

An Apology to My Son

A memoir

Zena Carnation

*For all the Mothers before me.
For every Mother after me.*

Intellectual Property of Zena Carnation

Trigger warning: The following contains mentions of rape (non-graphic), sexual assault (non-graphic), domestic violence and child abuse, self-harm, disordered eating behavior, alcohol abuse, and graphic imagery of medical trauma, infanticidal and suicidal ideation. Readers' discretion is advised.

I care about your mental health. Please take breaks if you need them.

If you feel uncomfortable about a word, description, or situation in this book, I invite you to sit with that discomfort.

If you are able, please take a moment to ask yourself why you are feeling discomfort.

If you are in a space to do so, please pause to dig deeper into your "why". You might ask yourself: How has the way I've been raised affected my perspective on this word, description, or situation? How has my society influenced my perspective on this word, description, or situation? Is my perspective harmful to myself or others? What could I change to bring empowerment for myself and others into this word, description, or situation?

Whatever you're feeling, your emotions are valid. This is just an invitation to move through reactivity into reflection. Take care ♥.

Preface

The only reason that I am able to write about this now is because this is no longer the state that I am in. The past three years have been the hardest and scariest years of my life. I am so grateful that this time has passed and that my post-partum psychosis has faded and returned to being just regular ol' depression. Because that's what I had. For three years. The most severe form of post-partum depression; a psychosis.

I told no one. Not even my husband knew how often and how close I came to killing myself and our child. I told no one because I was afraid and ashamed. I was afraid that my baby would be taken away from me. I was ashamed because the thoughts that I had were so very far from what a loving mother is supposed to have.

I needed help, but I didn't reach out because of the stigma our society places on mental health, and because of the complete lack of maternity care available in our country. I didn't know where to look for possible resources, or if they even existed. I am sharing my story, my struggles, in the hope that it will bring more awareness to this crisis in America. Please take notice; our mothers need more support.

Prologue

My mother divorced my birth father when I was eight years old. He was physically and emotionally abusive to all of us—my mother, older brother, younger sister, and me. Despite this relatively early separation, my father's treatment of us left a life-long wound within each of us. My mother also has her own demons that my siblings and I have witnessed her fighting against for as long as I can remember; chief among them was depression, ADHD, anxiety disorder, and bipolar disorder. She was not diagnosed with any of these conditions until us kids were on our way out the door. Combine this with my father's anger management issues and whatever else has caused his mental instability, genetically speaking, I am not off to a good start in the mental health gene pool. I very clearly inherited my mother's depression and anxiety.

In the past ten years, I have been sexually assaulted and harassed more times than I can count, and I have been raped three times. Repressing all these traumas has left me a hair's breadth away from falling into a festering pit of darkness within me. If I actually took the time to think about all the hurt and pain that has been inflicted on me by males, of how unsafe I feel every time I leave my house, I would start screaming and never stop. All of this is why I never wanted to have children in the first place.

Pre-Pregnancy

But that's not entirely true. When I was little, I used to imagine how many kids I would have when I grew up and what their names would be. Depending on the day, I might want to have two or three kids, always either two girls or two girls and a boy. My sister and I liked the same names, so we would argue over who got to use which name for their imaginary daughter. It became an unspoken competition: the first one to have a female child got to pick the most coveted name. Silly, really, to fantasize about having a family so far in the future when the idea was completely abstract. We had no comprehension of what having a family entailed, ours being as broken as it was. We just knew that we each would have a family one day with more than one child.

Fast forward to college, I always told anyone who asked that I would never have kids. They are too messy, too time consuming, and cost too much money to take care of. I was a broke undergraduate who only cared about their freedom, with a future wide open to opportunities. All of my life experiences up to that point had taught me that the world we live in is not safe. There are good things, here and there, that can bring joy and hope and restore our faith in humanity. But those things are few and far between. For the most part, our world is worsening with every day: racists coming out of the woodwork, sexual predators in high places, mass shootings on the rise, a broken education, health, and criminal justice system, politicians serving their own self-interests more blatantly than ever; putting their party over the needs of the people. Why would I ever want to bring a child into a world like this?

