once you’re there, you’re there. I learned this fairly basic tip in two places. The first was the Tae Kwon Do studio where I have trained for eight years. The second was in my own home, and my attacker, if he could be called that, was my father.

We were in the small dining room and had just finished a meal. The large wooden table that my family gathered at twice a day (we only ate breakfast and an early dinner) was several feet away, its smooth surface gleaming in the dull light pushing fruitlessly through the blinds. Their color matched the wall my back was clinging to so pitifully—a nondescript off-white that seemed so deceivingly calm and boring now in light of the violent clash of wills that echoed through the house as angered screams. My bare feet were cold against the rough hardwood floor—I had come to dinner without socks; the floor was always icy in the winter. But the cold hardly registered. My face was hot, red and throbbing slightly from the blow. The tears cooled me, but more blood rushed with the shame of this sign of weakness. I truly don’t remember what we were fighting about, or why he backed me against the wall, screaming in my face. That doesn’t really matter; the reason never did. It happened. It happened over and over under different circumstances for two years. And though I can defend myself physically, I never raised an arm or even a finger against him. Besides, nothing physical could protect me from the words, the screaming, the names he spat at me. And the words were always worse than the blows. Always.

Disobedience had always been punished with physical pain in my household, and in other aspects of my life. It was, as they say, the “hard way” to learn. If you make a mistake, you might fall. You might just skin your knee or bruise your arm, but you might break a bone, too. Eight or nine years ago, when I was cooking brunch for my family on a Sunday morning, an accident resulted in one of my father’s usual violent forms of punishment—this incident stands out the most because it was so deeply humiliating.

My sister Ambika and I had been laughing and messing around, joking about things that are completely meaningless now. We were young, perhaps ten and fourteen (she is older), but we cooked a lot and were trusted (and expected) to do so. The flour bag had been put away upside-down, and as I hefted it into my arms the paper unfolded to release a wave of creamy white powder onto the kitchen floor. My sister and I stopped laughing. We
knew I had made a mistake, and we knew I was in trouble. We cleaned up the mess, sweeping and wiping until all of the powder was gone. The flour was expensive; it was organic and unbleached, the only kind my mom would use despite our dismal financial situation. My parents believed in quality over quantity—we never kept more than the bare essentials (flour, beans, rice, potatoes, etc.) because we couldn’t afford to, but it was always “healthier.” My father had been listening to our tomfoolery from upstairs, and now he came rushing down, his bedroom shoes making their distinctive swish swish on the wooden floorboards. As I had feared, he was enraged that our foolishness had wasted a large portion of the bag of flour we bought once each month. He dragged me to my room and beat my backside until I wet myself.

That is the way things were. Mistakes were punished by pain. Spanking was a normal part of my parents’ childhood, and it was a part of mine. But spanking a child because he or she is “bad” is entirely different than what began to unfold between my father and me several years later, when I was approaching fourteen years old. That kind of punishment has a reason—children need to learn what is right and what is wrong. It is not out of hate or intense rage so much as it is out of necessity.

I always knew when I had pushed him over the edge again. The reasons for our fighting were never important. It was usually small things; he said something that I didn’t agree with so I spoke my mind, and he never wanted to hear my opinions. To him, nothing anyone else said was as important as what he believed. My father is a suspicious man, distrusting and often wary. When something went missing, or something turned up broken, it was never his fault. He blamed someone else each time, no matter what they said or how much they insisted that they were not to blame. A lot of the time my brothers were his targets, because occasionally they really did lose or damage his things. I would listen to him shouting at them, screaming at them, telling them how stupid they were and how they should do things, and it made my blood boil.

“Where the fuck is my hammer? Every time you assholes use my shit you leave it laying around, rotting in the woods, because you’re selfish bastards. Where the fuck did you put it?” His eyes were always so deadly, so enraged. I despised his eyes, because the only times I had looked closely at them was when I was forced to, and during those times he was spitting rage and glared down like a vicious predator.

“I didn’t take it,” Oren, my second-to-youngest brother, said loudly in a pleading voice. “I swear I didn’t.”

“Bullshit,” our father roared. A word of denial was never good enough. He need concrete proof, and even when he had it his pride blinded him from admitting his own fault. “I want you to find it right now.” He drew closer, threateningly. Oren drew away, hunching his back in a defensive position. I would have done the opposite, and it would have gotten me into trouble as usual.
He seemed like a bully to me—his way of fighting reminded me of the verbal tactics of a rival at school or an elder sibling rather than a father. Instead of trying to take control of his temper and be the stronger person in the argument, he tended to jab and stab away with words in a way that was only meant to hurt, not to resolve a problem. He seemed to specialize in making his “opponent” feel worthless. The tone of his voice was sometimes one of uncontrolled rage, and other times it was more taunting. He would reduce my brothers or me to hot, angry tears, and then he would laugh. More than once, I exploded. I was always exploding. I stuck my nose in things that were not my business for the sake of justice, for the sake of my rage at the sound of his verbal bullying. In the end, I always ended up trapped by my own words.

