

I Am Here

There is something about being left that stays with you; by *left* I mean being adopted, given away, relinquished, abandoned, thrown away. As I look back on my life I can now understand my actions and reactions towards people I loved and people I in fact didn't love but felt I should have. The girl who gave birth to me and gave me away. The woman who adopted me and left me at five. The man who adopted me at birth and I considered my only real parent until he died only days ago. The women, so many women, who came and went like ghosts; phantoms who I learned not to trust, not to believe in; what was the point, they would all leave eventually.

My father married his fifth wife when I was thirteen. I told him I was not going to call this one mom; I was finished using that name for these women who were only desperate to please my father while raising 'his children'. *Mom, mother, mama*, those words didn't really mean anything to me; I had begun my feelings of ambivalence then; always torn between caring too much and not at all. Walking the tightrope with people in my life; desperately trying to find people who would take care of me, and then pulling away out of fear when they did; it cost too much to really care. Feeling guilty about everything and not understanding why. Asking people if they were angry with me and not believing their answer, whether yes or no. The pleaser, the doormat, the mother, the daughter, the friend, the helper – the chameleon – always changing to fit the situation, to fix the problem, to save the day, so not to be left again.

I was in the eighth grade when I started to drink; I was a slight teenager, but I could drink more than the boys three times my size. It was a necessary escape for me, my dangerous refuge; riding my BMX bicycle to keg parties and goat roasts in the small white, conservative rural town in which I lived. I was an outsider, with my brown skin and nappy hair. This tiny, small-minded town, where I was forbidden to date any of the boys in school; always the bridesmaid, never the bride. I was the funny girl, best all around, best personality. A boy I loved once told me that he adored my hands; they didn't look like 'black people hands' he said; it surprised him and pleased me. This boy whose parents threatened to disown him, or at least take his car away from him, if he considered having me as his girlfriend. The fact that I was standing beside him while they laid out this ultimatum seemed not to matter all to anyone but me, stunned and ashamed that my skin was slightly, but ever-so importantly darker than theirs. And what could I do? Standing there like a statue while these people talked about me like I was not even in the room. It was then when I started to really wonder; am I invisible? Can't these people see me here? Am I here? My thoughts then went to the boy and how he must have felt. But then, what could he have done really? After all, they were his parents, and it was a nice car.

You begin to wonder if you are invisible when these things happen to you. In meetings when you share your ideas and opinions and people look past you like you are not there. And then when you begin to think that your ideas are nonsense, the person sitting next to you repeats your exact comments and everyone suddenly nods in agreement and expresses their earnest and heartfelt appreciation for the revelation! I sometimes force myself to lift my hands up and stare at them; just to check, to make sure, to ask myself, am I really here? A psychiatrist once asked me if I felt like an

alien; I do. But not like an alien in the sense in which he was asking; not like people who truly feel they come from some other place and are now trapped in the wrong dimension. But rather like someone who doesn't fit neatly anywhere. Someone who *can* fit most anywhere because she understands how to change to fit the surroundings, but someone who doesn't fit in naturally; she always wears a mask.

Sometimes the world looks blurry, fuzzy, in a very literal way. Sometimes I have to squint to see things clearly and for just a moment, things make sense. It usually doesn't for very long, but those few moments are glory, and I can breathe; and I am here.