More than that, I never shared with anyone my most deep-seated fear that I would fail as a parent more spectacularly than my own parents failed me. I was afraid that any child of mine would inherit my mental health problems and suffer through the same inner turmoil that I have experienced my entire life. Would she/he/they wish that they had never been born too? Would they feel as alone as I have always felt? Why would I want to force another being to go through the “human experience”? Life just seemed like a sick joke to me most of the time. I wanted nothing to do with continuing the human race.

Depression and anxiety are something that I’ve struggled with for a very long time. I had depression when I didn’t even know what depression was. Ever since the reality of the world we live in struck me, when I realized that not everyone and everything was okay all the time, when I learned that how our father treated us was not normal and not okay, when my mom filed for divorce and took us away, ever since then, I have felt that living is pointless. I have felt that what other people thought was important was actually trivial.

I didn’t fit in or have many friends because I didn’t care about what they cared about—fashion, gossip, boys, pop culture. We were in grade school; why did any of this matter? I just didn’t get it, and felt very insecure about that, so I did my best to pretend in order to fit in. I had a lot of practice pretending to be something I’m not, while inside I was waiting—waiting for this awkward phase to be over, to leave this school and never look back, to go somewhere better and never have to see these superficial people again.

While I waited for my life to begin, I devoured books. I read science fiction and fantasy mostly; novels about adventure and hidden powers discovered. A particular favorite series of books were the Bloody Jack novels. I loved the stories of girls who dressed as boys so that they

could go on swashbuckling adventures and do all the fun exploring and mucking about that boys could do but that girls could not. They were my escape from this dreadful world of middle school and high school, and the expectation that if I wanted any kind of attention from boys, even though I just wanted platonic friendship, I had to dress in skin-revealing clothes and be willing to perform sexual acts.

This started in 6th grade and it is not an exaggeration. I got into the habit of only flirting whenever I talked to a boy, just so that they would pay attention and talk to me. I vacillated between this and being a quiet nerd, which led me to being treated like an androgynous being, completely ignored like a piece of furniture until a use could be found for me; passing a beaker in chemistry or sharing my notes from English Lit. Books were my only escape as I bided my time until I was gone from these places.

I never thought about hurting myself until later on in high school. It was during a time when I had an eating disorder, and my very first serious boyfriend. It wasn't until my college freshman student orientation, when the Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center did a presentation for us, that I learned and realized that my entire first relationship was steeped in sexual assault. At the time that it was happening, I thought that it was normal in relationships. I thought that the way I felt—reluctant, disconnected, obligated—just meant that something was wrong with me.

I knew that I had to break up with him before going to college. He wanted me to put him before everything else. But there were only two things that my mom drilled into my head while growing up: I can be whatever I want to be through hard work and dedication, and never put a boy before my education. In this, I would listen to my mom. I knew my first relationship wouldn't last, but I was having a hard time leaving the first boy I ever loved and who had ever

loved me in return. His raping me was the catalyst for me leaving him. That, I knew at least, was not normal and not okay.

My depression has always been a constant companion. So much so, that on the few occasions that I wasn't depressed, I didn't know what to do with myself. The intensity of my depressive feelings has slowly increased, layer upon layer, over time. What started out as thoughts of pointlessness, turned to pointlessness and thoughts of self-harm. I've thought about it but could never bring myself to cut my own skin. I didn't want there to be external scars when I already have so many internal ones. I didn't want anyone to see my insides turned out.