Let’s go back to that corner—back to the dining room, with the food sitting still and congealing on the table. We may have had an audience (my mother, my brothers) but they faded to nothing beneath the hurricane of raw emotion, the defiance and the anger, the hurt and the shame that quivered threateningly between my father and me. I remember the feelings so clearly, though all the details of how it came to be have been blurred beyond recognition and are hiding somewhere at the back of my head. I wish that all of it would hide. I wish that all of it would go away. I feel sick now as I remember the stench of his breath. It was hot against my face. Spit flew from his screaming mouth to spatter against my cheek, and I turned my eyes away. “Look at me,” he screamed. I remember him shoving the words from gritted teeth and into my face with the flecks of spit. I looked, straight into his eyes, angry tears pouring down my burning face. My head hurt. My eyes were swollen from crying, and hot humiliation burned in my chest at my weakness. I could feel strands of my hair pulling from my scalp as his fist tightened around a handful of it, pushing my head harder against the wall. The back of my head ached from the force of it striking the wall. He was still yelling. I don’t know what he said. I don’t know what I said. I do know that he struck my face, then the side of my head, with his large, calloused, work-worn hands.

It hurt, but it was more of a mental shock, an emotional blow that started with words and was emphasized until it became almost unbearable with the addition of physical pain. It was always this way. It hurt my chest because it made my heart pound with such fright and anger, humiliation and hate. I won’t lie about that part. When my father put me in that position, that helpless and degrading position with my head forced back, my neck bared, and his face far too close to mine, I felt as if I had never hated someone more. He had complete control, and he took full advantage of it. He knew I would not fight back or strike him in his face as he struck me, and he used that knowledge. The idea disgusted me. It enraged me. It hurt too.

“Keep hitting me, it doesn’t hurt,” I screamed, knowing it would
bring more pain but not caring. I wanted to try to make him feel some semblance of guilt. I wanted him to see what a monster he was. My back was against a wall—again. This time we were outside, and my back was pressed against the door leading to our basement. The doorknob jabbed into my spine. I remember that we had been arguing about a bike—nothing more than that, just a vague memory.

The day had started well. I know that we had been getting along better than usual. It seemed to happen that way a lot. I felt as if the world was punishing me because each time I started to hope things would improve, it all came crashing down, breaking over my head. The unfairness of it brought me to tears. I loved my father. I love my father. But it is hard to love someone when his fist is clenched around your neck. It is hard to love someone when he slams your head against a wooden wall and hisses, “Bitch!” between gritted teeth. It is so much easier to hate, and so I did. I fought the urge to ram my elbow into his face and run as fast and as far as my legs could carry me. I fought the urge to curl into a ball and sob until my heart broke and I stopped breathing. He was too close. I wanted to throw up from the tears choking me and the smell of his breath filling my nose again. The bridge of his hat pressed into my forehead, leaving an angry red line. He was telling me that I was wrong, telling me that I needed to learn when to keep my mouth shut. He “believes” in freedom of speech. He is a liar, a hypocrite. He plays a man of peace, a believer of freedom. He is a liar, a hypocrite. I remained against that wall for a long time. His hard grip hurt my neck and left my breath short and painful. I remember protesting this treatment, but my words were ridiculously garbled from the pressure. I was helpless. Again.

At some point, you grow somewhat numb to these things. Once a beast is subject to enough pain, the pain can be blocked, pushed into the background and ignored. My father never left a mark on my face, or a bruise on my body. He struck just hard enough to make my ears ring, just hard enough to punctuate and accentuate his words with a sharp slam that ached for no more than twenty minutes after his hand left my head. I was used to worse. I experienced worse physical pain each week in my martial arts classroom, where I have suffered bruises, sprains, dislocated fingers, hard falls and a battered face.

