

The Choices You Make

The muffled tone, seemingly louder than usual, accompanies a blank screen as I wait for the familiar face to appear. I have not seen my mom, in person or even on a screen, in over three years, in order to keep a healthy distance, or so I tell myself.

The screen lights up as the face of someone who has lived a rough life appears. Her tan, leathery skin, short blonde hair, and deep wrinkles, are accompanied by yellowed dentures. Years of no dental care and drug use have taken all of her teeth from her. The dingy, smoked-stained walls of the trailer and sheets separating the rooms fill in the background of my computer screen. My mind instantly returns to a younger period of my life, and I feel as though I am 17 years old, all over again.

“Ya have never asked me ‘bout my life before son,” she states in that thick southern draw and inability to ever clearly speak, as though being in poverty is somehow linked to being stupid. She inhales a puff of her cigarette, long and slow, as if she is contemplating what portions of her life she really wants to divulge to her son. “Ya brother is back in prison,” she states casually, as if that is normal. I remind her that this is about her and poverty, not a casual conversation to catch up and most certainly not about my brother, who I have been estranged from for nearly a decade.

There is a sudden change in Lori’s eyes, a sort of childish cower. She seems to be embarrassed, a quality not many would use to describe my mother. “I wasn’t always this way... poor, ya know.” Lori grew up in a two-parent household in California, with a drunk and abusive father, but “we always had a roof over our heads, and food in our tummies,” she states as if providing food and a home are adequate reimbursement for abuse and drunken nights. Her family life was short-lived as she fell into a group of friends who made bad choices. “Y’all know

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how it is, drugs n drinkin n stealin jus ta get more money to keep doin the drugs n drinkin.” Lori dropped out of school at the end of eighth grade and began coming and going as she pleased.

“I left that shithole just after I turned fifteen,. I seen those people for who they was and they wasn’t good people.” This is where her journey into poverty, and the inability to ever make it out, began. I see the trembling in her old, worn hands and the tears begin to fill her eyes. “I never had anyone to truly teach me how to be a good person, I was always thinkin I’d found a good man who would teach me how to be good and take care of me, but I always chose the wrong ones, ya knew who they was. I tried to get half of ‘em to be a daddy to ya.”

Leaving home meant becoming a sort of gypsy, selling drugs or stealing to buy food and have some sort of cash to survive. Somehow, she never quite remembers how she got where she was and the inference can be made that it is from the heavy drug use. “Foggy brain” she calls it. Lori ended up in Florida, with no one except her boyfriend and his friend. “In Florida, that’s where I realized I was really poor. I got pregnant with you there and realized I really was on my own. ” Despite knowing how bad things were, she decided to marry her boyfriend. Needless to say, her first marriage did not last long. “I went to have ya and ya were asleep, just a sleepin baby when ya were born.” This story is something I had never heard my mother talk about before ,and I most certainly did not know this was how I was allegedly born. I have been in that hospital room, watching my two children being born, and I know for certain, no baby is born sleeping. This is where I begin to realize that poverty is not just a lack of money. Lori is uneducated ,and it is becoming more and more obvious to me.

Life went from bad to worse in Florida after I was born. Lori explains, “there I was, alone, and I didn’t even have a crib for ya, thank God I had my food stamps so I could get ya formula and there was this church I found kinda close that I could get diapers from for ya.”. The

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ebbs and flows of life continued, and eventually things had gone to a dark place where Lori knew she needed to at least take a break, so she headed back “home” to California to see her mom.

I could see tears running down her face, and I was beginning to think that maybe this interview should have taken place over the phone instead of via zoom. I may have grown up and worked my way out of poverty, but there are some things a son never wants to hear from his mom, let alone have to look her in the eyes as she says it. “I took this bus from Florida to California to go see my mom. I didn’t have any cash and only enough money to get ‘bout halfway there.” At 17 years old, Lori walked onto a greyhound bus with a one-year-old and a wooden trunk filled with her belongings. As the story continues to unfold, I soon realize this had to have been one of the scariest moments of my mother’s life. The details are not what is important, but I soon realize that this story is one she could have never imagined she would be telling that same little baby who was on her hip when she got on that greyhound bus.

When Lori finally arrived back in Orange, California, with an unspeakable disgust in herself and the choices she had made to have enough cash to get her there, she arrived at her mom’s new home, divorced and seemingly leading a normal life. “She begged me to stay there, stay there with you and finish school. If I have any regrets in life, it is not staying there with her, raising ya right.”

“I did everythang I could think ah, raisin ya and ya brothers. I sold my soul to the devil at a very young age, but it kept you boys fed and mostly with a roof over ya head.” She continues with story after story about trying to get out of poverty but not being able to. The stories consist of going to Mexico to see a dentist because her teeth were rotten and her kids had never seen a dentist before, and not eating for a week because her food stamps ran out, and there was only enough food in the trailer for my brothers and me. The thought of getting out of poverty and

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making a real life was what she always wanted, or so she claims. She talks about never having the willpower to follow through and work hard, always taking the easy way out. “I know I’m even like that today. I just quit my job at that car wash. It was too much pressure and I don’t like workin’ those weird hours.” This is who Lori is, and I am not sure if this is the poverty she continuously lives in or if this is just a personality trait of hers. For someone who never got out of poverty, she definitely does not appear to be worried about money, and that right there makes me worry. That healthy distance is looking more and more tempting right now. The stress of having a family member, especially my mom, living in poverty, has somehow caused me more stress than I think she experiences. I may have been born into that lifestyle, but I most definitely have never understood it, been okay with it, or cared to even be around those who live in it.

“God got me out James, I ain’t sure where I’d be right now if I hadn’t had God with me,” she states. I am unsure what she means by “out” as I clearly see the living conditions and hear her speak about quitting her recent job and my brother's most recent imprisonment. Lori was never able to forgive herself for what she put her kids through, allowing them to grow up in such a way. The conversation continued on, and although the stories were difficult for her to tell, there was a cathartic aspect for her. “We never got out James, but y’all did, you never came back...will ya ever come here again?” I cannot manage to answer her, and instead I change the subject, bringing it back to the topic at hand, her experience with poverty. She drops it, knowing I will never expose my children to her life or the home she has created out there, and continues telling different aspects of her life pertaining to poverty and how she still is not quite sure how she managed to get herself so deep into the wrong crowd.

“James, I’ll neva be able ta forgive myself after ya brother did what he did.” She talks about Steven a lot during this conversation. My late brother, Steven, took his own life after

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getting in too deep with the wrong people who my mom had brought us around as children. He was unable to find any way out of what he had gotten himself into. “Is it my fault?” This is not the first time she has asked me this, as if my opinion really will make her feel better. The truth is growing up the way I did, I was exposed to things that most people die never having experienced. My mom brought us around bad people, bad people sucked two of her children in, and they could not get out. That is the cold hard truth. It may not be her fault, but she brought those people into our lives, and these are the unfortunate outcomes of it.

That is poverty, a choice she made, a continuation of bad choices and bad people, according to a woman who lived it, continues to live it, and raised kids in it. Life is all about the choices you make.