

What I Learned From Hating My Mother

Trigger warnings: child sexual abuse, suicidal ideation, parental neglect

I've hated my mother for nine years now. I didn't always — in fact, for the first five years of my life, she was my best friend. She was a single mom, and I was an only child, relishing in her love and devotion. We were thick as thieves...until we weren't.

My earliest memories with my mother include us decorating my bedroom with a full 90s Ballerina Barbie set (featuring the Black Barbie, of course); making hot chocolate with marshmallows on chilly winter nights and cozing up for movie night under a shared blanket; and spending hot summer days eating popsicles at the local park. I loved her more than anything back then. The hate came much later.

My mother isn't a cartoonishly bad person, you see, not in the Disney villain way. She's friendly and helpful and charming, in her own way. She donates to charity and hosts all of the family holiday dinners. She's also happily married to a man she knows sexually abused me throughout my childhood.

This is very difficult for her, she assures me as she books their 24th wedding anniversary trip to Las Vegas, leaving me to care for my youngest sister for a week. It's the hardest thing she's ever done, she cries as she gets dressed for date night. She's doing this for the family — for the kids — she insists, as she commissions a brand new home for the two of them to live in.

It all started with the nightmares.

It was autumn of 2016, and I was starting my senior year as an undergraduate at Yale. The pressure to find a job that matched the prestige of my degree was on. I had recently given up on my childhood dream of becoming a surgeon and was searching for something, anything that I could do after college. The stress of schoolwork, combined with an uncertain future and the recent upset in the 2016 presidential election, had frayed my nerves beyond belief.

I started having nightmares — just one or two initially, then every night for weeks. The nightmare was always the same: me lying in bed with flashes of my mother’s husband standing over me. Soon, the visions progressed, and I started having flashbacks even during waking hours. Despite already being in therapy for depression, anxiety, and an eating disorder, I kept everything to myself for months and tried to convince myself that the memories weren’t real. “Be serious,” I told myself. “This is all simply a product of your stress and the dislike you’ve harbored for your mother’s husband since adolescence. Get a grip.”

Staring down at the thick, non-slip turquoise socks, I silently joked to myself, “When I said get a grip, I did *not* mean a grippy sock vacation.” After an emotional breakdown and a panicked call to my psychologist, I had landed myself a five-day stint in Azkaban (also known as the Yale New Haven Psychiatric Hospital) for suicidal ideation. Upon release, I decided to take the spring semester off and return home to Tennessee. “Maybe a slower lifestyle and being surrounded by family would make things better,” I thought. I was wrong.

The transition back to Tennessee life was smooth initially. I got a part-time job as a receptionist, adopted a German Shepherd puppy, and started feeling like a human again. I spent my days working, training my new canine son, and catching up with old friends, and crashed on my mom’s couch at night. I felt like I could breathe again. I felt like *myself* again. That is, until one morning in late March when I awoke with a jolt and saw my mom’s husband standing over me on the couch with his hand reaching out to touch me, and I panicked.

As soon as he saw my eyes open, my mom’s husband bolted from the room and busied himself with pretending like he hadn’t been about to touch me — just like he had always done in my nightmares. Slowly, and then all at once, it dawned on me that my flashbacks and nightmares weren’t a figment of my imagination. They were memories. Memories that my mind had protected me from for over a decade.

After he left for work, I took a deep breath and approached my mom’s room. I couldn’t make eye contact with her, but I knew I couldn’t keep things to myself any longer. For nearly an hour, I stumbled over my words as I rushed to tell her everything: the childhood memories, the nightmares, the incident from that morning. Afterwards, I

waited with bated breath for her response. After a tearful silence, she announced that she was so sorry that this had happened to me and that she would divorce him as soon as possible. “This is it,” I told myself. “It’s over.”

My mom came in for a hug, and I had a sense of *déjà vu*, suddenly remembering a similar conversation a decade prior. I was twelve years old and had woken to the sound of my mother yelling and crying as she kicked her husband out after seeing him emerge from my sister’s and my room in the middle of the night. “Did he touch you?” she had asked frantically back then. Not knowing how to answer, I murmured, “I don’t know. Maybe?” The only other thing I remember from that decade-old conversation was my mom woefully sighing, “I guess I’ll have to learn how to be single again,” as she took her ring off and tossed it in a drawer. The memory was gone in a flash, and I silently packed my bags and my puppy’s crate and moved into my grandmother’s spare bedroom.

Weeks passed, and my mom still hadn’t confronted her husband. When I asked her about it, she cited my younger siblings’ upcoming statewide standardized testing. “I don’t want to distract them. I’ll do it after,” she said. I nodded in understanding and returned to my grandmother’s house.