It is important to emphasize that I do not consider what my father did to me beating, per se. It was abuse, physical and emotional. It hurt more than a deep and bleeding cut. It hurt more than any physical pain I have yet experienced in my short life, which isn’t saying much, but it continues to hurt. It continues to feed off of memories. Though it has been two years since the last blow, I cannot look my father in the eye without flinching. Without even trying, I avoid eye contact. Almost automatically, I leave a room hurriedly when I suspect I may be alone with him. There is a cold distance between us that I feel will never be resolved. This distance, I believe, is almost necessary.
for peace. Once I became cold and emotionally indifferent to the tiny daggers he threw at my face and body with each spiteful word, I was able to pull away and end the vicious cycle of hate, spite, fear and bruised hearts.

My mother was my only ally in the two-year war. She told me time and time again that I needed to be humble, and that he was my father and deserved more submissiveness and respect. Her words made me sick. I am a proud person. I was not made for submissiveness. I have a fiery temper, a passion, a deep-seated sense of right and wrong. My brothers once sneered at my temperament, dubbing me “rattlesnake” and “redhead,” because I lashed out at those who tread on me and grew crimson as a firecracker when I was angered. Later, an ex-Marine in my martial arts class named me his “pack of wild dogs” because at fifteen I could hold my own against him in a match. He could never catch me, and he rarely got past my defenses. To everyone in my world, I was tough. I was strong, angry, hard, and nasty when I wanted to be. Maybe this was my father’s justification, for tearing me down and trying his best to break me. No one could hurt me. How could they? Even when I was being hit in the face, dragged across the room, or beaten over the ass with a metal mop handle while I teetered on the edge of the porch railing, I still burned with an anger that everyone could see. In truth, it was more of a deep sense of hurt and shame. I was too proud to be treated as I was. I kept up a façade of toughness to hide my shame, to hide how much he was hurting me. At least in the beginning.

Towards the end, after two years, it did start to break me. At that point even my brothers—who still ignore my sadness due to how uncomfortable it makes them—could see that I was finally crumbling. I was fourteen when it began and sixteen when he said the words that ended it all. I was tired. I was sadder than I had ever been. I remember wandering down to the creek one evening after another fight. I was hurting so badly, and wanted it all to go away. I remember that there was a large tree in the woods near the creek that was easy to climb. I started toward it with every intent of scaling it and jumping. I thought that even if I didn’t break my neck, I would surely break a bone and then maybe my father would realize how much he had hurt me. Maybe he would be sad, and maybe he would show that he loved me again. At this point I wasn’t entirely sure that he did.

I never climbed the tree. I had almost reached it when a voice split the cold evening air, calling my name. I paused. Then I continued, not really caring who was looking for me.

“Chandra!” The voice came again, closer than before. Bushes shifted, and a few twigs on the dry forest floor snapped. I stopped again and turned around, making my face blank and uncaring in preparation for the assault. My oldest brother emerged from the thick walls of dead plants all around us. “What are you doing down here?” he asked me tentatively, eyeing my still, yet tear-streaked face. “Come back to the house.”

“Why should I?” I asked. “No one wants me there. What’s the
point?” I meant it. At the time, I could not think of a single reason why I needed to be in my own home. The endless fighting between my father and me affected everyone. They all wanted it to stop. I did too, I just didn’t know how. Maybe if I climbed that tree...

“You’re being stupid,” he said, not unkindly. There was a pleading note in his voice. “Just come back. I want you there, and so does everyone else. Even Dave.” He was watching my face for some reaction.

I almost laughed. “No he doesn’t,” I snorted. Dave was my father. My siblings and I never called him Dad.

When I was much younger, I was still scared of him. My brothers and I had all heard him and my mom fight before, and, at times, it had been terrifying. He used to hit her, too. They had both screamed and slammed doors and broken things around the house. But when they weren’t fighting, it was impossible not to see how much they loved each other, and how deeply. It remains the thing I love most about my father: his love for my mother. It still brings out his soft side, and, in a way, I think that falling in love with my mother saved him. My father had a hard life—much harder than mine. He left home at fifteen due to issues with his own father. I have never met the man, and don’t care to. He is racist and intolerant to the core; to him, my mother is bad enough because she is black. My siblings and I are abominations in his eyes because we are “mixed.”

“Come on,” my brother said. He might have taken my arm to pull me along (an unusual gesture of affection). I don’t remember. In fact, I can’t recall another detail from that day. It must have been quiet—the quiet after yet another storm.

