Childhood Trauma Family Conflict and Emotional Loss

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The Summer Evening I Still Hear

It was a harsh summer evening, and I was sitting on the couch beside my bedroom window, staring outside and wishing I could exchange my life for somebody else's. The light outside was soft, almost peaceful, but there was nothing peaceful inside our house. My parents' voices travelled through the walls in sharp pieces. Every sentence seemed to strike the next one harder. I remember wanting to go deaf. At twelve years old, I did not understand the reasons behind their arguments, yet I understood the fear they created. I could feel it in my chest and in the way my hands would not stay still (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

Tears rolled down my cheeks, but I hardly blinked. I had reached the end of the patience a child should never have needed. I wanted to shout at both of them to stop. I wanted to walk into the room and remind them that I was there, listening to every accusation and every door that shook. Instead, I ran. I did not put on shoes. I slipped out of the house barefoot, scattered, and trembling, then hid in a corner of the backyard where the wall and an old shrub made a small shelter. It was not far enough to escape the voices, but it gave me somewhere to fold myself into a smaller shape.

Children often believe that if they remain quiet enough, adults may forget to carry out the terrible things they threaten. I sat with my head down and made bargains in my mind. I promised I would behave better, study harder, and never ask for anything expensive. None of those promises had anything to do with the conflict, but I needed to believe that I could still influence the outcome. The argument belonged to my parents. The blame, however, had already begun searching for a place inside me.

The Sound of the Car

Then I heard the engine. "Vroom" is an ordinary sound, but that evening it felt like a verdict. My heart sank before I even looked up. I knew my father's car well enough to recognize the way it started and the brief pause before it moved. For several seconds, I could not make myself stand. I listened to the tires move away and told myself he might only be going for a drive. Perhaps he would return after cooling down. Perhaps he would come back with snacks, pretend nothing had happened, and ask why I looked so serious.

My father had been the person I waited for whenever something happened at school. He was the one I

imagined at every birthday, picnic, and family gathering. When I had good news, I rehearsed how I would tell him. When I was hurt, I waited for the sound of his key at the door. This made his departure feel larger than a car leaving a driveway. It felt as if every future occasion had suddenly lost one of its people.

I remained in the backyard until the voices inside stopped. Silence should have been a relief, yet it frightened me more. I walked back to my room with low shoulders and dried eyes, taking careful steps as though the floor might break. My mother was crying, but I did not ask her what had happened. I did not wipe her tears or offer the comfort I later wished I had offered. I was twelve. I had no language for comforting a parent, and part of me was angry that I had been placed in a situation where I was expected to understand adult pain.

I lay down without changing my clothes. The room looked the same—the books, the curtain, the faint marks on the wall—but it no longer felt like the room I had left. I waited for the front door. Every sound from the street made me hold my breath. Eventually, exhaustion did what reassurance could not, and I fell asleep.

The Morning After

The next morning, I woke with the confused calm that comes before memory returns. For one or two seconds, I did not remember. Then the previous evening came back all at once. In my mind I heard my father's familiar advice: "Son, no matter what life brings our way, never forget to gather courage, because no matter what happens, we all have to survive." I cannot say whether I remembered the exact words from an earlier conversation or created them from everything he had taught me. They sounded like him, and that was enough.

The memory did not make me brave immediately. It made me cry. My feet felt cold, my chest tightened, and I cried with the full force I had held back the night before. I was not only crying because my father had left. I was crying for the ordinary life I thought every family was supposed to have. I cried for future dinners, school events, and holidays that had not happened yet. A child can grieve events before losing them because imagination is one of the first places separation enters.

After some time, I washed my face and went to my mother. She was sitting quietly, looking exhausted in a way I had never seen. Despite all the conflict, she was also suffering. I sat on the floor beside her. Neither of us spoke. I held her hand and waited. When she finally broke down, I hugged her with all the strength I had. It was not a dramatic moment in which everything became understandable. We were simply two people in the same room, both hurt by the same separation in different ways.

For years I remembered that silence more clearly than any explanation. My mother did not ask me to become the man of the house. She did not give me a speech about divorce. Yet I began taking on small responsibilities without being told. I watched her face before asking for money. I tried not to bring home problems from school. Sometimes this looked like maturity from the outside. Inside, it was

also fear: if I became easy enough to live with, perhaps nobody else would leave (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

What Family Conflict Leaves Behind

The divorce ended the daily arguments, but it did not erase their sound from my mind. For a long time, raised voices made me tense even when the disagreement had nothing to do with me. I became alert to changes in people's tone. I noticed doors closing, short replies, and long silences. This sensitivity sometimes helped me understand others; at other times, it made me expect disaster where there was only an ordinary disagreement.

I also learned that a child can love both parents and still feel angry with both of them. I loved my father, but I resented his absence. I loved my mother, but sometimes I blamed her because she was the parent who remained close enough to blame. Those feelings were not fair or orderly. They changed from one day to another. Adults often want children to accept a simple explanation—one parent was wrong, the decision was necessary, life will be better now. My experience did not fit a simple explanation.

There were practical changes. Celebrations had to be planned differently. Questions from relatives and classmates became uncomfortable. Photographs from earlier years began to look like evidence from another family. In some of them, my father and mother are holding me together, and I still pause when I see them. The people in those pictures look unaware of what is coming. I sometimes want to warn the child in the photograph, although I know that doing so would only make him afraid sooner.

At the same time, peace slowly entered the house. We no longer listened for the beginning of another fight. My mother's face changed as months passed. My father remained part of my life in a different and more complicated way. I began to understand that staying together is not always the kindest outcome. A home can contain two parents and still feel unsafe. Separation can cause grief and also end a pattern that was harming everyone.

Learning Not to Become the Conflict

As I grew older, I worried that the arguments had become part of my personality. I wondered whether I would repeat what I had witnessed. During disagreements, I sometimes withdrew completely because silence felt safer than saying the wrong thing. At other times, I became defensive before the other person had finished speaking. Recognizing these habits was uncomfortable, but it was also the beginning of changing them.

I have had to learn that conflict is not always abandonment. Two people can disagree and still remain. A raised concern is not automatically the first step toward divorce. Listening does not mean surrender, and speaking honestly does not have to become an attack. These lessons sound obvious

when written down. For a child who once listened to a car drive away, they took years to feel true (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.).

I also stopped telling myself that destiny had made us helpless puppets. That idea once protected me because it removed the need to understand decisions I could not control. Now I see that adults make choices within difficult circumstances. Some choices hurt people even when they are necessary. Accepting that complexity has allowed me to remember my parents as human beings rather than characters in a story about who destroyed the family.

The Quiet That Remains

Life is going well now, but there is still a mysterious silence deep in me. I no longer expect that silence to disappear completely. It is part of the history I carry. Some nights, when I look at old photographs, I feel the same hollow space. On other nights, I look at those pictures with gratitude that there were happy moments worth missing.

The most difficult decisions can sometimes protect people from a worse daily life. My parents' separation did not make us happy, but it eventually gave us peace. That difference matters. Happiness returned slowly in smaller forms: a calm meal, a joke that did not end in tension, a day when I forgot to listen for an argument. Peace was not dramatic enough for me to recognize at first.

I once believed courage meant standing up immediately, drying my eyes, and acting strong for my mother. I understand it differently now. Courage also means admitting that the evening frightened me, that I missed my father, that I was angry, and that I needed help making sense of it. Surviving was only the first task. The harder task was learning to live without allowing one summer evening to decide every relationship that followed.

References

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