

Issue #1:
Relationships

ALL

The

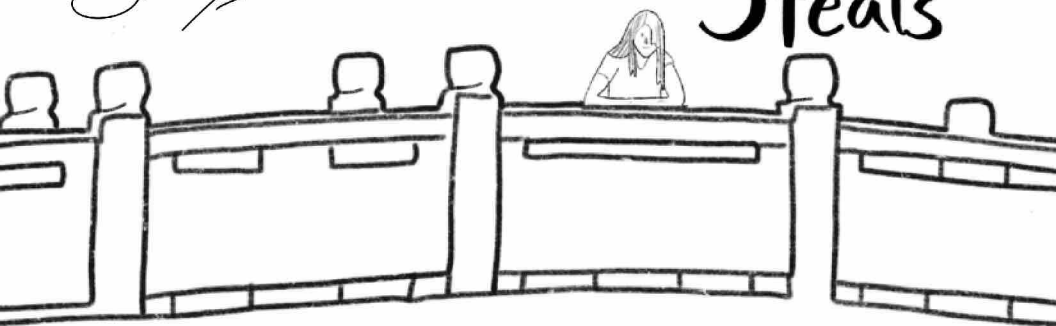
Things

Abuse

by: Tor Lowell

Bitterleaf Hymnal

Steals



1

Trigger Warnings: mentions of sexual abuse by a sibling, mental abuse, and suicide.

I've never been one of those people that makes a lasting impression. It's always seemed as though the shape of me can't hold in someone's mind.



In the second grade my best friend was a girl named Amanda. We were inseparable. She was the first friend whose phone number I memorized.

I don't know why we stopped being friends, but in junior high, I sat down at a table next to her.

2

She glanced at me for a moment,
said, "you seem familiar,
did we know each other?"

...I still had her phone
number memorized

(I still have
it memorized.)



Time goes weird, when you're abused
You remember all the friends you
had because they were bright spots
in the middle of all the pain. And fear.

I know so many names that have long
forgotten me, memories that cut
through the quiet, empty isolation,
vivid days no one else has need to
hold onto.

3

I wasn't an unpopular kid, really, not as a small child, but with every year that passed, I grew out of sync with those around me.

Friends defined by handball and hopscotch and catch and ghost stories become friends defined by talking and affection and everything a skittish, dissociated, traumatized kid can't be.

Adults didn't seem to know what to do with this grimy, untalkative kid with a jittery, fidgeting presence.

What can you ask of children?

4

I latched onto anyone I knew who would talk to me, even though I knew sometimes it was pity.

(don't befriend people for reasons you wouldn't want them to friend you for.)

(They always know, anyway. And it feels terrible.)

But I often felt like a polite
afterthought.

I had nothing interesting to offer. I wasn't allowed to read or watch a lot of things, because my family were the kind of conservative Christians

5

that thought it was wrong
to participate in "sinful" media.

I had to keep my life separate.

Its not as though I could
answer:

with: "How are you doing?"
"Well, my brother was
arrested for sexually
abusing a kid...
like he did
to me."

This was not something I was
allowed to tell people.

I just had to live like I was a good
Christian girl who didn't even know
what sex was.

6

There was nothing for anyone to hold onto. I contained so many secrets, I appeared devoid of personality.



By the end of 9th grade, I was barely hanging on. That's the thing about an abusive, dysfunctional family - my mother couldn't acknowledge the ways I was hurt and messed up. The kind of good parents who would help their kids aren't the ones trying to hurt them.

7

I was an anxious, dissociated wreck. I could barely concentrate on schoolwork. I figured out, when I was 11, that I could hide in my own head with vivid daydreams of someone loving and rescuing me. It was the only thing that cut through the misery.

So after 9th grade, I convinced my mother to let me attend a local independent study high school.

Everyone is aware that, come graduation, you drift away from a lot of your high school friends. Without forced, day-to-day proximity, nothing sticks.

This was my graduation.

8

Life got eerily quiet, after that. I could go such a long time without talking to anyone.

Even at church, I was the kid standing off to the side, speaking only when spoken to, always in a bit of a lost daze. If there were others like me, they were better at hiding it.