The end of the war came during a car ride with my family. It was Sunday, and we cajoled my father into doing something very out of the ordinary: we planned a trip to a local restaurant so that we could all spend time together. I was excited. Things had been better lately. We had definitely been fighting less, and a foolish hope was awakening in me again. We were driving slowly down the winding road to the restaurant, discussing what we would order when we arrived. I must have started a conversation with my father, something rare indeed those days. I still don’t know where it went wrong. Perhaps we were never meant to get along. It was starting to seem that way. The shouting started. It was mostly my father this time—I was tired, and I just wanted to go to the restaurant. I don’t know who started the fight, but I know how it ended. He stopped the car. He screamed in my face and struck me. He reached back and grabbed me, pushed me. But as usual, the angry, hate-filled words were the true blows. I cried with the humiliation and hurt. After all this time, I still couldn’t control my tears. Break my nose. Crush my finger. Throw me in the dirt and punch me in the face. I won’t cry. Hate me when you’re meant to love me and watch the tears come in an instant. I am weak in so many ways. I am not tough on the inside. I am soft.
This softness has brought me so much grief, and so much joy.

My mother managed to calm him, but the damage was done. This time I felt truly broken. We were turning around. We were going home. Everyone was disappointed, even disgusted that our fighting had destroyed the calm once again. I felt that I was to blame. I had fallen off my seat during my father’s attack, and I curled in the small space between the car door and the car seat. I screamed, sobbing because it hurt so much and I couldn’t stop. I cried more pathetically and with more pain and emotion than I had ever allowed anyone to see. I felt like an animal, or worse, something disgusting and lowly. The car jerked, and my mother stopped trying to calm me as my dad came to an abrupt halt with a loud “Fuck!” I quieted, but remained on the floor and could not stop the tears. The car was moving slowly, noisily. Something was wrong. My dad continued to cuss. He had been driving very quickly in his fit of rage and had taken a turn far too sharply. He said something about the transmission. Again, this was my fault, I thought.

“It will be okay, sweetie.” My mom’s voice was there above my head, and I wanted to cling to her. I was done. Finished. This had to stop. No more fighting.

We made it home. I don’t recall how, but we made it. It was only a few miles anyway. I crept to my room. As always, I had a throbbing headache. I didn’t want anyone to see my face. I was so humiliated by my lack of control. Why couldn’t I just be strong, actually strong for a change, and not let him get to me? Why did I always snap? Hell, why did he always snap? He was the adult. He was the father. This was his responsibility. But I decided to stop thinking of it that way. I decided that I was done. I was tired, and I just didn’t care anymore. He had pushed me to my limit, and I decided that no matter what he did I would remain cold. I would make a mask, and I would leave it on until all of this stopped. Each time I felt anger rising to choke me, begging to get out and wreak more havoc, I would smother it and clear my head. I would act calm no matter how I felt inside, for that is true strength. You cannot simply follow what you want to do, or even what you feel is the best or most right thing to do.

Life just isn’t like that. Any relationship involves give and take—you have to be willing to step back and not always insist that you are right, no matter how much you believe you are. That is what I decided to do, and I did it. I underwent a huge change after that realization. I have become a calm and level-headed person. I am so different from the raging, rebellious fifteen-year-old I once was. I learned more about tolerance and communication during those years than I have during any other time of my life. I grew so much, and I am a stronger, more tolerant person due to the experience. That is not to say that all of these changes occurred in a single dramatic moment of realization after the fight in the car. It took at least another three months for things to begin to approach normal, and there were more fights after that. But these were different. These were “normal” fights. Because one thing did
change suddenly and dramatically that evening.

I was sitting on my bed. I could hear my parents’ voices from downstairs. My mother’s was low, soft, and a bit pleading. I thought at first that my father’s was angry as usual, but there was something different about it this time. It was too quiet. There was a tone in his voice that I have only heard a few times in my life. Shame. I listened more intently and my heart stilled. Then he said it: The words that changed everything.

“I’m never going to hit her again.”

He never did. I can only guess as to what caused this change of heart. Perhaps he had reached the same conclusion I did: it just wasn’t worth it anymore. The fighting, the screaming, the endless war of wills that had been pushing us apart more and more with each passing week—it had reached a peak, a crescendo of rage that was always boiling just below the surface. The incident in the car was proof enough of that. I had done very little to provoke him; perhaps one misplaced word, or a look, or a tone of voice that had rubbed him the wrong way. Maybe he recognized at last how quick to anger he was, how easily he lashed out in response to the smallest quiver of defiance on my part. I can only speculate on what the cause was, but perhaps knowing is not so important. The important part is that storm passed. The rage is gone, hiding somewhere deep inside. The corners have dissolved, and they lack a threatening air as I move past them in the lovely wooden house my father built with his own hands all those years ago. It would be a lie to say that all is well, but is it ever? We can only be grateful for what little good there is, because no matter what you do, or who you are, a shadow of some sort will always darken your way. You can only walk armed with the knowledge that it will come, and bask in the light when it shows its face.