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Wearing My Genes: Understanding What Happened

by Kelly Palmer

My younger brother, Logan was having an overnight play date, so it was just Mum and I at home that night. The loud music was irksome, so I found Mum in her room and asked her to turn the volume down. She was lying still, exact. I crawled onto the bed and stared, waiting for movement. Was she dead? I tugged at her eyelids, convinced that by forcing activity, mobility would ensue. I patted her wobbly cheek, "Mum, Mum." I called out with greater intensity, tugging at her hair and pushing at her torso. I was convinced that this would resuscitate her, but she remained still. Unable to give up, I ran out into the kitchen and returned with a beer bottle. The cold glass stung my clammy hand as I climbed to her side. Without hesitation, I pressed the bottle hard into her cheek, not daring to take a breath. Shocked by the chill, she pulled back and looked at me, expressionless. Every ounce of my weight shifted. She was alive. If fear was darkness, then she had turned on the light and vanquished the shadows with a warm glow. But the light soon blew, and I was afraid again.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"But-"

"Get off, go to your room. Jesus Christ."

"Mum..."

I could not believe it. I was so sure that I had achieved something good. I saved her, or if not, I settled my worst fear, and I was being punished for it. How could she hate me? Her furious expression persisted, so I slumped into my room to spend the night questioning her reaction.

When I was old enough to understand, her alcoholism did not scare me. Her depression did. Holding her hair back was easy- talking her out of suicide was not. I would plead with the hysterical woman, reminding her that she is needed and loved very much. By 3am she would stop crying, tell me she loved me, and fall asleep on the couch. This occurred bi-monthly, and was otherwise ignored by friends and family. Some friends of Mum were aware, and would offer to babysit Logan and I for the night. These confidantes assured my brother and I that it was not our fault; "She was like this before she had kids". Nevertheless, we were involved in her illness from an early age and were often the subject of her temper.

Logan and I saw Mum as two different people. One was good to us. She never pressured us into anything; she inspired creativity, played, and told us "I love you" everyday. The other was an insecure, deeply unhappy, paranoid alcoholic. Her darker layer was forged from a miserable, abusive childhood. My Grandmother denied such claims and converted into a Jehovah's Witness, which supposedly alleviated herself of all blame. My Grandfather ignored any letters from Mum after she left home. This lack of explanation, apology or closure stirred feelings of depression, loneliness and distrust of all people. Mum simply played with the cards she was dealt, and often lost.

Despite her "one goal in life to raise great kids," she often resented

parenthood: Or rather, single-parenthood. This was another feat that us kids did not appreciate. My brother and I were so consumed by the idea of not having a Father around, that on some subconscious level we despised Mum for not providing one. I should have known that when the Father of your first child tells you to have an abortion, and the Father of the second hits you, raising your kids alone is not a choice. Mum needed me to understand that, but I was too young to believe that anything outside of a plutonic family could be acceptable.

When I turned 13, Mum and I fought regularly. She suspected everything: stealing, sex and drugs. It was not a coincidence that these confrontations were made after a few bottles of passion pop. She was paranoid because that's what she did when she was my age; she was mad because she cared and wanted to stop me; she was irrational because she was drunk. Each time I promised that I was either working or at school, but Mum seemed to think that a day was longer than 24 hours. Absolutely convinced that I was lying, she would call her friends and tell them to take me away before I ended up in jail. To dramatise the scene Mum would add "Kelly called me a whore- I think she's going to hit me." It is disturbing to be vilified by a parent you want so desperately to be proud of you.

She could not see that I was an over-achiever. Due to her paranoia of my villainy, Mum was oblivious to the trouble that my little brother was involved with. The police had caught Logan in possession of marijuana, fighting and scratching cars. Logan's grades were low, and he had regular fits of anger- most likely as a result of Mum's hatred of men and obsession over me. Once, Logan confided, "She just doesn't listen". Our combined fear, irritation and confusion brought Logan and I closer together as we grew older. I somewhat took over the role as Logan's parent and offered plenty of incentives and disincentives to modify his behaviour. Mum did not challenge this bond- she was comforted by our alliance, even if it was against her. She would repeat, "If anything happens to me, at least you and Logan will always have each other." Logan too took comfort in our friendship, and Mum's erratic nature did not bother him as much. I however, was unhappy with the extra responsibilities, and as the stress of school and work picked up, I had little tolerance for Mum's eccentricities.

