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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

MENTAL HEALTH SERIES BY GIRLS WRITE NOW

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.



"Salt on Old Wounds" by Sabrina Persaud

Sometimes we are hurt by the ones we love the most. It is important to rise above that pain; turn it into something powerful. This is for everyone who has grown up in a broken home.

For a long time, it was all about you. Everything I did in my life—from the way I tied my shoes to the way I wore my heart on my sleeve—revolved around you. I didn't realize this until you were gone.

I don't remember much about that house on the corner of 110th Street. The memories are foggy; some good, most bad. The household was always a battlefield for two lovers who forgot how to love. My sister and I used to wave white flags for them, hoping they would see each other and surrender. Hoping he would take her hand to dance the way they used to, but it never happened. Instead, my sister and I took cover in our bedroom, holding each other so close it almost blocked the sounds of our family breaking apart.

After that, everything sort of fell to pieces: my happiness, confidence, faith. I was young, I'm still young, but I didn't know the kind of effect losing you would have on me. I was your little girl for a long time, and then I wasn't. You probably don't know, but it was my choice not to speak to you for those three years. Not mom's, not her family's, not her friend's; it was mine. You only called when you'd had at least three drinks and you liked to cry, a lot. I think that's where I get it from, you know? You taught me how to wear my heart on my sleeve, but mom taught me how to shield my heart from the world. Together, you created a child who is both rough at the edges and soft to the touch.

I sort of had a mantra during those years when I blocked you out; I find myself whispering it sometimes. "If you don't believe, he can't hurt you." If I didn't believe that you would get your act together, be the man I always wished you would be, then there would be no room for disappointment. I didn't have faith in you at all. I didn't believe that you'd be a good father, and a part of me didn't want you to be. Old wounds never seem to heal.

It was that night where everything took a turning point. My sister was turning twenty and she deserved a good birthday party. I knew I didn't want to be around you when you were drunk. It would set off something in me, a fear that was at the back of my mind. It made me

uncomfortable when you had a drink in your hand. You thought it was okay to cry to me, or stop me from leaving, or hug me when I didn't want you around. I never stopped you even though I wanted to.

The music was loud and the smell of alcohol danced across the room. I was the only one who didn't have a cup in my hand. I knew I could have a sip if I wanted to—maybe it could have calmed my nerves—but the thought made me more anxious. The kitchen was small, too small, and I couldn't seem to find refuge. You were drunk and I was at the edge of a cliff. You were dancing all across the room and I was trying to hide. I didn't want to be around you—not when you were like that. Memories from years ago came to mind. I saw you in the same state in a different setting; at my uncle's house, at the old apartment, in your mother's home, at the other end of the phone. You found your way close to me and I looked down. I avoided eye contact in hopes that I would become invisible. It did not work. You put your arms around me and swayed back and forth. I felt every fiber in my body tense up. I felt my eyebrows crinkle. I felt a shiver run down my spine. You pressed a kiss to my head and I needed to scream. It was all too much; the smell of alcohol, the music, your arms, your words, you. You couldn't understand how badly I needed to be away from you. I had to do something; it felt like the earth was closing in on me. So I pushed you. I stretched out my hand and placed a distance between you and me. It was soft enough to avoid a scene, but strong enough to make you stop. You stepped back and looked at me with your head tilted to the side. I looked you right in your eye and shook my head. No.

I don't want to be in a constant battle with that bottle. I shouldn't have to ask you to put the drink down, put our broken relationship first. I was a little girl once and I needed you to be my hero, but that's not the case today. I don't need to be saved, not by you.

"A Godly Woman" by Kathleen Scheiner

Mental illness runs in my family, but it's always been treated like a dirty secret. Nobody wants to talk about it much, maybe thinking the problem will go away if they ignore it.

The sun beat down—high noon in Missouri—and all the flowers had been arranged along with the Precious Moments figurines into an impromptu serenity garden for the memorial. We were fanned out across the yard in lawn chairs, and I made sure to face the fire pit where my uncle, aunt, and cousins burned their trash rather than paying the city to cart it away. I could see empty plastic two-liter bottles that used to hold soda fused together in strange clear sculptures, along with mattress coils and broken flower pots. I remember Grandma always having a bottle of Pepsi tucked under one batwing arm. She loved her sweets.

