At the Bottom

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I always thought that you couldn’t go into a downward spiral if you were born at the bottom. That is how I pictured myself, at the bottom. I was born in Flint, Michigan to Destiny Clark, a single mother mired in the constant symptoms of a broken heart. When I was young I didn’t really understand what was happening in my house. I didn’t know that the constant stream of men coming in and out of our double wide trailer wasn’t normal. I had a new man to call “Dad” every few months, and for a while it was fun. When a new man came along that meant that my mother would be happy, and our lives would be peaceful—for a while. The men were nice at first, but by the time they left us I was ready to see them leave and never come back. I especially felt this way when my mom brought Tucker home.

My mom had been alone for about two weeks when she met the man that she said was “going to change everything.” It was a Friday night, which meant that she would be going out to find someone she could use as a salve for her most recent heart ache. She pulled herself off the couch, and made her way to the shower to get ready.

“Hey Kid, go in my room and pick momma out one of her outfits. Im’o get me some lovin tonight,” she yelled from the bathroom. “Yeah!”

I marked the page I was working on in my coloring book and headed down the narrow hallway to her bedroom. My mother had several clothing items that she kept separated into piles on the floor. She had jeans and sweatshirts like the ones that the other moms of the kids in my fourth grade class wore. She had tennis shoes and button up shirts, but the outfit I knew she wanted was actually folded neatly and tucked into one of her dresser drawers. I opened up one of the dresser drawers and began fingering through stacks of clothes made from mesh and pleather. I ended up choosing a pink spaghetti strap tank-top, and a black skirt that zipped up the front. The last time she wore this outfit she brought home a man that always came to our house with candy. The candy-man was my favorite, and I guess I was hoping for my mother to find another candy-man.

“Outfit is on the bed Mom,” I tapped the door and headed back to the living room to finish my picture. I selected each color carefully and made sure to
stay inside the lines.

“Momma is lookin gooood tonight! You picked a good outfit, Kiddo.” Mom paraded into the living room with her knee high boots on and her purse in hand. That night she went out as Destiny Clark-- single woman motivated for love, not as Destiny Clark-- single mother burdened by a little girl.

She stumbled through the front door around 3:00 a.m. giggling and leaning against the man that I would come to know as Tucker. I remember the way he looked, shuffling my mother through the front door, a hand constantly inching its way towards her breast. He was a large man with strong arms and a belly that looked as if it was trying to escape the waist of his pants. His hair was greasy and hung in wavy clumps down the back of his neck. Most of all I remember his mustache. It was thick and snuggled closely along his lip.

I found him immediately repulsive, but he was my mother’s choice. I sat up on the couch where I had been sleeping and stared into his large dark eyes. He let the right corner of his mouth turn upward and smirked at me. My mother kissed his shoulder and lifted her arm, showing him the way to her bedroom. Tucker winked at me as he reached and smacked my mother on the butt.

That was the confirmation I needed. I picked up the blanket off of the old brown couch and went to my room to sleep. I knew what my mother and Tucker were going to do, and I knew that I wanted to be as far away from it as possible. Throughout my mother’s escapades with different men my room had always been my sanctuary, a place where I could pretend that I was some place far away. The Exbury Gardens could surround me. As I look down into one of the ponds my reflection could reveal me as a true princess with curled hair and a jeweled crown. The smell of lilacs could surround me and I could be Guinevere- the love of the strongest knight, Sir Lancelot. He could and would meet me in the Garden and protect me. I could be some place not on the bottom. I walked quickly to my bedroom and closed the door behind me. I pulled my pink ballerina comforter up over my head and hummed to myself until I fell asleep.

“This one is definitely a keeper” my mother said to me the next afternoon after he left. “I’ll tell you what; I have a feeling that he is going to be the one that changes everything.”
For once in my life I can say that my mother was right. She was telling the truth. Tucker did change everything. And it was only two weeks before Tucker moved himself into our trailer.

One night, I woke up to the sound of the television blaring in the living room. Rolling over and rubbing my eyes, I checked the clock on my nightstand and realized that it was only 2:00 a.m. I remember wondering if Tucker had left the television on before heading back to my mother’s room. I climbed out of bed, opened my door and peeked out into the living room.

In the blue light casted by the television I saw my mother’s hand lying on the floor with the palm facing upward. I crept out of my room and inched down the small hallway to check on her. When I reached the corner of the hall I froze. My mother was naked and on her back. Tucker was naked too. His large body hovered over her as he thrust back and forth. He grunted each time he pushed himself into my mother. Her body seemed limp, almost lifeless except for her hands that were clenched tightly. I watched as she stared at the ceiling—her eyes vacant.

