

FIND
Beauty
WITHIN DARKNESS
STOPPING THE PATTERN

GISELLE MCNAB

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The author has tried to recreate events, locales, and conversations from her memories of them. In order to maintain anonymity, in some instances she has changed the names of individuals and places and may have changed some identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations, and places of residence.

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ONE

Ring Around the Rosie

I REMEMBER THE closet was small and tight, crowded with coats, shoes, and boxes. I pressed myself into the corner of it, trying not to cry or make a single sound, while the man of the week was making my mother cry. They hit her, they did drugs with her, and they used her. Most of all, they scared me.

I was happy before that, when it was my mother, my father, and my older siblings. I was five, the youngest of three kids, all of us living in New York City in a third-floor apartment across the street from the Chelsea housing projects in Manhattan. Even though my brother and sister had different dads, my dad was their Papi as much as he was mine. He taught my sister how to ride a bike and taught my brother sports. No one was left out. Back then, I attended a Catholic-based Pre-K located inside a brownstone.

I remember playing and singing loudly, “Ring around the rosy, pocket full of posies,” while happily waiting for my dad to hoist me onto his shoulders to carry me the ten blocks back home. I felt loved and cared for.

My mother worked two jobs: one, at a diner called Smokey’s on 24th Street and the other at a local community center on 8th Avenue. My father worked for a clothing company called Cacherel, which meant we always had the cutest clothes on the block. My dad came home almost every night with clothes for all of us. I remember so many of them, even a mushroom print shirt that was the style back then. Thinking about it makes me laugh now.

There are so many good memories from those days: playing slip and slide in the apartment hallway, watching TV and movies together before bedtime every night. Of course, like kids we also gave my mom a hard time; we messed around and made

“My mother was so beautiful, but the more she used, the more the glow in her face and her perfect smile faded away.”

noise during our bedtime. I even fell off the top bunk bed one night right on my sisters’ hard, Candi’s wood clog, busting the entire front of my mouth. That was the beginning of a lot of pain and the cause of my ever-so-embarrassing buck teeth! I think the craziest sibling memory of all had to be when my brother didn’t want

to disturb my mom with the light, so he decided to look for his sneakers with a candle under the bed. How my mom got that burning mattress out the window still confuses me but hey, that was our mother—always a step ahead!

I loved the summer days at Brighton Beach with all the other families from 21st Street. I can remember loud radios playing

everything from Motown to salsa. Some nights, my father and his friends gathered in Central Park, playing the congas, claves, cowbells, and timbales to create the best salsa sounds I ever heard. My father was so young—only twenty-one—so he was always full of energy.

But then the arguments between my parents increased. My father hated when my mother went out with her friends or away for the weekends. They accused each other of cheating and doing drugs. My mother hated my father questioning her whereabouts or telling her what to do; it just made the arguments worse.

I remember one night my mother was in the kitchen cooking dinner. Our bathtub/shower was in the middle of the kitchen and my dad was showering. The argument had started before that, and kept getting worse, until my father jumped out of the tub and began fighting with my mother, slapping her over and over again.

Then he turned around and noticed me. I was sitting there, at the kitchen table, watching it all. He tried to soothe me, but there was nothing that he could say to erase what I had just seen or calm the fear in my heart. He left the apartment that night and I didn't see him again for quite some time.

Things just went downhill from there. We moved out of the apartment in Chelsea and stayed with a family member on Cypress Avenue in the South Bronx for a little while. The neighborhood was suffering from a total economic collapse, with fires destroying more than ninety-seven percent of the buildings. The media speculated that landlords were burning their own buildings for profit from the arson insurance. Regardless, the fires left a lot of people homeless and unemployed, which produced street gangs who supported themselves by dealing drugs. All those abandoned properties attracted squatters, some of whom were mentally ill, and others who were drug addicts.

My mother got heavier and heavier into drugs after my dad left. She would make long trips to the bathroom and emerge high

and groggy with small injection bruises running up and down her arms. She'd start to slur her words, saliva dripping from the corner of her mouth, and sometimes she just nodded off without realizing it. I would just stare at her and wait for her to come out of this zombie stage. My mother was so beautiful, but the more she used, the more the glow in her face and her perfect smile faded away.

Her mother, my grandmother Maria, would come around sometimes to see us. I could hear my grandmother screaming and arguing, pleading with my mom to allow her to take us, but my mom would always tell us to hide in the closet. Sometimes she hid in there with us and would tell people to lie and say we weren't there.

Then, Isaiah entered our lives. We were living in an apartment in the South Bronx. All I remember about that area is the broken glass, the urine smell, and the loud music and arguments. Isaiah's family lived in the same area so we would visit them often. There were a lot of kids in that family and we all played together. The sound of Isaiah's family's beautiful singing started to take away from the agony of watching my mother's drug use and missing my father.