Standardized testing came and went, and nothing happened. I went over and asked my mother in person, point-blank, when she planned to divorce him. She couldn’t look me in the eye. “Soon,” she assured me, although she did have a favor to ask. “I know this is hard, but since we already booked everything for your graduation, is it okay if he comes?” I saw red and canceled everyone’s flights and hotel rooms in a rage. Not only would *he* not be at my graduation, but neither would I. That night, I received a text from my mother’s husband for the first time in so long that I had forgotten he even had my number. “I’m sorry for what I did to you. I pray that God can heal our family again.” I typed three words, blocked his number, and threw my phone. “Go to hell.”

As I paced around my room fuming, it dawned on me that my mom would never leave. She hadn’t been single since she was a teenager, and she had no interest in doing that again. The phrase, “I guess I’ll have to learn how to be single again,” bounced around my head like a ball in a pinball machine. That was the moment I decided that I hated my mother.

Weeks turned into months, and months turned into years as my mother and her husband settled into a comfortable rhythm of pretending that none of this had ever happened. They hosted family events, went on holidays, and even dared to invite me to participate in their charade. Some days, I obliged — faking a smile to shield my younger siblings from the knowledge that their father was a pedophile and their mother an enabler. Other times, I spat venom like a cornered snake, calling my mother everything but a child of God and relishing in her selfish tears. I loudly and eagerly blamed her for everything that went wrong in my life, from my depression and anxiety to my inability to keep a job for longer than a year without rage-quitting. I hoped that my fury and self-destruction would guilt her into leaving — or, at the very least, into caring.

The more she enjoyed life and tried to pretend like we were one big happy family, the more miserable I made myself, hoping against hope that seeing her firstborn, her eldest daughter, suffering would activate some maternal instinct and convince her to leave the man who had ruined my childhood. The harder I tried, the less it worked — and the more I hated her.

“Why hate *her*?” you might ask. “Why not *him*, the man who actually abused you?” I’ve asked myself this question more times than I can count, and the only answer that I can ever come up with is this: because she’s my mom. Him? He’s just some guy she met when I was four and married a year later, as I bawled my eyes out in my grandfather’s arms, devastated at the thought of losing my mom’s love and affection.

I never loved *him*. I never adored *him*. I didn’t spend the first five years of my life living alone with *him* as best friends, complete with matching outfits and days snuggled on the couch watching *Dora the Explorer*. Yes, *he’s* the predator — and I place the blame for my abuse solely and squarely on *his* shoulders, where it belongs. *His* abuse stabbed me in the chest and changed me forever. But *her* abandonment twisted the knife.

One day, after years of torturing myself both consciously and unconsciously, I gave up. I couldn’t do it anymore. It was months after my thirtieth birthday, and I had just been diagnosed with ADHD and begun medication. Suddenly, for the first time in my life, I felt like *I* was in charge — not my trauma. I felt a sense of agency that I had never known before, and it dawned on me that, as much as I hated to admit it, no amount of suffering would make my mother choose me over her husband. I could reduce myself to

nothing but a shell of a human being, and she still wouldn't leave. I had been keeping myself miserable in the hopes that it would make my mom suffer, but the only person I'd destroyed was me. She was doing just fine.

I realized that, not only had I been using my suffering as a way to seek my mom's attention, but also as validation that what had happened to me was real and wrong. Because I would never receive justice legally or familially, the only way that I could prove that I had been harmed was to carry my misery in my heart. If I allowed myself to heal and find happiness, then where was the proof that what he'd done was wrong? Surely, if I lived a joyous life, then he and my mother could conclude that all was well and move on with their lives. But the thing is, *they already had*. They had a new home, new cars, and more date nights and vacations than I can count. They were already living consequence-free. The only one suffering was me.

I wish this essay had a tidy, neat ending — perhaps one that ends with me living my best life after a tearful reunion between my mother and me after her husband's long overdue (in my opinion) death. Perhaps he finally feels remorse for his actions and drives off a cliff. Perhaps his useless heart gives out on the factory floor, and he collapses on the spot. Perhaps he gets hit by a bus like Regina George in *Mean Girls*. A girl can only dream.

No, our story is far from tidy. I haven't forgiven my mother or her husband, and I don't plan to. I don't subscribe to the notion that forgiveness is necessary for healing, nor do I think that my abuse was part of some grander plan to make me a stronger person. My mother is still blissfully married to the man who ruined my childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. I'm still picking up the pieces of my life and in therapy for C-PTSD. I still occasionally have nightmares. And I still hate my mother. I guess the therapy hasn't fully kicked in yet.

But, maybe, that's not the point. Maybe the point was always to reclaim agency over my body, my mind, and my life. Three months after my revelation, I quit my soul-crushing job and decided to pursue a career as a writer. I'm currently drafting my first novel, feeling healthier than I have in years, and prioritizing building a new life with my chosen family. I'm exploring new hobbies, strengthening my friendships, and actually

allowing myself to imagine a life where I'm happy, healthy, and free. I'm treating myself the way I wish my mother had treated me all those years — with love, care, and respect.

I suppose the greatest thing I learned from hating my mother is how to love myself.