

OPEN BOOK INTIMACY

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I was born into this world by accident in a city called Oshawa, a suburb about 45 minutes east of Toronto, as the result of a double affair which broke the family apart. My darker complexion made my mother's husband vividly aware that I was not his own, and for that unwanted. I would forever be cast aside as "the ugly one that ruined everything". This is likely the reason I'd eventually become an open book amongst those closest to me, always willing to bare myself raw if in doing so I'm able to make others feel at ease, as if I'm a "safe space" not without my own flaws.

Things changed drastically when my little brother was born, five years after me. My mother went in, but a shell of her came out. The warmth of her eyes was gone, replaced by a distance I didn't understand. Nowadays, it would be recognized and diagnosed, but at the time it just became a rapid downward spiral, shredding apart everything she had created for herself. Our family went from upper middle class to broken and living in public housing, unable to afford groceries, within five years. I became the protector and mother-figure for my brother, literally hiding him from the abuses I'd endure on behalf of both of us in hopes that he'd never remember those years.

Due to past trauma, drug dependency and a weakening mental state, my mother turned to sex work, which only dug her deeper into herself. My siblings were chosen to live with other alternate relatives, while I was instead bounced between foster homes and a house that no longer felt like a home. While my friends' families were playing board games, planning camping trips and watching movies together, my mother and I had a knock system for when she had a client over, so I knew to stay in my room so as to not make them "uncomfortable". Sex was never a taboo topic but love and intimacy were a sign of weakness that others would just use against you eventually.

All of my friends and their parents knew. Some even used her services. Pretending regularly that I didn't understand their comments or hear the jokes, though they always hurt. I couldn't

understand why things couldn't be different for me, as if I was undeserving in some way and it wasn't my place to question it.

At the same time, my older sister – known by many as “the pretty one” – faced her own struggles with mental health and an injury that changed her life's path. The once top ballerina with hopes of becoming a lawyer turned instead to stripping, and then eventually became an adult film star. Marilyn Monroe was her idol and she held her sexuality high over men, but she did not understand the darker side and the toll it could take.

When I lost my virginity and my mother found out, she convinced me that she had also slept with him after me and that he didn't actually want me, it was just an act. That he was using me, and to remember I wasn't special. A core moment of intimacy and vulnerability that should have been just ours, taken and perverted. It took me 20 years to find out from him that it wasn't true, a lie intended to lower my self-worth and distance us. It worked for a period of time. I'd go for the partners I knew weren't ready for a relationship, the ones I knew would cheat, deny being with me or tell me no one else would want me, thinking that's forever all I deserved. There were glimpses of light at times though: the boy who just wanted to cuddle or be close, the one who wanted to dance outside without music, or the never-ending game of Twenty Questions with the one that blushed when I entered a room.

Both my mother and sister tried to teach me that sexuality and sexual acts were to be used only to gain power in any situation, and that you just needed to numb yourself because it was all meaningless. With an always-hovering case of body dysmorphia, I knew this wasn't going to be my path. Due to my upbringing, I became empathic almost to a fault and wanted more than anything to feel seen and understood, and with hope I could bring the same to someone else before anything physical could happen. I allowed myself to be open and vulnerable again, and perhaps because of this, I've realized over the years that I tend to be the one sought out for leadership in many situations, the one people think has everything together...but it did not come without years of hard work and inner reflection.

Now at 40 years of age and after 21 years with my husband, the father of my two children, I can say that the cycles have been broken. My children have never known a time of feeling unloved by us. Their standards of how they are to be treated and what they are worth are high and remarkable, something I'm in pure awe of. Hugs and feelings are regularly shared

and acknowledged. We used books as a natural way to bring up topics they would deal with in their day to day lives. As each day passes, I feel more comfortable in my own skin, truly seen for who I am and for the effort it's taken to get here. I tell my story not as a cautionary tale of woes and hardships, but instead the triumphs in forming one's path towards a future of our own choosing.
