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Like Skipping Stones

by Stacia Hill

Pride Rock

When I was very young we had an old gray and white couch, speckled with small tufts of pink, pastel yellow, and key-lime green. It had sections that reclined and portions where a footrest could be coaxed out beneath your legs with a sharp tug on a wooden handle. The cushions were worn thin and if I ran a little ways and leapt onto the couch my knees would sink into the thin padding and smack against metal pieces of the frame. The arms were wide and sturdy and I climbed on top of them and sat on my hands and knees, looking out over the expanse of the living room, pretending I was Simba from *The Lion King*—perched just at the edge of Pride Rock.

A time came when my parents decided the couch needed to be replaced by a burnt-orange and cream patterned sofa that had come from my grandparents' basement. My parents hadn't quite reached the divorce-stage at this point and apparently their decision to exile the couch had been reached in parental consensus, meaning they weren't interested in hearing my opinion on the subject. I decided to refuse to ever get off the couch again, therefore making it impossible for anyone to physically remove it and me from the living room.

Much of my short life had been lived on that couch, watching *Blue's Clues* and *Little Bear* on PBS in the mornings before anyone else in the house was awake. I would drag my plush Blue dog out with me, climb up on the counter to reach a box of cereal, then spoon as much sugar as I thought was reasonable into my bowl of Cheerios. I was very responsible when I did all this—I wiped up any milk I spilled and put the old coffee canister full of sugar back into the cupboard when I was finished.

When the couch was finally taken from me I'm certain I cried. I cried very easily as a child and developed strong bonds with any inanimate objects I had known for a long time. Even now I can remember the feel of the couch's upholstery rubbing against my face, and the smoky-dirty smell of the back cushions.

Baby Dolls with Private Parts

After my parents' divorce someone decided it was a good idea for me to start seeing a psychologist or a therapist—I'm still not sure what she was exactly. I was eight years old and I felt simultaneously distrustful and intrigued by the strange women I spent two hours with every week. She was young and had dark hair bobbed at the shoulder. Most of what I remember is playing board games with her – not *Monopoly* or *Candy Land*, but strange games I knew had been made-up just for special use in therapy meetings. She would give me little toy people and animals to play with and ask me their names and whether I was happy or angry with them. I thought she was kind of weird—I didn't really understand what she was getting at, and I probably answered most of her questions by saying, "I don't know."

After we were finished with a board game she let me pick one or two little erasers out of a brown paper bag to keep as prizes. I would dump the bag out on the table and spend forever picking through the little dogs and butterflies before deciding which one specifically I wanted to keep. I never used those erasers. I just collected them over the weeks and kept them together in a little plastic box in my bedroom.

The therapist had one room we used for board games and another with a foam-covered floor and two-foot wide exercise balls and what I now realize was an actual punching bag hanging from the ceiling. One day I noticed

some plastic crates stored up high with lots of huge baby dolls inside. The dolls weren't the standard size and shape of manufactured Cabbage Patch Kids—they were all different sizes and ages. Some were infant babies and some older toddlers. They had all different skin tones and hair colors. My therapist took one down for me to examine. I looked her over and noticed her body was made from hard plastic instead of the normal fabric stuffed with little beads and polyester filling. I started to undo the Velcro of her pink dress before my therapist stopped me, “These dolls are special—under their clothes they have bodies just like real girls and boys.”

She helped me remove the little girl's dress and showed me how the doll had private parts and a butt just like a real person.

“Why?” I asked.

“That's just how they are.”

I didn't understand and I suddenly didn't want to talk about the dolls anymore. She put the doll away and I decided I wanted to play a different game of kicking around the big exercise balls.

Nostril Worms

When I was twelve my mom moved into a community rehabilitation house to help with her recovery from alcoholism (and other addictions I would later discover). During her stay in the Share House she made several friends who had long-lasting presences in our lives. One of those friends was named Danny and he had a very young daughter named Isabella. She had white-blond hair and visitation times with her father several days a week. My brother and I visited the Share House after school on Mondays and Wednesdays. We would play outside in the small yard with Isabella, showing her ladybugs we caught from the birch tree and rolling around in the grass.

Danny loved to make jokes and do outrageous stunts to make kids laugh. One of his favorite tricks was catching earthworms off sidewalks after rainfall and sucking them in through his nostrils. Then he would reach in through his open mouth and grab the worm that was dangling in his throat and pull it back out to show us. The worms were never harmed during the stunt—except for the few he decided to swallow whole once the basic maneuver no longer shocked me.

Danny left the Share House of his own accord not long after he had started living there. When my mom had been living in the house for long enough to earn the right to have free time on her own she started taking my brother and me to Danny's dark apartment for visits. He owned two ball pythons he wouldn't let me hold even though I was very much interested in touching them and not at all squeamish about snakes. He also made me my very own walking stick from a piece of driftwood that was naturally shaped like a child-sized cane. He sanded the wood down until it was a pale pine color and coated it with glossy varnish. I think my mom was happier with my gift than I ever was—it sat in the corner of her apartment untouched for years.