To the girl who walked up
to me on Sunday morning
and asked bluntly if I
wanted to be friends, I'm
sorry I said no. I was so
messed up. I regretted
it. I don't even know why
I did it.

9

What I wanted was someone I could talk to. But in the kind of church I was in, joy and cheerfulness were the proof of your relationship with God.

Trauma reactions looked more like sin.



I got a job at the library my senior year of high school, and became friends with my coworker. I could feel how sheltered I was, how little I knew about the world, made worse by isolation. I barely knew how to interact.

10

It took me a long time to learn how to talk. I had to teach myself facial expressions, and how to fit emotion into my voice.

"Oh no, that's so awful."

"Yeah, uh huh, you could try meaning it."

...but I did

It's still a hard one for me.



Graduation was the first time I felt the loss of my choices. I knew I had cut myself off. It felt like nothing. I had no anchor of nostalgia, no sense of loss or love or remembering.

As if I'd been asleep.

11

After high school, I got my first real set of friends. I was an adult drunk on teenage freedom, enamoured with sleepovers and midnight car rides. This was the first time I was starting to gain some independence from my mother, to think that I was allowed to be an individual. Until then I didn't know how much my mother controlled my thoughts.

My mother says
my mother says
my mother says...
were the only
things allowed to
be true.

(I always bring up
the time my friend
said, "your mother is
mentally abusive."
And I shot back,
instantly, without thinking,
"she wouldn't think that.")

12

My brother got off parole.

Everything was
terrifying.

I was losing friends.

I was suicidal.

I didn't want to
see him anymore.

(Mom: Did he rape you?
Me:

👉

Mom: It doesn't matter
what he did, you still have
to forgive him.)

I lost more friends.

The world was nothing
but clear, flat panic
and loneliness.



It's easy to lose friends when you're suicidal. There is a wall that builds between you and everyone else.

An Aside

You are desperately needing others. And yet even in the presence of friends you feel like you're drowning in the nothing.

That's the other way trauma steals from you. Even when you have people who care about you.

you're still trapped.

you're still alone.

And the cruelty of it all is that the less people can reach you, the less they know how to reach you.

you start to slip away.

14

I left.

You lose everything, when
you leave.

People don't understand how much kinder leaving is to staying. How much you lose - extended family, the love your immediate family had, the community that surrounded you.

You don't live in the same narrative space as them. You could stay, and destroy yourself in lies, or destroy them with a truth they probably wouldn't believe.

Or you can leave, harm yourself to not be destroyed, and let them have whatever story they need.

15

I can fit now, in whatever narrative they could possibly construct.



Because how do you tell your family how cruel your mother treated you? How do you ask them to detach themselves from the ones they love, especially when you're the one that needs to not see the ones that hurt you anymore?

(My cousin found my blog detailing how awful my mother had been treating me. She then hung out with me to convince me of how great my mother was)

So you give them up.

you give it all up.

16

I changed my name because my family was a matching set.

Because I wanted to be my own.

(And because I'm non-binary.)

But to do that means accepting, another time, loss.

Friends didn't know who I was anymore, and dropped me on Facebook.

And to find them would require explaining more than I want.

I needed to do this for myself, but it still feels like loss. Like one more thing that puts distance between me and the rest of the world.

One more crack.



I hold onto too many people. That's what the trauma did, its isolating, lonely effect makes for a memory of names and faces that would have no need to hold onto me.

This is my first completed zine. I don't know what will come of it, if anything. I have these wants of grandeur, this hope I'm starting down a road of community, purpose, meaning, that there is magic in all of this. And an end to isolation.

But I fear that one day I will have to run again, leave everything behind, or that I am still too much the dissociated, skittish one standing off to the side.

And I fear that on my death bed, I'll call out to an empty room, and the world that has lived long and far beyond me will at most only be able to look at me and say,

"You look familiar.

Do I know you?"

Before moving on.

Thanks for reading!
I write about:

abuse, child sexual abuse,
complicit & toxic Christianity
harm in the name of
silence & community
the anti-apocalypse
the rejection of the end times

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