In high school I became anorexic, to a point. I didn't stop eating completely. I still had to be able to perform at school and on sports teams. I ate breakfast and lunch to get me through the day, and then only allowed myself to eat one or two snacks when I got home from school. I kept track with smiley faces in a notebook. If I only ate one snack I gave myself a happy face. If I ate two or more I gave myself a sad face. I would skip dinner and make any excuse not to have to eat with my family. My mother never said anything. My sister knew what I was doing. She never said anything either. We kept each other's secrets. Just like how I knew she was cutting, but I returned the favor and didn't say anything.

The first time that I had any thoughts about suicide and its being an acceptable option to end this pointless and useless life was when I was on Accutane. The first four months of Accutane had been fine. I was no more or less depressed than I was before I started the medication. But the last two months were awful. I lied to the dermatologist because I was so close to completing the treatment. I had definite thoughts of suicide and how it wouldn't make a

difference if I was here or not. It startled me to think that something I had never entertained before would so suddenly seem acceptable.

After my Accutane treatment, my suicidal thoughts went dormant in the back of my mind. But it was almost as if once the door was opened it could never be closed again. Those thoughts trickled out occasionally throughout the years. More so during my sophomore year of college, when I threw away my self-respect because I was tired of being ignored by males. I say males because I have since learned that real men don't treat people the way that I was treated during this time. When I tried to regain my self-respect and move away from the party scene, I was raped by a guy I had gone on two dates with, whom I had met while he was working at a local campus eatery. We had been texting for about three weeks, getting to know each other. On our third date, he invited me to his place to make dinner for me. It never occurred to me that I would be unsafe there. I dived into the bar scene after this happened, desperate to forget.

My anxiety has manifested synchronously with my depression. My father was obsessed with arriving to places on time. To him, on time was getting somewhere ten to twenty minutes earlier than the start time. His obsession with time became mine because if we were late, we were in trouble and would be physically punished for it. Like my depression, the manifestations of my anxiety have increased in intensity over time. For example, my anxiety involving Time meant that in high school I was constantly checking the clock for the time in my classrooms. Every fifteen to thirty minutes I was looking at the clock. When I went on a school trip, I asked my group leaders for the time so often that they began to preemptively tell me whenever we arrived at our destinations, had breaks, or when we were leaving. They laughed, perhaps thinking it was a joke or a cute little neurosis. But for fourteen days they did this for me

and it was such a relief to not have to ask anymore—for them to just tell me the time so that I would know.

In college my anxiety with arriving somewhere on time combined with my anxiety due to school work, which resulted in full blown panic attacks. The attendance policy that was enforced meant that I had to arrive to class on time or early, otherwise I would be marked down as late, which would then count as a “no show” even if you were there. Participation in classes was also expected and made a part of your grade. I had to have all of the assigned reading done in order to know what to talk about in class. Except that it is physically impossible to finish all the reading assigned each day for every single class when you attend college.

On the days that I couldn’t skim through all the reading that mattered, I would internally panic while getting ready to go to class. I would agonize and debate over whether or not I should go to class now, even though I hadn’t finished the reading assignment and I could be picked on at random to answer questions that I had no clue what to respond with. By the time I decide to just go and do my best I look at the clock and five minutes have passed. So on top of not finishing the reading, I would now have to show up late and my professor will give me this disapproving look for disrupting the lecture. With this addition of disapproval to my already acknowledged homework failure, I debated again the merits of going to class.

Then, I’d look at the clock and a total of ten minutes had passed and my mind careened sideways and I dropped my stuff, crawled into bed, pull the sheets over my head, and sobbed. This has happened on many occasions. I have always been a solid B student. But because my attendance record was so bad, my grades were much lower than what my work actually reflected. Nowadays, my anxiety is no longer the only reason that I have panic attacks.

It was during my junior year in college that I had finally figured out how to manage my depression and anxiety. I ate mostly nutrient-dense foods. I had to be careful about what I ate because of my IBS. I worked out twice a day, five to six times a week, self-learned yoga in the morning, cardio in the evening, with weightlifting thrown in one to two times a week.