Inside Churches

When I was young I believed in God but I rarely went to any church and I had little understanding of religion. If you summed together all of the time I have ever spent inside of churches you would find the majority of those hours consisted of me lying on the floor in dark rooms as adults perched in folding chairs nearby and discussed their problems with alcohol. In summer the rooms were always too hot. It felt weird to sit in a dark room with hot air because I was accustomed to the idea that darkness—nighttime—was associated with coolness and relief from the summer sun. I would sit by a cracked basement window, beside stained electric fans that swept side to side in a slow rhythm. Sometimes I would try to gather enough light from the thin long windows to read a book by. Other times I would sit and listen to the hushed voices of the adults as they talked about their jobs and families and God.

My mom rarely spoke at all in AA meetings when my brother and I were present in the room. Instead she would listen to others and nod her head in silent support. After the meetings were over, people would gather outside the church and smoke cigarette after cigarette and talk for what felt like forever. I walked around outside and tried to catch the attention of my mom without getting too close and risking her introducing me to one of her AA

friends. They were usually very nice to me when I became sucked into their conversations, but I didn't like talking to the men rocking from heel to heel and the women who would fuss over my name and hair. After the meetings were over the adults were usually in excellent moods, and I was usually bored enough to happily turn my attention toward homework.

Pets My Mom Bought My Dad Against His Wishes

When I was three years old my mom surprised my dad on Valentine's Day with a puppy. I remember the little pile of curly white fur sat atop a ratty pink towel. My dad named him Reggie, and although he was furious with my mom for buying a dog without first asking, he was never the type of man who could resist a puppy and so we kept the dog.

Reggie was a cock-a-poo, a cross between a cocker spaniel and a poodle, and he was thirty pounds of fluffy old-man crabbiness. He didn't much care for me when I was very young but he adored my dad. When my parents got divorced five years later my dad moved into an apartment that wouldn't allow dogs and Reggie had to go live with my grandparents in Kalispell. He stayed there for three years and by the time we moved into a new house and got him back to Missoula we only had two more years left with him.

One Father's Day when I was around ten or eleven I decided I wanted to buy my dad a pet bird as a gift. He had never given me any indication he was interested in owning a bird, but somehow I convinced my mom to spend her money on a cage and a baby cockatiel for his benefit. When my brother and I presented him with his gift he was surprised and seemed to me to be excited. A woman at the pet shop instructed us on how to feed the baby bird formula with a syringe. Twice a day we held the cockatiel named Boyd, and slowly squeezed the contents of a syringe through the side of his beak.

Over time Boyd began to act lethargic and mellow. I would let him sit on my chest as I watched TV and he would climb up and snuggle next to my earlobe. Then one day I came home to find Boyd perky and active in his cage. I reached in to pet him but he squawked at me and lunged towards my hand in an attempt to bite. He was like an entirely different bird.

Years later my father admitted that we had accidentally killed the first Boyd slowly via simultaneous suffocation and starvation. When we had received instruction on how to properly feed the baby bird formula with the syringe we were told to feed the formula down the wrong side of his beak. As I understood it, one side of a bird's beak led down into the esophagus and the other side opened down into the trachea. When we fed Boyd his formula we had directed the contents down his trachea and into his lungs rather than into his esophagus and stomach. After the first Boyd died my dad snuck out and purchased a similar looking cockatiel that was significantly less friendly than the first Boyd had been. The second Boyd lived several years until we woke one morning to find him dead on the bottom of his cage.

My Mom's Boyfriend with Terminal Brain Cancer

Since giving birth to me at the age of twenty, my mom has gone very few years of her life without having a husband or boyfriend of some sort. Her most recent companion came in the form of a terminally ill man named Jerry with a tendency to get closer to me than I am generally comfortable with. He once told me a story of how he had gone into a rage and threatened to kill a woman who worked as a secretary in the VA house where he was previously living. "They kicked me out, can you believe that?" He spoke with an obvious lilt in his voice that suggested I should be just as outraged as he was. "They called the police to escort me out!" he exclaimed in apparent disbelief.

"Oh man," I replied, not knowing what else to say.

This past year my mom and Jerry celebrated New Years alongside my grandparents, aunt and uncle, my

girlfriend Michelle, and myself. We all sat together in a hotel room and my mom and Jerry left frequently to smoke outside and sip alcohol from some hidden container I think they thought we didn't know about. When it was time for them to leave, my uncle stood up to drive them back to their apartment and Jerry walked over to Michelle and me to say goodbye. He took Michelle's hand in his own and she seemed uncomfortable with his touch but she allowed him to bend down as if he were going to plant a kiss on the back of her hand like a knight bidding farewell to a royal lady. Instead, he darted out his tongue and licked the skin on the backside of her hand. She wrenched her arm back from his grasp.

“Did you lick her?” My mom laughed and smacked Jerry on the backside of his head.

“He's just joking around!” she attempted to assure us, still laughing. My uncle ushered them out the door of the hotel room. Michelle left to the bathroom to wash her hands. I felt like I was going to throw up.