I didn’t know what to do. The sight of the two of them confused me. My mother didn’t appear to be enjoying what Tucker was doing to her, but she didn’t stop it either. I didn’t want to get in trouble so I turned around and ran back to my bedroom. My mother had always been careful to make sure that these types of things only happened in her bedroom. I remember trying to make myself fall asleep, but the image of my mother’s vacant stare wouldn’t let me.

The next morning, I decided to pretend like nothing had happened. When I got out of bed I pulled a grey sweatshirt over my head and made my way down the hall. The television was still on and I could hear Tucker burp. Before making my way around the corner into the living room I paused for a moment and took a deep breath. Much to my relief Tucker was fully clothed and sitting on the couch with a bag of potato chips resting between his legs. My mother was a few steps away washing dishes in the kitchen. Focusing on my feet I walked through the living room and headed through the kitchen to get a cereal bar.

“Kid. Come here.” Tucker grunted as I walked back towards my room. Hesitating for a moment I looked back over my shoulder to make sure that
my mother was still behind me in the kitchen. Something about the way he had looked the night before as he was towering over my mother made me afraid and angry. The image made me want to punch him. Keeping my focus on the floor I walked over to him. He lifted a finger covered in potato chip crumbs and placed it under my chin, raising my head until we were looking at one another. He smelled the way my mother did sometimes when she returned home from a night at the bar. He leaned in close to me until his head was next to mine and I could feel his hot breath on my neck."Did you enjoy the show last night?" He whispered.

Startled, I pulled away from him. He winked at me and licked his lips before burping and yelling at my mother to bring him another beer. I ran back to my bedroom and shut the door. The thought of him noticing me standing there made me feel sick. Everything about him made me feel like I was going to puke. The way his finger felt on my chin and the smell of his stale breath seemed to follow me. I spent the rest of the day in my room trying to make it go away and hiding from him. He didn’t frighten me the way monsters in movies do, but I knew that the way he leaned in and whispered to me was something I should be afraid of.

Almost an entire week had passed since Tucker had spoken to me. Every day when I woke up he was on the couch, either sleeping or watching television. My mother and I fell into a routine of cleaning and catering to Tucker while he drank all day in the living room. One day he ordered my mother to clean the kitchen. I waited until he had fallen asleep on the couch, and then I went and joined my mother. My mom was down on her hands and knees scrubbing the small linoleum floor. Grabbing a wash cloth I knelt down next to her.

“Mom, I wanted to talk to you about Tucker. He kind of scares me and uhh the other night...” I focused on the sponge as she moved it in circles on the floor.

She paused for a moment and then looked up at me."Damn it, child. He is nothin to be afraid of! You’re letting that silly imagination of yours get the best of you.” She looked at me and nodded before returning to her scrubbing.

Her nod meant that the conversation was over. My mother looked hopeful
then—not distant and vacant like she had when Tucker was on top of her. I thought that maybe what Tucker had done was a fluke, maybe he hadn’t really seen me at all. Sitting there on the floor with my mother I decided that for her sake I was going to attempt to put up with Tucker.

Over the next few weeks I tried to get along with Tucker. Whenever he requested, I brought him one of his cold bottled beers from the fridge. I helped my mom make dinners, and I ate with them in the living room. One day my mother woke up feeling sick. My mother asked me to make dinner for the three of us while she took a nap in her room. I could tell that she really didn’t feel good so I boiled up some noodles and made spaghetti. I took my mother a plate, but she was in no shape to eat so I left it on her nightstand. After serving Tucker a heaping plate I spooned up some spaghetti for myself and plopped onto the far end of the couch, as far away as I could get from Tucker. As I sat next to him I could smell the stench of beer, and barbeque chips. An episode of “Married with Children” was keeping him entertained. I watched him for a moment as he slurped the spaghetti off of his plate. Long strands of noodles hung from his mouth as he sucked in as hard as he could.

“I’ve always liked this couch,” I say trying to get along with him for the sake of my mother.

“Huh. Wanting to be close to me eh? I’m not complainin” He chuckled a little and then winked at me. “Besides your lazy mother has been laying in bed all day.”

“Mom is sick. She isn’t trying to be mean.” I said staring at him. He rolled his eyes and reached his hand over while staring directly at my thigh.

“ There is more on the stove.” I shoved his hand away from me and went to my room. I shut the door and paused for a moment to listen to make sure that he hadn’t followed me. Nothing. Sitting with my legs crossed on my bed I grabbed a stack of my books. I stretched out, and pulled the covers back and began to read Charlotte’s Web.

I awoke to the sound of something in my room. I couldn’t see anything in the dark but the familiar smell of beer wafted over me. I tried to sit up, but before I could a salty taste hit my lips as a large sweaty palm clamped over
my mouth and pushed me back down until my head was against my pillow. Tucker's face appeared a few inches from mine. He drug his other rough hand over my thigh and began to let it creep up until his fingertips slipped under my nightgown. I began shaking and tried to scream, but the force of his hand over my mouth and the weight of his body leaning over mine was too much. His hip was jabbing into my stomach as he leaned into me making it almost impossible to breathe. It felt like a car had fallen on top of me.

