

Birth to Age ten

Born in Kono the heart of the diamond mines in Sierra Leone Leone West Africa, my childhood is a blur. Like a vast expanse of desert I only remember landmarks. Memory I have since come to learn is a trickster. Do we interpret things based on perception? If so can those perceptions be held up as truth when perception itself is rife with so many layers and colors? Is memory selective?

By the time I was 10 I had been touched, battered, butchered, (female genital mutilation)more on that later) sent away to boarding school, lost my papa and had my name changed to assume the name of my mother's current husband.

Much of what I recall afterwards remain those things that survivors do to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Blanking out all thought. Numbing oneself into forgetfulness. Numbing one's heart to bear the demands of a wounded psyche. Tools .

I did not know that then but my concept of time is almost non-existent . I know that now. I do not remember years, I remember events. Some people can tell you clearly who they were or what they did at age five, or six, or age 3. I can't. I remember highlights . Like words in my ears, "you're a bastard, a whore, you'll never amount to anything." I remember sounds like musical notes reverberating in my ears from being slapped so hard . I remember the flash of lightning darting across my eyes and the taste of my own blood from the tender childlike flesh breaking under the force of an enraged adult's hand.

I remember hiding inside myself so far away it would take thirty six more years to begin the journey to finding my way back to myself. I remember wondering why I had been born in a world so confusing so dark so fearful. I remember the feeling of being all wrong, and trying to understand why and wondering how I was going to make myself right somehow. I decided I was going to be the best child, the brightest, the funniest, the most hard-working the most polite. I would be the perfect child then all this would go away and I would be back alone with my mother and she would love me again.

I worshipped the ground she walked on. No one was more beautiful, no one could compare. She was my sun. I woke up to her radiance. I lived for the moments when I was in some way connected to her, with her. Perhaps just being in the same room, watching her cook, helping me dress up for school.

I remember an incident that would both literally and figuratively leave a mark on me forever. It was one of those glorious African moon-lit nights. Too beautiful to describe. The sky bright with millions of stars shining like smiles. Creating an otherworldly feel. Fireflies occasionally flying so close you could almost catch them as they danced flashing their lights on and off. It was so bright that if the long shadows cast over by the grandfather trees had not darkened parts of the street one would have thought it was day time. It was as if the world was happy with itself and from deep within it's heart, glowed.

One of my aunts Lily Bongo was admitted to the hospital and my mother and I were going to visit her. Strangely I don't remember meeting anyone on the road. It seemed as though God

had given us permission to have the whole universe to ourselves. I remember holding my mother's hand swinging to some silent music and laughing. I remember feeling like a princess. That every wish I had ever had had been granted. Suddenly I screamed out as something sharp and unexpected cut into my foot and my enchantment was broken. My mother looked down worriedly and asked what the matter was as I pointed to my foot. There crawling away was a scorpion. I had been bitten. She picked me up and put me on her back typical of the way African mothers carry their young. Blood coursed down my foot as my mother ran. She knew scorpions are dangerous and sometimes their poison fatal. I remember feeling the bones of her hips as I bounced up and down her back as she ran hard and fast towards the very hospital where we were going to visit my aunt. After the initial shock and pain of the sting, I felt nothing except the most profound feeling of happiness. I was on my mother's back. I was safe. She loves me. She's running with me so something bad does not happen to me. I am the luckiest child in this magical world. Pain forgotten, I feel alive, whole. Right.

I still have the scar from that night though faded and much smaller and I am still chasing that sublime feeling of being loved, being wanted by my mother. No amount of self-loving and self-mothering encouraged by my therapists over the years has succeeded in ending that chase. I have never again since that night felt that joy, that happiness, that connectedness, that oneness with her- that feeling of being her world, her everything.

Perhaps it was that night that set the tone for my mistrust of things looking right and feeling right- of trusting happiness. Something catastrophic, will happen for sure. I will find myself in situation after situation all through life playing out this scenario. Happiness, catastrophe. Happiness catastrophe. Have I attracted this mad dance to myself by my belief born of that incident with the scorpion those many years ago? Is this simply the nature of life to give you one thing and take another, to give you happiness and then replace it with grief?

I have wondered over the years does my mother remember this incident? Does she know that this is the only childhood memory I have of her where I felt normal, happy, wanted, loved, completely?