Our last fight was September 2010. I came home from work that night to find Mum drunk and screaming abuse at someone over the phone. She shouted "You're such a bastard- why won't you come have a drink with me? You're with my kids all the time- why don't you want to know me? You must be a paedophile! I hope you die." She was yelling at the owner of the local general store, a man who just happened to be Logan's employer and mine. If it had been anyone else on the phone I would have pulled the cord out of the wall, and apologised in the morning, but this man just watched his wife lose a battle with cancer. This man had been very good to me since I had been working for his family; giving Logan and I time off for school work, plenty of hours and was a dear friend. Mum was not just attacking this poor man, but she was attacking the notion of Logan and I belonging to a family that was solid, functional, and cared for us. This was the night I absolutely lost it.

"What the hell are you doing? Are you insane, you crazy bitch?" I pulled the phone off her and slammed it onto the receiver. "How could you say that? Don't you realise you could have just fucked up everyone's life?" I could not believe that she was capable of intentionally hurting anyone like that. She

had always seemed ignorant and obnoxious before, but this was malicious.

Mum glared back at me, "You're not my daughter. You're a monster."

"You've been saying that about me my whole life anyway, time to start acting like one."

She took a swipe and missed. I can't recall where it came from- maybe I was just sick of taking her abuse and looking after her, but I wanted to be hit. I dropped to my knees and taunted, "Fine! Hit me, come on. Hit me now." I look back now and am so ashamed. I can't imagine what Mum must have been feeling when I said that, but something in her brain rolled over. She repeatedly hit me across the head. I could tell she was mad, but somehow confused- like a child tearing apart a toy because it's not working.

"Is that it? You can do better than that. Hit me!" She hit me again. "Is that what you wanted? Do you feel strong now? Do you feel big and powerful now that you hit your daughter?"

She pushed me over. Suddenly, I did not want to be hit anymore. I ran into my room and shut the door behind me. Through the door I heard Mum say, "You're leaving. Pack a bag, you're living with your Grandmother." This to her was the worst possible punishment, and I was not going to let her give it to me. On my mobile, I rang my boss "I am so sorry about Mum- she is drunk and delusional. Look, we just had a really bad fight, can you pick me up?"

On my way out the door I ran into Logan coming home: "Where are you going?"

Mum answered for me: "She's leaving because she hates us both." Mum was hurt because I exploited her illness to claim moral superiority- I was able to recall that I did not touch her... but I still hurt her. Mum needed to return that pain so she did not feel so vulnerable. She knew that I loved Logan more than anything, and used him to throw the last punch.

"Kelly says she does not love us anymore and she is never coming back."

"How dare you?" A voice exploded out of me that I did not recognise. It was deep and it echoed years of repression. I reached into my pocket and handed a fifty-dollar note to Logan. "If you need to leave tonight for any reason, call a cab.

He nodded in comprehension and tucked it away. I walked out onto the street where my boss was waiting for me, and we drove off.

There were no heroes that night. Although I would like to think that it was Mum who kicked me out, I know that I was leaving anyway. I was unhappy and though I was seventeen when I left, I had given up years ago. I soon confided in a co-worker and lived with her for a few months before moving to Brisbane. Not long after, Logan decided that he did not want to be there either. He moved in with a friend. We had left Mum completely alone. She fought the urge to kill herself for seventeen years, only to have Logan and I abandon her when we decided playing caretaker was too hard. I tried to justify my guilt by assuring myself that I never would have made it out intact if I had not left when I did. But how much longer would I have been there anyway? Four, maybe five months until I started university? I could have

stuck with it and left on good terms.

I used to think that because she was my Mum, she was supposed to take care of me- not the other way around. I look back now, and see how much she really did look after me. I just could not see it through the depression and the drinking. I'm ashamed that it took me this long to really be proud of Mum for raising my brother and I, for having stuck around when she didn't always want to, and when no one else would.

I make an effort to be there for her now. I often stay in my old home over the weekend, and we talk on the phone. The reconnection is taking time, but it's worth it when you are standing to lose your Mother. I still don't know if leaving was the right thing. Maybe it takes distance to realise how much you need to be together. I'm just grateful that Mum, Logan and I can be friends. We owe each other that much.

Kelly Palmer is studying at the Queensland University of Technology where she is majoring in Creative and Professional Writing. While reading and essay writing consume the daylight hours, her nights are spent on articles for high school and university newsletters. Through the plotting of her memoirs, Kelly is beginning to understand herself- where she has come from, where she is going and where she wants to be. She has begun submitting short stories for publication and hopes one day to work as an Academic.

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