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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“DANCING WITH THE WOLVES” BY GILLIAN AUGUST THORP

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



On October 20, 1974, my father fell asleep for the last time in a red Fiat, parked in our driveway in Durban, South Africa. Before that date, he had carefully driven my two siblings and I (and our mother) for countless rides as our family grew. But his final turn at the wheel was one he took alone. The car idled throughout the night with a tube carefully connected from the exhaust pipe into the car. It was still running when he was discovered the next morning.

It was long after my father's death that I would learn of the details. His suicide was kept a secret from us children. In my young mind it made no sense that the man I loved most in this world would just suddenly disappear. With confusion came dark shadows that loomed over me, and my family's lives forever changed with his "disappearance."

I was four years old when he "left." He had a tender heart and I can still remember him telling me one day, **"black, brown, white, boys, girls—we are all the same—we're all just people Gillian."** But the tilted system of apartheid and the haunted houses I would live in following his death told me otherwise.

For years after my father's death, my mother disappeared into a bottle, drinking her pain away. Unable to care for us, my siblings and I were sent to live on a remote farm. The adults called it "boarding school" but it was actually foster care.

Mother's vision blurred by grief and alcohol, she remarried a man who was quick to beat my brother, and to leer at my sister and me. With this man in her life she felt she could now retrieve us. **In a land where misogyny and patriarchy were engrained cultural norms, her new husband acted like a hero and my family treated him as our "rescuer."** In reality, he was anything but that.

We came to live with my mother and Marcel in a dreaded fortress of abuse. He terrorized each of us with physical beatings and the sound of his belt striking my brother's skin became a regular thrum that echoed through the house, along with my brother's cries of pain and fear.

The belt was reserved for my brother Thurn, the bamboo stick for my sister Tania and I, and his punches were for our mother. Though his beatings were frightful, nothing terrorized me more than his nighttime visits.

At eight years old I had no idea why I would awaken in the middle of the night to see him hovering over my side of the bed with his hands on my body.

The moment I would wake, he would quietly disappear into the dark, leaving me in a world of confusion and fear. I would wonder: "Why was he here? What was he doing to my body? Why did he hate me so much to do this to me?" Filled with fear I would mummify my body each night as I tightly wrapped myself in blankets.

As I look back, there were tears shed in secret, born of pain and much isolation. I felt that there was no one I could turn to because in such an environment where could I go for help? **I was a poor coloured girl whose mother drank her problems away and I was more her caretaker than she was mine. There were no hotline numbers to call, no counselors at school to talk to, no sex education classes or teachings at all about such matters.** "Children spoke when they were spoken to, and seen but not heard," were repeated phrases from adults.

School was no safe haven either, as teachers frequently hit students with sticks and rulers. In the sewing class that was required teaching for girls, I was hit on my knuckles for having a single stitch out of place on my apron. My trust in the world at large was tainted, and I kept my confusion to myself.

In 1986, South Africa was in the throes of a cultural and societal revolution. Outside of our house of fear and pain, clashes between the various black consciousness movement groups and the apartheid regime were in full swing; **violence was commonplace, civilian deaths, explosions, grenades, strikes, mass uprising, police brutality, nation wide state of emergencies, and bombings at hotels, grocery stores and other public places.**

The South African government attempted to murder my Uncle Nicki, whom I loved and admired for his courage. Although he was not around the family often, due to him being either in exile or leading his comrades on secret missions to overthrow the white-controlled South African government.

He was a vibrant figure who regaled us with stories when we did see him and his firm convictions filled a room the moment he entered it. In 1986, Nicki was leading the Johannesburg branch of AZAPO (Azanian People's Organization). My grandmother was worried for her family's safety given our uncle's involvement in the revolution and she urged my mother and her husband to get us out of South Africa. Marcel decided on California and my grandmother scraped together her life earned savings and bought us our one-way-tickets out of Africa.

With one bag of clothes each and a few humble belongings; we unpacked our things in a studio apartment in Ventura, California – two adults and three teenagers. **I was fourteen at the time and found myself in a culture that I neither fit into nor understood. In South Africa, I belonged to the "coloured" community and never interacted with white people (it was illegal to do so). I knew my place there but in America I had no idea where I belonged or how to act.** It felt strange living next door to white people for the first time. Should I divert my eyes when they look at me? Do they know we aren't supposed to live next door to them?