My uncle starts out the service, talking about the godly woman that Marjorie Billings was. I'm surprised to see everybody nodding and hearing the Amens coming out of them.

I remember Grandma running down the street naked to get a newspaper from the Wawa, talking to terrorists through her geranium, and telling me about how different aunts and uncles were conceived after a drink too many. Godly, I don't remember. Well, there was that one time she thought she was the Virgin Mary and all the children in the world were hers.

We call it the family illness—it runs heavy in the females on my mom's side, and my grandmother got a heavy dose of it. We never had a name for it until the 1980s—bipolar disorder. But every year Grandma had to go to the mental hospital—the longest time for a year after my Uncle Charlie was born, the kid she liked the least. "Just never cottoned to him," she said. They tried shock treatments on her that year.

I used to be terrified it would soon be my turn. I'd worry, *Are my emotions normal? Am I feeling too much? Will the trembling turn into something I can't control?*

I asked Grandma, "*What does it feel like going crazy?*"

She smiled like she was remembering a long lost love. "It's the best feeling in the world. Sometimes I can't wait for it to come back."

I didn't worry after that.

"Warm Milk" by Gia Deeton

The stigma around mental illness needs to change. By telling the story of how mental illness affects my family, I hope to inspire others to gain the courage to share their experiences with an issue that is often overlooked. Names have been changed.

My mom and I walked in silence under the yellow glow of the polluted night sky. When we reached the door, she handed me the overnight bag that she carried for me while I carried my backpack for school the next day. Before ringing the doorbell, she hugged me and murmured, "I love you. Thanks for being strong. Bea will be okay."

I knew that my older sister, Bea, would not be okay.

"I know." I lied.

I climbed through the monochromatic stairwell to meet our family friend, Vivien, at her fourth floor apartment. I was met with a hug and consoling words, while the sound of her teenage son angelically playing piano spilled out of the other room.

The orderliness of Vivien's house was something I'd always admired, but I noticed it even more at that particular time. While my face stung from tears and my arms and nose ached from bruises, I thought about how nicely her marble coasters were stacked. She heated a mug of warm milk, placed it in front of me, and made herself a cup of tea. She sat across from me, her eyes limpid with empathy.

I hadn't forgotten about the discord I'd just witnessed in my own home, and I was thankful for the peaceful atmosphere that surrounded me while I sipped the comforting beverage. Vivien broke the silence and said, "I used to study psychology. I had an uncle who was a lot like Bea, and I was inspired to help people like him. But the first time that I went into the psych ward? I switched majors the next day. It's not a good

reality.”

I knew that it wasn't a good reality. I knew it the first time it happened, and the second time, and the third time. But this time, the fourth time, was the first time I'd been hit. The first time I saw my mom get kicked in the shins. The first time I took a punch to the face when my sister's mania had spun out of control. And where was my dad, the only person in the household who was physically strong enough to hold her back?

He was out parking the car.

The car (which was filled to the brim with Bea's cigarette butts) that he had used to rush up to her college, bring her back to the city, and drop her off at our house so the school faculty would never suspect that she has bipolar disorder.

I love my parents, but my sister was sick. They should've called the ambulance that night.

Once my dad returned, my parents did everything they could to “restore” Bea so they could send her back to school and avoid another hospital bill, even if it meant neglecting me. I finished the cup of warm milk and excused myself to get ready to take a shower.

The shower had a luxurious setup which included a steamer and two high-pressure showerheads. I stood under the scalding water with enough steam drifting through the room to envelop my entire body. It even concealed my black and blue arms and legs, which I would've forgotten about if they weren't causing me so much pain.

I thought about going to school tomorrow.

I thought about telling the guidance counselor.

Mostly, I thought about how I would act like nothing happened.

Early the next morning, I woke up to rays of light gleaming through the

window. It wasn't time for school yet, but the apartment was coming to life. I made the bed, taking the time to flatten out all the wrinkles. It was the least I could do to show how grateful I was that I got to sleep at all that night. I wandered out to the kitchen island where Yuri was putting cream cheese on a bagel and Vivien was sipping coffee. A place was set next to her, and when I approached it, I noticed the bowl of Cheerios topped with strawberries.

