

## **My Journey of Self-Awareness**

*I drag my feet across the carpet, falling into the comfort of my mom's acceptance as her waiting arms wrap around me. I sob away the pain of the day. Mom says, "I would do anything to be able to take this pain instead of you." I know she cries into her pillow every night for the pain I endure as I learn these life lessons. She doesn't know that I have willingly participated in making someone else feel the same. Maybe she does and is just too kind to say it. She taught me about karma - I know I deserve what is happening to me.*

In middle school, all that seems to matter is fitting in. At the Catholic schools I attended, there was a disparity between myself and those who grew up "rich." I attended three different Catholic schools from first to eighth grade. My mom was divorced which still held a stigma in the 70s. We moved frequently, always into a nicer place. The parents who judged us had no idea what she sacrificed to keep us in Catholic school and nice homes. They didn't know that as a tiny, pregnant 17-year-old, her childhood stopped and she devoted her existence to giving us a good life. Because she managed to keep them looking nice, they never knew that for decades she wore the same heels and clothes that she purchased on the clearance rack.

When the blue-eyed girls in their knee socks with the alligator logo, brown Aigner penny loafers and long, shiny blond hair began to accept me, I would have done anything to stay in their good graces. This is how I became a bully. They had all grown up in multi-story homes in the same neighborhood, had big families with lots of siblings, fathers who were lawyers or engineers, and mothers who worked the PTA and make baked goods. My mom didn't have time for those things; she had divorced my alcoholic, drug addicted father when I was five and all her time was spent keeping a roof over our heads, food in our mouths, and making sure my sister and I grew to be responsible, respectful people with strong self-esteem.

*We are sitting at the green linoleum-topped table with the silver metal legs. Mom hasn't made the steak to Dad's liking; he rages "I told you I wanted this medium rare!" He slams his chair backwards onto the floor, kisses me on the head, saying, "I'll come see you soon baby," and he's gone.*

Michelle had grown up as part of the clique. She lived in a three-story brick house that had a long driveway and a big wrap around porch with her five siblings, her mother and her father, the state's attorney. One day we all walked the paved sidewalks of middle town and showed up at her back door. She came to the door with a smile on her face, thinking we came over to hang out, but instead we hurled insults at her right there on her back porch. "Four eyes!" "You're so stupid!" I can still see her confused look, wondering why her friends of years had suddenly turned on her.

After her father committed suicide, Michelle was allowed back in the clique. I continued to hang out with the group, always wondering when they would decide I wasn't their kind; my mom was divorced, she worked, I didn't have name brand clothes. I don't remember caring that I didn't have these things except as how it related to being their friend. I do know that I was never embarrassed about my Mom; she was my hero- strong, young and beautiful.

*We are headed to school in Mom's compact car, she in her pencil skirt and pointy-toed heels, going to her job in the newspaper industry. I want to be a professional, dress like her and go to an important job like that when I grow up. I eventually spend over 25 years working in the newspaper industry. For a while she surprises me with clothes for work, but my style evolves into something different from hers.*

It's the new school year. I am trying to go outside, but suddenly several of my friends are pushing on the door from the other side and through the glass I see their faces laughing at me. At first, I think they're just teasing me - I'll come outside and we'll all laugh together. Eventually, I break through the door and I'm outside in my well-worn, nameless cardigan, my too-tight Catholic plaid skirt, and my cheap shoes. I hear jeers of "Fatso!" and "Zit Face!" My self-pity leaves no room for the awareness that I put Michelle through the same thing the previous year.

*The teacher, a curvy woman with long brown hair, is writing on the chalkboard. She is wearing a denim wrap-around skirt that ties at the hip. As she writes, the skirt begins to untie and slip. Other kids in class are laughing, but I'm not. I can feel her embarrassment as crimson rises from her neck to her face, and she turns her back to the class to tie her skirt.*

There were two teachers in eighth grade that were friends, and they were my saviors. As I endured the teasing and exclusion of the clique I was formerly part of, they allowed me to stay inside for recess. They empathized with me, told me this was a blip in the radar of an entire life and that I was worthy of good things.

We moved again and I made a best friend named Diane. She was taller than most of the girls. She had thick calves, dirty blond hair, and she chewed her cuticles until they bled, but she acted like she belonged. We started Catholic high school together. She tried out for cheerleading and made it. Because of her, I had the courage to try out too, but I missed the squad by one spot. In retrospect, that was a blessing; the cheerleaders were some of the same girls I had hung with and been ostracized by in eighth grade. I made a new friend from a public middle school in a neighboring town and another from a different Catholic grade school. I keep in touch with these last two friends over thirty years later.

*I am fifty years old, sitting on my couch, my laptop and wireless keyboard perched precariously on two TV trays. I find my eyes welling up with tears as I recall the pain I felt and inflicted in my youth. Tomorrow, I will go to my professional job where I am successful and well liked thanks to the values Mom taught me. I endured some verbal assaults from one woman when I started this new career three years ago. Through it, I remembered my past and did my best to try to understand the feelings she was going through as I came into the place she had worked for 15 years. That person who treated me poorly those three years ago is now a friend, just as Mom predicted.*