I tried to find my niche but it was rough going. With blonde hair, fair skin, green eyes (a vestige left behind from my great-grandmother's Welsh lover and the European soldier on my father's side) and a South African accent, **I was foreign to blacks in America while, white people were foreign to me.** I found myself gravitating towards Mexicans. They had brown skin like a lot of coloured people, and I came to learn that a good number were illegally present in the United States. We had common ground in this respect as my family and I were considered "illegal aliens" as well. I felt great isolation in America and I contemplated running away but there was nowhere to go. I thought of returning to South Africa but I knew this was not a serious option I had no money, no job and my grandmother would have been heartbroken and probably even angry with me if I ever returned. Plus I felt a huge responsibility to take care of my mother, whose mental and emotional health had been in decline for a decade by this point.

After a few years of living the secret and repressive life of illegal aliens, my family won the biggest lottery prize any alien can win – the Green Card Lottery. We were granted permanent resident status and I no longer had to fear being rounded up and thrown into the back of a truck and carted off to a holding cell or airport. There was a freedom that came with our new status, and I suddenly saw endless possibility.

Though the future looked bright, family secrets weighed heavy on me. We were living in Reno at the time and it was there that **I confronted my sister for the first time about the sexual abuse at the hands of Marcel. In all the years that we had shared a room, I never saw him do anything to Tania and I had never talked to her about it. After much pleading, Tania confided in me what I had feared and made me promise never to tell another soul. But I lied.**

This newfound information would not let me be silent any longer. I already hated him for what he had done to my mother, brother and me, but this was the last straw. The sheer anger and fury took over and I could no longer contain it. I was about nineteen at the time, and a family gathering brought my grandmother to America (for the first time) to witness our immigrant success story – my family owned a house, Marcel's business was thriving, we were now permanent residents and each of us were working. I should have been happy but happiness did not buzz inside me. It was at the family gathering that I unexpectedly (even to myself) announced to everyone gathered who Marcel really was and the horrific abuse we had suffered over the years. **He stood across the house full of people and looked at me with the familiar crooked smile I had come to know so well. It was a cunning smirk that never reached his eyes.**

I hated to look into those eyes; whenever he talked to me, I would look away. His eyes and smile were those of a dog before it bites. Usually his face, particularly his eyes scared me.

But for the first time I did not look away. I locked eyes with him and kept my eyes fixed on his.

His smirk seemed less fearful and simply weak and revolting. My eyes remained fixed on his as anger flooded my body and I began to tremble. His lips flattened into a thin line and he tilted his head, like a dog perplexed by something it had never seen, and he turned away. I wanted to spit all the bitter ashes of my childhood, our childhood into those eyes, but something else happened instead.

I realized at once that the laughter was a lie, the party was a lie, every word that came out of his raucous, tight mouth for years was a lie, a lie that only lingered because he terrorized his witnesses with threats and beatings. He had stood on the shoulders of children to elevate himself and chose a woman who could not interfere. He was a fraud, a fraud that I had feared for all those years. **I suddenly saw that he was not a monster, not the devil. He was a dog. A dog that performed tricks for whomever happened to be watching, while biting everyone else. He was a con man, a huckster, a carnival barker who had invited everyone to applaud at his performance as ringmaster.**

"Excuse me," I said. "Can I get everyone's attention." My voice was low and calm at first. Then I shouted, "CAN I GET EVERYONE'S ATTENTION!"

That day changed the trajectory of my life.

Today, I am not where I was and I am not yet where I am going. As I sit and write this piece I watch my two young daughters (Kiara and Nicki) race along as they find their own legs, stumbling, falling, racing again. And as long as I live, they will never, if I can help it, be tripped by someone or made to stagger under a weight of someone else's choosing. They are my redemption, my art, and my finest works.

It has taken me a long time to slow down, to stop running and simply breathe it all in.

I have been surrounded by thieves: death (which stole my father, my sister, my husband, and my children's innocence); Marcel (who stole pieces of my siblings' and my innocence that can never be returned); alcohol (which stole my mother's emotional mind). Yet as I take it all in I know that out of every one of my experiences has come love. Even the best thief cannot take away either the love we are born with, the love we create, or the love others give us along the way.

Today, I stand with my feet firmly planted in a world in which everything belongs, including me. I don't know what tomorrow holds but I know this: I'm breathing. Not someone else's breath, my own. And the taste of life that resides in my mouth is also mine now here to stay.