"Good morning," she chirped. "Would you like cold or warm milk in your cereal?"

Warm milk in cereal? I'd never heard of anyone doing that before, but I knew it was exactly what I needed.

"Warm milk would be great!" I replied.

Yuri wrapped the cream cheese bagel in tinfoil and placed it in a deluxe Ziploc bag that already contained a granola bar and an apple.

"Good morning, I made you a lunch for school," he said.

"Thanks so much!" I set the bag aside to put in my backpack.

Vivien poured the microwaved milk into the bowl and sat down beside me while I ate. My anxiety about the day was soothed a little bit more with each spoonful of Cheerios. My parents couldn't be there for me, but they loved me enough to put me in such good hands. I worried about their safety and my sister's mental health, but it was out of my power to fix my deteriorating family. I knew that I would get through it, and at Vivien's house, I was safe. I ate my Cheerios in peace.

"Then Comes After" by Jane Porter

This piece came out of a free-writing exercise Kayla and I did together. I wrote about my mother, who was struggling with cancer treatment at the time. Thinking about the importance of voice in my many conversations with Kayla, particularly its strength and endurance,

greatly helped me shape this piece.

It starts this way. The disease is silent. Invisible. Not there at all, you could even say. A tiny bump, lump, blip in your plans for the future.

If a lump grows, tiny, blind to the naked eye, to the humming magnifying of machinery, in the core of your chest, beside the lymph nodes, hidden in fat and flesh and all your womanly curves and no one finds it—is it even there? Are you even sick? Is there anything to speak of, carve out, kill away with the chemo—is there?

It starts this way. The cold hands of a doctor gently feeling along, pressing, prodding, pausing. The machines that light your insides up, the deep deep cut into your softness, where your children slept those years ago. A cut to get at the disease, to dig the foreign object out—the thing your body built that doesn't belong but still grows inside you nonetheless.

It starts this way. Invisible invasion.

Then comes after. The hair that clots on your pillow, the weakness like a stone wall leaning in on you from all sides. A cage of weakness and a pile of your hair in the middle, gathering, growing week by week, clogging the drain until the water rises.

The after is your body pumped with poison so your veins rebel, your bones rebel, the nerves in your body dancing like live wires on fire, trapped with no way out.

After, you wrap your head in a scarf and pull the thin gray hairs left on your scalp to the front to show the world they still exist.

After, you lay in bed like a stone slab. No, like a cement slab full of cracks and crumbling. And you remember that girl you once were, so fearless that your youth and health could ever be taken from you.

After, you lay alone, robbed of the things you never thought to hold on

tight to. And you understand, or maybe you don't understand but just accept that nothing was ever yours to begin with. Everything borrowed. Everything here for just the time it's lent to you.

Except your voice. That portal from inside to out. You hold on tight to it. You let it loose.

You listen as it sings your song.

"What Brought Me Here Today" by Mekkiayah Jacobs

I believe that my piece speaks to the theme Rise Speak Change in that the topic of this narrative is about me and how I have grown. It's about a time in my life where I was tested and I passed.

My life has been affected significantly because of all the heartache, friends, families, and states I've experienced. My mentor asked me the question: "What brought you here today?" But where exactly is here? I like to think the question is: who am I today?

I was born May 2, 2002 in the Bronx, New York. A year later my Irish twin, Ny-Leyah, was born. We both had the same father, who was barely in our lives. But there was another man. I'll call him Tall. He became our stepfather a few months after my sister was born. He was always around; there was never a day when we didn't see him. A few months before I turned four, my mom gave birth to my second sister, LiAanni. Tall had already become a violent presence in the household, but after the baby was born, it got worse.

A year later, we moved to Maryland, where we lived for the next four years. We were close to family who lived there too, but their presence only fueled the fights between my mother and stepfather. Soon we lived by the policy "don't tell anyone what goes on in this house." I was naïve to the situation though, and sometimes told my grandmother things my mother would have preferred I kept quiet. She always said she wouldn't tell her, but she did. The police sometimes came, but unfortunately never took him away; they always just told him to calm down.

