

“Resilient”

By Cynthia Garner

An excerpt from *Thrown from the Nest: A Memoir and Trail Guide for Surviving Relational Trauma and Healing Attachment Wounds*

There is no birth story. No tales of water breaking, or rushing to the hospital, or a frantically pacing father. There are no pictures of me resting on my mother’s chest, or smiling playfully from a cradle or stroller. There is just the emptiness of not knowing.

In some ways it’s kind of like I was never really born at all. I just appear magically in my adoptive parents’ life at 18 months old, outgoing and smiling, not needing much, and never fussy. Supposedly, I adjust quickly to my new life as a “daughter,” bouncing back even though before then I have only ever been a “foster child,” a too-much to handle, mistake, eternal reminder of abuse, fear, and bad choices.

They say I am *resilient*. My adoption is a success story. I know I am “adopted,” but have little context to understand what that truly means, other than knowing that my birth mother could not take care of me, so I have a new mom and dad now. They aren’t my *real* birth mom and dad, but they *are* my parents.

They do the best they can to put a positive spin on me being adopted. They tell me I am a gift to their family. That they chose me, I am just what they wanted, and they are so glad to have me join their family and become the daughter they could not create on their own. But despite their valiant efforts, a pervasive sense of not being connected to a lineage, of being unlike anyone else in my new family, follows me through my childhood.

When you are “adopted,” the question of family and belonging is complicated. You are different than everyone around you. They say you are “special,” but most of the time you just feel like an alien from another planet. Those first few years, after I move to Catonsville in the early 1980s, are predictable and quiet. My new mom and dad never fight, and they both work a lot, Mom as a state park ranger, and Dad as an accountant and naturalist. I go to daycare at a Catholic preschool, where I learn to read chapter books by the age of 5, and the nuns wear black habits covering their hair, speak in thick foreign accents, and pinch your toes if you aren’t asleep during nap time.

As the years go by, I begin to freckle, and to notice that many of my cousins and aunts and uncles resemble each other, but that no one in my family looks like me. We live outside of Baltimore, and our cousins live in Connecticut, Chicago, and Mississippi, so there aren't any nearby family playmates, just the hodgepodge of rough-and-tumble not-adopted kids in my neighborhood. My freckles and differentness seem to be a good enough reason for them to exclude me, tease me, and make sure I always have the ball when we play "smear the queer." Playground politics in first grade squash any hopes of having a "best friend," or getting to be part of the "treehouse club," and my loneliness and longing grow like weeds pushing up through cracks in the concrete. In second grade, school becomes even more socially devastating when my only neighborhood friend, Betty, decides that I am not a part of the "cool girls group" that shares their Skittles and homemade cookies during lunchtime. During our class bathroom breaks, she and the other girls climb up on the toilets and look over the stall at me, trying to see if I have freckles on my private parts. So, I pee my pants a lot, because I hold my bladder too long for fear of getting yelled at by Ms. Smith if I ask to go to the bathroom in the middle of Math time.

As an only child, I am used to being alone. Instead of submitting myself to the harassment and exile of the neighborhood gang, I stay inside and build couch forts, read books, and play "mom and baby" or "happy family" with my dolls. At just seven years old, it is clear I will be a good babysitter someday. And I already know then that I want to be a mom, certain that my own children can't possibly reject me the way I was rejected by my mom, and that someday I'll finally have a family that is truly mine.

Desperate for more connection, family, and belonging, I begin to ask my parents if they can have another baby, not knowing the mechanics of these things, nor that there is a physiological reason they decided to adopt me in the first place. Little do I know, that they are already working on adopting two more children from El Salvador, siblings who they plan to bring home as soon as the violence there abates enough to allow safe travel.

When I learn of my new brother and sister, I am over-the-moon ecstatic. I rearrange my bedroom to welcome my sister into the bottom bunk, start practicing Spanish, and tell everyone at school that I am getting a baby brother and sister from El Salvador. Finally, I will have babies to take care of! They will be my family and I'll be their older sister, and things won't be so quiet and lonesome anymore. But on October 4, 1986,

when my my mom steps off the plane with my new brother and sister, they are nothing like the squishy little gurgling babies I expected. There are scars and little round cigarette burns up and down their arms, and their eyes are hollow and scared. Their skin looks gray and flat, and smells like burned corn. They are three and five (almost six) years old, and cannot understand a word I say.

The first night at home, my brother stands behind the baby gate in his room and wails for hours. My sister, in the bunk below mine, weeps softly for a time, until she finally gets up and goes to him, climbing over the gate and curling around him in his bed, and I am alone again. I am too young to understand that they have slept in the same bed with all their siblings and family every night of their lives until tonight, and that they have no idea how to sleep by themselves. My parents stay hidden away in their bedroom. They are strong believers that “crying it out” is be the best way to to handle it, because we all have to get used to a new life now, and sooner is better than later. They don’t want to create bad habits, or be enabling.