Then one winter night, we were eating dinner with Isaiah's family. Suddenly, he leaned over and gave my mother the hardest punch I'd ever seen. She tumbled out of her chair and onto the floor, but he followed, and kept on hitting her over and over again. His family was able to stop him and pull him off her. My mother's face was covered in blood, her lip was busted, and her eye was swollen. We all grabbed our coats and ran out of the apartment.

I don't remember where we slept that night, but I do remember the commotion the next morning. My Grandma Maria was standing at the front door, arguing with my mother, and trying to force her way in. Someone must have reached out to her and told her what had happened. My grandmother finally convinced my mother to let her take us away. My siblings were sent to live with my aunt and uncle in North Carolina, and I was dropped

off at my Grandmother Lourdes' house. I remember standing in front of my grandma's building on 21st Street in Chelsea holding her hand so tightly as I watched my brother and sister be driven away. I had tears in my eyes and so much pain in my heart. I didn't know if I was ever going to see them again.

Grandma Lourdes was so wonderful to me, and even better, I got to see my father occasionally. Seeing him always made me happy. He stuttered when he spoke, and I would giggle at the way his words sounded. Even though it hurt to be away from my mother, my grandmother and great-grandmother Ernestina, who I called *Mamama*, showed me so much love. I remember sitting on top of the sofa, putting rollers into her hair while we watched telenovelas together. I had my own room especially made for a princess, but all I wanted was to sleep in that folding bed in *Mamama's* room. I felt safe with her, especially because things were changing so much in my life, and I didn't know what to expect next.

My Spanish wasn't good enough then to understand every word my grandmother said, but I knew enough, heard enough, to know my mother was in trouble. My grandma did all she could to make me happy, but I couldn't stop worrying about my mother, brother, and sister. I missed them so much and I cried every single night with the pain of it. Even now, as an adult, I can't imagine how I got through all of that when I was just a five-year-old.

My grandmother Lourdes took me to the Dominican Republic for two weeks that summer. I ran around and played like a normal kid. We ate sugar cane, mangos, and limoncillo quenepas freshly picked from the neighboring yards. Sometimes I played in the patio and would hear the run-down pick-up trucks driving by and selling eggs, fruits, and vegetables. There was so much family and love that summer. It was the best time I could remember ever having; I cried when it was time to return.

When I got back to my Grandma Lourdes' apartment, my father came over to visit and asked me about my trip. I was telling

him story after story until my grandma interrupted us, saying she had to talk to my father. A few minutes later, he left in a fury, his face the same as it was whenever he argued with my mom.

After my father left, my grandmother sat me down, and with tears in her eyes told me that my mother had picked up my brother and sister and wanted me to return home to live with her again. The next day, I moved to a house on Blackrock Avenue in the Castle Hill area of the Bronx. My grandmother Maria owned it, and it was much nicer than the area we used to live in before. We had a three-bedroom apartment located in the basement of the home. My aunt and uncle from North Carolina had moved up there and were living on the first floor. I shared a room with my sister, and we played outside in the big backyard all the time. I immediately made friends, and we played hopscotch and freeze tag all summer. My mother would give us money whenever the ice cream truck came around.

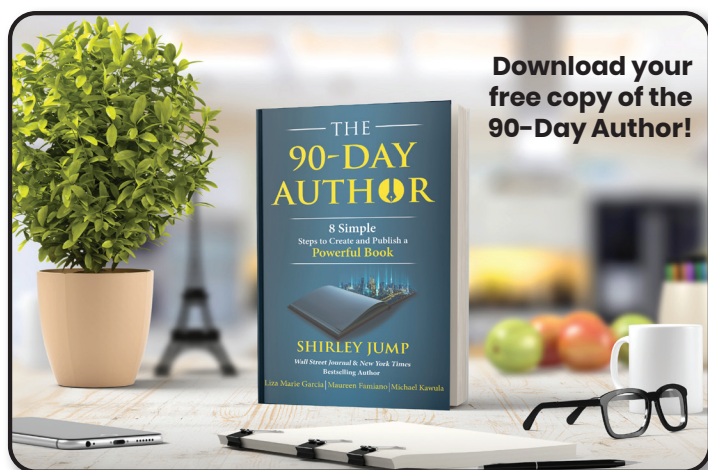
I was happy for a while. The glow in my mother's face was back. The beautiful smile and love she used to give us had returned. There were no more long trips to the bathroom or different men in and out of the house. It was just us, our family, except for my father. But as fall approached, I noticed that my mother's belly was growing. She told us she was having a baby, but whose baby was it? And how was this going to change everything?

Ashes, ashes, it all falls down...

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