Time passed and my mom gave birth to my brother, Zakai, so now we were four. Life at home was up and down until my brother wanted to talk, and that was when Tall's anger worsened. Zakai couldn't get out the words to express his feelings so he would cry in frustration, which annoyed everyone, particularly Tall. He would scream, "boys don't cry!" Around this time, I started staying in my room all the time writing. I was suffering from depression; I didn't know that then, but I know it now. I attempted suicide three times by trying to suffocate myself. I could never go through with it. I would ask God: "Why me? What is so important that I need to be here?"

I felt as if no one understood me; no one ever listened to me. I was lonely, no matter how much I smiled and laughed. My mom told me that I could always tell her anything, but I just shared the things I knew she wanted to hear. Now, Tall was a different story. I would never let him in on my inner thoughts. Whenever he was in the room with us, we all shut down, and when he was gone we all felt like we could be open again.

When I was nine, my mom and Tall decide to uproot us and take us to Georgia. The move was very sad. I was leaving a place that I had called home, with both good and bad memories, and all my friends and family were there. My grandmother took us in a rental car while my stepdad took the U-Haul. It took about twelve or thirteen hours and there were a lot of rest stops in between. Being on the road like that was actually very relaxing, just seeing the trees, the road, and the other cars. When we finally made it to our new home, the place was bigger than I expected – my room even had a walk-in closet! But I was still not happy.

Living in Georgia changed my perception about my life. It started to sink in that I was getting older and I don't know a better way to explain it other than I suddenly knew that that this is my one life, that I am made of flesh, and I can feel, and that this is the only chance I'm going to get.

The big day: it was January 7, 2013 when Tall finally went to jail for ongoing violent behavior. He was only gone for a few months, but that day had a huge impact on me. My depression worsened and I mostly stayed in my room; I felt safer inside than I did out. I also started to gain

weight, was eating a ton, and writing really depressing poetry.

We stayed in Georgia for three years. Eventually my mother broke up with Tall and decided that we should move back to New York. Another really long drive with a U-haul and me and my siblings belting out songs and sometimes sitting in silence as we looked out the window. We lived briefly in Brooklyn and are now in the Bronx and I've realized that in life you have to be tough and depend on yourself, and only yourself, because no one will be there. I also discovered that I was great in math.

Today, I'm not sure who I am, but I do like the bits and pieces that I have found. I don't know where I'm going but I'll know when I get there.

"A Mother's Legacy" by Nina Collins

This is an essay I wrote for a website called Women's Voices For Change.

The death of my mother, when I was nineteen, has been the defining event of my life. I have four beloved children, started businesses, and been married twice. All these things loom large, but the loss of my mother pierced me in a way that I've never recovered from, and my love for her both buoys me and weighs me down.

Her name was **Kathleen Collins** (1942-1988), an African-American playwright, artist, short-story writer, and filmmaker, whose considerable creative output was only marginally recognized during her lifetime. When I was growing up my mother supported us with a job teaching film at The City College of New York. Simultaneously, she was constantly writing short stories and developing projects, having her plays read and produced, and making two films, neither of which were released in her lifetime.

As I neared the age my mother was when she died, forty-six, I found myself finally ready to grapple with the themes that consumed her — race, sexuality, intellectualism, women's lives. I started to dig through the considerable archive of work she left behind. What I found blew me

away: color, poetry, moments of real brilliance, and a voice so fresh that it spoke to me across the decades. I wondered if others might feel the same way, and I decided to try and share her voice and vision with the world.

The response to her work was overwhelming.

Nearly thirty years after my mother's death, her **films, Losing Ground** (1982) and **The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy** (1987), were re-mastered and released in 2015 at The Film Society at Lincoln Center in New York to great acclaim. *Losing Ground*, one of the first feature films written and directed by a black woman, resonated deeply with women across all generations and backgrounds.

In the wake of this astonishing success and revival of my mother's work, I was able to organize a collection of her never-before-published stories, **Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?**, released by Ecco Press, an imprint of HarperCollins, last December. Its sixteen short stories explore deep, universal issues of race, gender, family, and sexuality. The book has received accolades from women whose company I know my mother would have been so proud to join: Zadie Smith, Miranda July, Margo Jefferson, Leslie Jamison, Vivian Gornick, Bliss Broyard, Katie Roiphe, and many others.

The process of re-discovering and promoting my mother's work has been miraculous in many ways: healing, reconnecting, and full of love, pride, and lingering sadness.