Life never goes back to the way it was before. My new siblings come from a family that must have communicated by yelling, and even though it takes some time for them to learn English, they never lower their volume to meet the culture of our household. Our days are filled with shouts and screams, and constant chatter that quickly escalates into arguments. The play is aggressive and physical, and more than once I have to stop my brother from tickling or poking me in the crotch. He is violent and reactive, and it soon becomes apparent that he also has a learning disability and something called “fetal alcohol syndrome,” so I can’t blame him for it. I long for the quiet, solitary days and the privacy that once made me feel so lonesome.

As the years go by, my sister matures very quickly, her body changing and blossoming and becoming woman-like before she is 10 years old. My brother retains the attention span and intellect of a small child and is frequently suspended from school for his explosive behavior. I try to just lay low in my bedroom, studying or reading, and wait for the kind of quiet that tells me it is safe to come out. I stay invisible, as much as I can, because my parents have enough to worry about with my siblings, and I know they won’t have enough bandwidth for me to have problems, too. There isn’t any space in our family for me to be struggling, on top of what my brother and sister are going through.

When we study family trees, heritage, and genetics in school, I am singled-out, forced to speak up about my lack of biological family knowledge, and given an alternate assignment. My bewildered teachers often look like deer in the headlights when I approach them, as if unaware that anyone who seemed so put-together could have no common threads at the seams, no family history stitched together over generations, within which to contextualize my identity.

As we grow into teenagers, my mom becomes increasingly frazzled and jumpy, snapping at us for coughing or chewing too loudly, and spends longer hours at work. I prefer to be alone because it is safer and much more peaceful, and by 13 years old, I'm already thinking about college and getting my own apartment, and finally being free from all the arguing and yelling. When things flare up at the dinner table or in the living room, I flee to my bedroom as fast as I can, and make sure I get straight A's and stay out of trouble at school so that no one has to worry about me. I wish they could see that even though I isolate myself, and claim to prefer my solitude, I also long for someone in my family to see that I'm lonely. I wish someone would take the time to get to know the *real* me that's hiding away away in here, arms curled around my stuffed animals, wondering if this is what it will feel like to hold my own baby someday. Sometimes, I make loud falling noises, or cry loudly so that everyone can hear, just hoping someone will rush in and ask if I am okay. But because my brother and sister need so much of my parents attention, I keep this hunger quiet. Instead, I fill the void with stolen snacks from the kitchen, or my dad's candy drawer, and secret trips to the vending machine at school for Zingers or Snickers bars and Coca-Cola Classic.

Containing yourself takes a lot of work when you have big dreams and and are trapped in a world that makes you be small. Inevitably, as my sense of longing and non-belonging grows, so does my body. My arms and legs seem to stretch and bulge in odd places, like an over-inflated balloon. My skin is often tender to the touch, puffy and swollen, red and blotchy. I wonder if that would have been different if I could have looked around at my family and seen myself looking back at me? As I grow into a teenager, I often feel like an outsider in a strange land, without a map, navigating territory no one I know has ever been to before. The feedback coming from every direction is that I do not belong here, in this chaotic family, and that my body is the source of the problem. It is as if the me that lives in my body is overflowing — too big, too much, an explosive mess trapped inside a human shape.

When you do not live in a system where you are taught to love your body, you have no incentive to be kind to it. And it can be even easier to treat your body poorly when everyone around you reinforces the message that there is something wrong with it, especially when there is no one in your life who has the same body as you.

I hate my teenage body. I feel like it is this outward signal that I am bad, that I am doing everything wrong. I am lazy, unable to control my impulsive eating, and don't exercise enough to get my shape right. My sister also gains weight in her teenage years, but her weight is more proportional and she has big boobs and boyfriends who can't keep their hands off her. It will take me almost 30 years to understand that for both of us, our weight gain is the physical manifestation of our protective strategies and that we are both carrying generations of pain and trauma within our skin.

My well-intentioned parents see we are all gaining weight, and decide that we need more discipline. They implement weekly weigh-ins, during which we can earn a dollar if we lose a pound, and have to pay a dollar if we gain a pound. They also require us to do a daily family "run around the block", a half-mile job we are expected to complete in 4 minutes, timed by a stopwatch. In my already overweight body, and with little innate athleticism, this is the most miserable four minutes of my day — shame and pain compounding on themselves with each strike of my foot on the asphalt. I am always more out of breath, slower, and more crippled by stomach cramps than everyone else, and regularly miss the 4-minute mark, or get busted taking shortcuts through the neighbors' backyards.

It isn't long before I start feigning sickness, limping, or lying my way out of this daily torture. When my sister joins track and field and stops eating, she loses her extra weight and is celebrated for her discipline and fitness. Her body now catches the attention of men, and she frequently finds herself in high-risk and dangerous situations that she has to punch and kick her way out of. It's a good thing she's tough. I figure that my best defense against rape and sexual assault is that I am fat. Whenever I am in situations with men that feel threatening or scary, I push out my belly, slump outward, and make myself look as unattractive as possible until they go away.

