

Poem

The ACE of spades

Leighton Schreyer 

Shame swallows me whole sometimes, in one greedy gulp,
scorning me for duelling with depression;
for walking through life on a tightrope, always on edge and afraid to fall;
for wilting away when I *should* be flourishing.

Because (1) I was never sworn at, insulted, humiliated, or put down,
but blanketed with unequivocal *I love yous*; tucked into bed with tender affection.

Because (2) my chubby apple cheeks were never bruised nor blemished –
only ever marked by Flamingo Pink smooches and Deep Plum pecks.

Because (3) the seeds of sex were sewn by picture books,
in soil tended to by the birds and the bees; and buds only blossomed
in the radiant heat after being swathed in milky layers of sunscreen
born from mother's breast, blooming into something beautiful.

Because (4) I knew how much I was loved:
as wide as Big Nut-brown Hare's arms could reach,
as high as he could hop, across the river and over the hills,
to the moon and back.

Because (5) my pink princess lunch pail was always packed
with stencilled sandwiches and wholesome, home-cooked meals,
and my biggest problem in the morning was deciding what to wear –
which brand to plaster on my chest and parade around the hallways
like a badge of honour, signifying my rank.

Because (6) my parents separated like oil from water: with ease.

Because (7) my mother was never pushed or shoved or beaten or bitten;
guns were never drawn, knives never wielded, threats never issued
before counting to three — and even then, they were forestalled
by halves and quarters and eighths and tenths.

Because (8) drugs meant Advil or Echinacea, not opioids or speed;
and it took an undergraduate pharmacology course
for me to learn that Molly and Adam and Crystal and Dex
were not just names of people;
and the only thing that revealed the joy my father found
in pouring himself a glass of beer after another long, laborious day at work –
in the way the can hissed then cracked like a rattlesnake
slithering through the silent night, preparing to strike its prey –
was the soft pillow my head sunk into at bedtime;
the one my lanky legs wrapped around when my father
became a walrus in the water or a cheetah on all fours.

Because (9) laughter filled our living room, happiness our home.

Because (10) prisons, I was told, protected me from criminals and crooks,
outlaws and offenders – bad guys guilty of wrongdoing,
never of being done wrong.
Other people.
Them, not us.

Because (ACE Score = 0) test score tallies tell me that
I have not experienced any trauma.
Life dealt me the ace of spades.

But what if life pulses with a fullness that can't be traced?
What if the trees – thick and luscious, branches stretching high –
blind you to the fungus worming its way inside?
What if you can't see the corroding centre flesh?

Will you care enough to look?
To listen?
Before it's too late.

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