

In the Green Room

It was a green room. What made it look green were the curtains which extended down from high white ceilings. The carpet was green. I remember that well, because my face looked down on it while uncle Sam fondled me. And I can see now the legs of the couches, like white lion's paws. The couches themselves trying very hard to be upper-class in a middleclass home.

It all happened in my grandmother's house. My parents were housesitting while she and grandpa were away. Grandpa was frequently going on business trips overseas. They left my uncle with us. He was sixteen and I was six. I don't remember how it started, but I remember how it became routine.

My parent's relationship at the time was hot or cold, never normal. My dad was either intensely romantic or violently explosive. He scared me when he got real quiet. I was afraid to speak then. I knew that it didn't matter what I said. He could be chewing his food one second then fly across the table and backhand you the next. He was always "protecting his dignity". The subject of an argument between my parents was rarely the point, it was always about his dignity being threatened. And now he was unemployed, living in my grandmother's house, a woman whom he despised and who despised him. My father is not a man of action. He would rather lay on a couch and stew in his hatred for months, years even, before he makes one move to improve his situation. It was just easier to blame my mother. But I don't want to paint him as a villain either. I guess he's troubled, but its not something you could

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ever put your finger on like with most people, except maybe that he was always nostalgic for his childhood back in Lebanon.

He lost a brother there in a shooting, but when he was older. Something about his childhood. He just couldn't leave it. We use to go to the beach sometimes and he would carry me and look out across the sea. His eyes would glaze over and suddenly he was no longer with me, in the moment. Maybe my father left his spirit somewhere in the rolling green valleys and fields of dancing gold, in the place of his birth, in the place of my birth, Baalbeck, Lebanon. He was in his office now almost all day writing on those big yellow notepads. There must have been at least 200 of them laying on the floor, sitting on his desk, piled on the bookshelves, filled with line after line of Arabic writing which I could no longer understand. That bothered him.

My mother, affectionately called ma-ma, sacrificed everything she had and was for her family. She *was* a man of action. I say man, because she had to be both mother and father in the responsible sense. She couldn't be home all day to watch me. The thought that her sixteen-year-old brother could molest her 6-year-old daughter was about a million miles off her radar. Who could imagine such a thing? Who would want to?

She was an elementary school teacher, so she got home later than me. My dad was taking classes downtown, trying to get his PhD when all this happened, so he would often spend his nights at the library. When I came home it was just me and my uncle. He treated me with love so I trusted him. But then things started to

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change. He began to tell me things about how people who loved each other showed their love in different ways. He led me into the green room with the green curtains and the green carpet, the afternoon light shining through, the gentle wind rustling the green fabric. Everything in the room was always clean, spotless, because it was never used. The couches were layered with plastic to keep off the dust. This room was reserved for guests. He slowly pulled my underwear down and unzipped his corduroy pants, placing his penis from behind and rubbing and wiggling it on my vagina. I couldn't understand what was happening to me, but it felt wrong, dirty. And the cleanliness of this green room magnified my shame as this thing became an afterschool ritual. I didn't dare tell. I was sure I had done something wrong, but my mother began to notice me getting paler, keeping to myself, not smiling or laughing anymore, something I always did.

I buried it all down deep, like it wasn't really happening to me, like it was in a dimension outside reality. This helped me to cope. I was young, but wise, never naïve to the fact that adults could do terrible things to children. I had witnessed teachers humiliate the weak just because they could. I began to wonder whether or not people enjoyed hurting each other. School often felt like a prison to me. There was always a particular adult who was hell-bent on breaking our spirits. I learned many things in school, reading, writing and arithmetic where the least of this knowledge. I learned about people, about authority, about politics and exploitation. You may say I was too young to pick up on such things, but I wasn't. the more I was

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underestimated, the more I saw. Innocence is a brief time in a child's life and then it is a struggle to hold on to. I knew that what my uncle did could kill it forever if I let it. It was then that my will was formed, turned stubborn against this rape of my childhood and vehement to keep it.

I eventually told my mother, but I don't remember this day at all, where ma-ma insists that she cursed and screamed at my uncle and that my father threatened to kill him. No, I don't remember it. My uncle never touched me again, but we stayed in that house for another month so we could save on rent. Between my mental health and cheap rent, I guess I was on the losing end. And then; the worst of all betrayals, absolute silence by all, but a silence so high in pitch, it shattered my six-year-old soul.

I sat at the dinner table with my head down, secretly lifting my eyes to stare at faces, arms, gestures, that to me no longer represented reality, but a world in which people could go on with life after committing horrible acts and not show even a wisp of truth or self-realization. What could I do? Was I to lay down and die? I was acutely aware that my innocence was taken and that to survive I would have to find a way all on my own of regenerating it. It took unbelievable will and a perfect stubbornness to never be taken advantage of by adults again. My parents ceased to be gods and became human and frail. I had to look outside my family for the strength to save the child almost lost. I did not want to become like my father, get stuck, lose hope, be forever trapped in that green room.

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I was made to carry the shame and the burden of this devastating denial, this roaring elephant, this lie, for the rest of my life. I saw my uncle every weekend when he visited with my grandma year after year. A fury and mistrust of all adults continued to burn within me and every year the flames stoked higher as at every turn they tried to put my life on some pre-determined track.

All those who were meant to protect me let me down. I felt alone eternally. A kind of survivalist mode set in to help me forget, so I could live. That fury, that rage, it kept my spirit from disappearing, along with books, poetry, and music. I would never really trust anyone again. But despite everything and in the face of it all, I held on to the child inside. I have gone through even worse tragedies in my life and somehow that child refuses to die. That child from that green room, ever defiant, ever a warrior.