My heaviness has the usual health consequences. As a high-schooler, I deal with collapsed arches, knee pain, frequent ankle sprains, body odor, and the social alienation that comes with being large-bodied. I never try out for the lead in the play or for volleyball, simply because of the tiny skirts and shorts the girls have to wear. And even

though I read Teen magazine, and get a haircut that will “frame my features,” I never feel pretty. I lose my virginity to a guy who lies to his friends about our relationship and calls me a “whale” when I am underwater at a pool party. All the other boys I am attracted to who are nice to me turn out to be gay, and I rebound by getting involved with an ex-con, 36-year-old, Pizza Hut manager, who gets me drunk during the late-night shift, and teaches me how to give blow-jobs in the walk-in.

My body is a blessing and a curse, a protector and a prison, a constant reminder of my different-ness. I am always aware that my shape is bulky and bulging where other people’s bodies aren’t. Every time I go shopping for new clothes and struggle to find size 11 shoes that don’t make me look like a clown, I am reminded of my not belonging. My body pushes against every seam, leaving angry red imprints in my skin where my clothes are too tight. I often notice the beauty of other girls, how easily they fit into their clothing, and how little they eat, how their spaghetti straps look so elegant, just resting upon their tight skin without making little indentation lines. My sister is one of these girls now, having found her own disordered way of staying slim, and she frequently reminds me of how different our bodies are. “Look how much smaller my wrist is than yours. I can fit my hand around mine. Can you?” Or, “you could be pretty if you tried.”

At school, on the television, at the doctor’s office, at the dinner table, everywhere, I am reminded that my body is wrong, ugly, problematic, unattractive, unhealthy. That I am not doing it right. Not enough discipline, exercise, too much sugar, fat, calories. I am lazy. A couch potato. Weak-minded. Undesirable. Trapped in skin that shouts my shame to the world.

One night, I find myself curled up in the corner of my room, holding a pair of sharp scissors to my chest, wondering what it could be like to make the pain go away. The pointed blades rest upon an inch-long, narrow scar between my breasts where a birthmark was removed shortly after my adoption. The scar already looks like a knife wound, a perfect resting place for a fatal dagger. Maybe in a past life I drove a blade passionately through my own chest, like Juliet. Perhaps it was the only way to escape servitude or imprisonment in a loveless marriage. It feels somehow familiar and peaceful to clutch the scissors above my scar, like for once I am in control of my own body, my own life. At the same time, I know I don’t want to die right now. There is too much beauty in the world, too many things I have yet to see and do. And when I

imagine the horror and pain on the faces of my parents at finding my scissor-stabbed body, I let them fall from my hands and weep, scooping up the folds of my nakedness in a hug, and repeating over and over, "I love you so much, Cindy."

I am still resilient, because what other choice do I have? I love being alive. Though this period of my life is difficult, I know there is light at the end of the tunnel, that nothing lasts forever, and that the time is coming soon when I will be able to make my own choices and find my own way in the world. By the time I emerge from my bedroom, I am smiling again and keeping my chin up, so no one has to worry about me. I suppose that once you survive the worst thing that can happen to a child—losing your parents—you know you can survive anything. All these hard moments of challenging neighborhood and sibling squabbles have been opportunities to grow my inner strength, choose the high road, and practice shifting my attention to something other than the mean messages and the alienation. *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.*

My relationship to myself is the only one I can really trust. My time away from people, with my imagination and my thoughts, is the only place I find peace. My parents see this need for individuation and solitude in me, and do what they can to support me in finding time to myself. Whenever possible, they allow me to stay home alone while they run errands with the other kids, and they send me to small summer camps where I have opportunities to connect with nature and get away from my siblings. Once, they even take me to a motel on the highway near our home and pay for a room where I can spend the night *by myself*, completely alone. There is a blissfulness to the quiet that wraps around me once that heavy door closes, and I swing the bolt across to tuck myself inside my own little cocoon, where no one can bother me. There is no one yelling, stomping, banging dishes, or arguing. Just the gentle hum of the air conditioner, and the distant pulse of traffic on the highway. This one moment of quiet restores me to myself so completely that I plop myself down on the floor, and just sit in it, for hours. Perhaps this is where my meditation practice first begins, at the Motel 6 on Route 40, this magical, musty space where I first experience the true serenity and healing power of spending time with myself in silence and stillness. In my final year of high school, when the waiting for freedom becomes tedious and unbearable, I retreat into my journals, where I can travel the magical worlds of my growing inner awareness. The mystery of my identity is my final frontier. I am a

landscape of adventure, curiosity, exploration, and excitement. No one knows me. I am unique. Different. My entries start "Dear Cindy," as though I am writing letters of intrigue to another part of myself, a treasured best friend who is off traveling some far away country, living a parallel life in another dimension. The pages are filled with my dreams and aspirations, and affirmations. I make long lists of all the places I'll go, and adventures I'll have. I take my journal out to the woods behind our house, where I still build forts and climb trees, even though I am too old for these kinds of games. I climb up into the tree stands left by hunters and imagine that I am like Snow White and can summon the rabbits and the deer when I sing. I whisper my secrets to the birds and squirrels, who don't care whether my pants are too tight, and they are never mean when they chirp and chatter back.