For the first time in my life, I felt like I was on top of the world. I felt strong and alive, and happy. For once both my mind and my body were functioning synchronously. I still had a boatload of stress, anxiety, and depression, but I had the tools and time that I needed to handle them.

This is what worked for me. This is what helped me keep going during my undergraduate years. How would I be able to do all this to take care of myself while also taking care of kids at the same time? I had my doubts, so I just wrote off the whole idea of motherhood.

My relationship with men has always been difficult. Because of my father's abuse, I grew up intrinsically distrusting all men. I wish the other men in my childhood had proven that this distrust was misplaced. Unfortunately, my uncles each had their faults and failed relationships which marked them as "unsafe" or "can't trust them" in my eyes.

With my father out of our lives, my brother took up his mantle and continued to emotionally abuse me and my sister. My step-father, unable to live with the pressure of being part of a family with three teenagers, became a "functional" alcoholic and was emotionally abusive as well. I'll never forget the time that he picked me up from 8th grade, drove us home in

silence, and said angrily upon arriving home, “Why do you always walk around with your head down?? Get your head out of your ass!”

I think that my first boyfriend only became my boyfriend because he was the first male to say anything positive about me, and the first to appreciate all aspects of me after so many years of being told that I was stupid, fat, ugly, dumb, loser, pimple face, etc. No one else at home ever contradicted what my brother said to me. I don't think my first boyfriend and I had any connection other than this. When he pushed for sex three months after dating, I voiced my concern that our relationship would devolve into one where we only had sex and no longer had real conversations. He denied that this would happen. But that is exactly what happened. When I eventually and more often said that I didn't want to have sex, he said that sex was how he showed me that he loved me and why would I stop him from loving me? It was another nail on the coffin. Men could not be trusted to listen and respect boundaries.

In college, when I threw away my self-respect, my only reason was that I was tired of being ignored. I thought that if no one was going to appreciate me for my mind, my wit and intelligence, then at the very least I was going to be admired for my body. Working out for my mental health also benefitted that plan. My self-confidence grew, and I was able to get my friends and I in at any party and go home with any guy that I wanted. I would search the party crowd for who I wanted to use that night. I justified my actions to myself, thinking that it was fair for me to treat males as expendable if they treated me the same. And they did, there is no denying that. They got their fuck, and then never spoke to me again. I denied the hurt I was causing myself. The physical contact with random people offered a hollow sense of intimacy, but it was intimacy nonetheless. The only physical intimacy available to me. As a person whose

primary love language is touch, these one-night stands and fuck-buddies meant everything to me because they were the only times anyone ever touched me.

While my freshman year at college was a quiet, depressive state, with a GPA on point, and not having a single drink, by sophomore year I was going to parties three to four times each week. This was not a decision that I completely regret. I had fun. I felt alive. However, after a time this lifestyle did have consequences. My grades suffered more than usual. But more devastatingly, sex became a disembodied transaction. I watched what happened to me from outside of myself. There was no true intimacy, yet after each encounter I would leave with a piece of myself missing. I grew tired of playing “The Game.” It started and ended the same, with little fulfillment if any.

It was around this time, when the drinking and staying up late grew distasteful, that I met the man who would become my second serious boyfriend. As we spent more and more time together, he was happy to leave the party scene with me. I found comfort in his solid presence. Surprisingly, he respected me in all ways. When I came home from Europe the summer of my junior year, where I had been raped for a third time by the two best friends of the man I was actually dating there, this old flame was the first person I cried on and told about being raped.

I’m sure that he was overwhelmed by this information and my grief, but he stayed. He held me. His steadfastness was enough to make me love him. And his wooing me with food didn’t hurt. I was happy with him. His love and care were enough to keep the ever-waiting darkness within from crashing over me. Processing my traumas could be put off for a while longer. Unfortunately, the solace I found with him just wasn’t enough to diminish said pit of despair.