“Don’t fight it.” He whispered, “I’m just going to teach you a lesson.” Removing his hand from my thigh he reached down and pulled the sock from his foot. The sock filled my mouth and almost made me gag as it settled towards my throat. It tasted like moldy bread. He grabbed the beer bottle that he had brought in off of the floor and tilted his head back to finish it off. Some of the beer trickled out of his mouth, down his chin and onto my nightgown. He is going to kill me! I have to scream.

“You like that don’t ya?” He shook the cold bottle in my face and laughed. “I’ll let you have it.” He brought the bottle to his lips one last time, and then he climbed all of the way onto my bed until his knees were between my legs. He weighs so much, there is no way I will be able to move him. I need to kick him. Keeping one arm across my chest he lifted my nightgown up until the edge was resting on my belly button. The cold bottle made my inner thigh tingle with goosebumps as he rubbed it against me. What is he doing?! No, not there! He took the neck of the bottle and rubbed it all of the way up my thigh and moved it in a circular motion against my vulva. I tried to kick him as the lower half of my body began to tense up. Noise, make noise. I tried to scream again, but the sock jammed in my mouth just made me choke.

“Hey don’t get fussy with me. Come on Sweetie, open those lips for me.” He moved the bottle up and down in the opening of my vagina and began to push it against me. What is he doing? Stop, please stop! My pelvis felt like it was on fire as pain surged like fireworks as he pushed the bottle into me. I tried to fight it, but as I struggled he pushed the bottle harder and my pain got worse. I closed my eyes as tears streaked my face. The thought of my mother popped into my head. Go somewhere else. Be someone else. Someone anywhere-- anywhere but here. I opened my eyes and fixated them on the flower stickers on my ceiling fan. There was nothing to do except let myself go somewhere else. Let my eyes go vacant. I am a Princess. I am in the garden, and there are miles of fields to run away in. The yellow and purple wildflowers wave in the wind as I run through them. Lilac bushes reach towards me calling for me to enjoy their beauty. I keep running
knowing that Lancelot must be some place near.

Tucker grunted with delight as I let my body go limp.

The next morning I stayed in bed late. It was well past noon before I got up and wiped the crusted blood off of my thighs. The pain shot through me with every move I made. I changed into a pair of baggy sweatpants that my mother had passed down to me. The entire lower half of my body was sore as I stepped into each leg hole and pulled the draw string tight around my waist. It felt like I was on fire from the belly button down. I tripled knotted the string as tight as I could before slowly opening the door and leaving my room. My mother was sitting on the living room floor with puzzle pieces all around her. I walked over to where she sat on the floor, trying to ignore the throbbing pain that hit me with every step, and gently sat down next to her—getting as close as I could.

“Help me out.” She scooped up a handful of pieces and set them in front of me. “I hope none of these damn pieces are missing. If they are this damn thing is useless.”

I picked at the pieces in front of me, scooting all of the yellow ones into a pile.

“Mom, I need to tell you something about Tucker,” I said still playing with the pieces on the floor.

“What about him? He seemed to like that spaghetti you made. He told me this morning that what he got was delicious.”

“Mom, he came into my room last night. He touched me,” I said letting go of the pieces in my hand.

She froze for a moment and pursed her lips together. “I know he did. He told me that he went in to say thank you for the dinner.”

“No Mom. It hurt. There was blood.” I looked up at her, waiting for her to react.

She leaned over the puzzle pieces and began to line them neatly on the floor.
“Oh dear, you are just becoming a woman that’s all.” She brushed her hand across the pieces messing up the perfect line she had made. “I’ll get you some pads—you put them in your underwear to catch the blood, no big deal.” She looked up at me and nodded, as if she had solved everything. “Now help me piece together this puzzle.”

Thinking back on that night I can’t help but hate my mother. I had tried to tell her that I was scared of Tucker and that he made me uncomfortable, but she didn’t care. I told her what had happened with that bottle in my room. According to her my imagination was getting the best of me, and that menstruation was to blame for the blood and for my pain. Tucker eventually left, but the pain stayed. To this day I cannot bring myself to drink a beer. The sight of a brown glass bottle of any kind makes me cringe. A bottle tore into me and changed my body forever.

The skin healed, but the wound will always be there—the pain will never leave. The pain will always live inside me. He took something from me—him and that bottle. Something that I was supposed to choose to share when I was older and ready.

Something was ruined that night-- I just wish I could say it wasn’t me.

Hayley Scheuring will begin working on her MFA in Creative Writing in the fall.