

“Defenders”
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My mama took satisfaction in believing she raised a fighter. I guess you could say she was an optimist. But mama didn't raise a fighter, she raised a defender. There is a big difference between the two.

I wanted to kill a man long before I wanted to love one. I learned that being quiet doesn't always lead to being safe. Sometimes the person you care for the most could also be the person who makes you the most unhappy. A girl should always defend herself, no matter how unfair the fight.

People are unpredictable. He had the ability to lift the room in gregarious laughter. His blue eyes soaked up the attention. He loved hard. He would also put his fist through a window pane if he didn't like its point of view. The picky temperament he carried reminded me of an old house; strong one minute and fragile the next.

Our house was temperamental. From the creaky old floors to the kitchen cabinets that never quite shut, she had her own personality. The kitchen light flickered and we usually paid little attention to its moody behavior. I remember my finger carelessly flipping the light switch down as I walked by. The sunlight's rays offered to brighten the room but it wasn't my decision to make. Controlling the lights somehow equated to controlling him. I could see the darkness behind his pupils. I could feel the tension building. I walked away slowly because that usually helped. But this time was different. Every step forward was one step deeper into disrespect. My slow exit turned into a breathless panic. Out the door I chose a giant leap instead of shuffling down the old brick steps. I never looked back. He was strong but I was quick. The sun was kind enough to quickly dry our bed sheets on the old clothes line and the sheets were kind enough to hide my underweight body. I would sit in the grass for the remainder of the afternoon. My fingers carefully traced the floral pattern on the sheets. I softly hummed my favorite song. I found joy inside of fear. On this day, fear defeated aggression.

Some people are born with black hearts and healthy minds. While others have good hearts but their brains flicker, like the old kitchen light. His brain flickered often. His hate was a malignancy that would rapidly spread throughout his body. Too quick for him to save himself and too powerful to save me. He loved hard but he could hate just as strongly.

There were more times than not that aggression would overpower fear. With flip of a switch, His mind would convince him that his own child was an enemy. Out of sight did not mean out of mind. Sitting cross-legged on top of a messy bed, I enjoyed being alone. My secondhand quilt was balled up against the wall and a careless mound of stuffed animals was where I laid my head at night. I usually spent my time doodling or keeping track of my days using a beat up notebook I called my journal. The bedroom door never locked, The antique knobs were too rusted to function. It didn't matter anyway. He didn't use the door knobs. His footsteps became louder and louder, echoing in the empty hallway. With one brute kick of his cracked leather boot, the door burst open. The hinges loosened. The lower half of the door was left with massive, interlacing splinters.

The sound of his heavy breathing was drowned out by the familiar sound of his belt being ripped away from the tight loops of his faded jeans. That was a skill he mastered much like a magician effortlessly pulling a tablecloth from under a stack of undisturbed china.

I held my breath. I closed my eyes so tight, all I could see were tiny white spots on the inside of my eyelids. I wished those spots were stars and I wished I was alone under the midnight sky. I would rather be anywhere else but in this room in this house. I tuned out the profanity and thunderous yells. That was a skill I perfected. I tried not to cry as the leather embedded itself into my skin. My porcelain skin immediately began to swell and turned a specific shade of red tinged with purple. Before I could exhale I could hear the sound of leather slicing through the air. Again. And again.

I opened my blurred eyes so he could see the pain I felt. That didn't work. Again. In a voice that I worked up to a whisper I said, "no." Followed by a weak "please." As I lay collapsed into myself I heard him make one approving grunt. My brain flickered and I resuscitated my damaged legs and numb feet. Standing on my bed put me at eye level with him. I was small but my rage easily matched his. With a clenched jaw and razor blade eyes I tightened my grip and my knuckles turned four shades lighter. This was the stance of a fighter not a defender. He met my rage with a smirk and in one strike to my chest I fell onto the cold wooden floor. I wanted to kill a man before I wanted to love one.

The days were repetitive. I replaced doodles with tally marks in my journal. Eventually, his brain flickered less and his body grew tired. I became accustomed to holding myself together with tape so I could delicately stitch him back together. On a Monday I blew out 18 candles. I bundled up my quilt, took a deep breath and walked out of the patch-worked wooden door. Over the following years I celebrated milestones and quietly worked to stitch the pieces of myself back together. I never stopped phone calls or holiday visits to the old house. It never occurred to me that I didn't have to love him.

Most of my youth was spent defending my thoughts, my words, my actions, and my body. But I never stopped fighting for myself. With the final stitch, I became whole. I went back home and I buried my youth. I grieved her but I knew she would beam with pride looking at the person we became.

I think mama was right.

I am a fighter.