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My Anger is Still a Small Boy: (Dis)embodied Anger as Survival.

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The stories found within these pages disclose graphic and intimate details regarding numerous accounts of physical, sexual, and drug-based assaults. These stories are raw, they are bloody, and they are mine. There are parts of me that I wish I could continue to remain silent about. However, I hold on to hope that these pages may offer some form of healing for myself and for (potentially) you. Given the nature of these pages, reader, I implore you to approach the essay carefully and cautiously. In this paper, I performatively engage with an internal family system of various personae that have manifested as a result of different anger responses to trauma. Through a system (dis)embodiment and narrative personification, I come to an intimate knowledge of varying orientations of anger and the role they play in my continued survival. Each member of the aggressional family, Rage, Resilience, Revenge, and Recovery, offers a unique insight into how anger can be understood as a central force of protection, growth, and healing. These pages may prove just as challenging to read, as they were to write. Let your anger guide you.

Keywords: anger, aggression, autoethnography, survival, trauma

Seven Years Old

The night it happens, the television sits on a channel that plays nothing but static feedback. At seven years old, you and your mother's boyfriend sit near each other on your mother's old leather couch. He holds a small cigar between the gaps in his rotting teeth, which fills the room with a sickly-sweet smoke you fight not to choke on. The man slowly rises from his spot next to you and sloppily carries himself over to the stereo system in the corner of the odious apartment you live in. After fiddling with the machine for a few moments, Kurt Cobain's good-dead-voice loudly swallows the room.

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“You like music, don’t you, boy?” He asks through slurred speech. You don’t like it when he speaks this way. He is quick to become angry. You don’t want to make him angry.

“I asked you a question, Damon.” With a single movement, he wraps his rough hand around your mouth, pressing his thumb and forefinger hard into your cheeks. A swift jerk of his wrist brings your face in line with his. “It’s rude not to answer.”

“Yes,” you say through a whimper. Staring back into his cold –already dead– eyes, you feel your entire body swell with fear. *Do not cry*, you think to yourself. *He will not like it if you cry*. Yet, you cannot stop the tears from slowly rolling down your face.

“Why are you crying, boy?” He questions, his hand still pressed firmly against your mandible. Again, you do not answer; you are too afraid to upset him by speaking, but knowing full well that not answering will also upset him. There simply was no winning this game you didn’t ask to play. “What did I say? You’re being rude,” he says, tightening the grip of his hand.

“You’re hurting me,” you cry softly.

“Hurting you?” The tone of his voice mocking your own. “I don’t mean to hurt you. You’re just being a soft boy. You know I wouldn’t want to hurt you?” As he speaks, he slowly releases his hold on your mouth and shifts his hand to the right side of your face. He holds his hand softly against your cheek now and slowly runs his finger along your jawbone to rest on your lips. “It’s time to stop crying now.” But you can’t. The tears continue to silently pour down your face no matter how much you will them to stop. “Stop crying.”

“I can–” and before you can finish speaking his flat hand comes hard across your face. A loud ringing follows a strong stinging sensation in your ear. The room spins, your eyes can’t focus, and then everything goes black.

* * *

I was seven years old the first time a man laid his hands on me absent my consent. I was a small boy taken from himself too early. With no language

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to name the damage, I remained silent. Tamas (2009) softly reminds me that “what breaks my heart also breaks my tongue” (p.4). It is, admittedly, this broken tongue of mine that unwillingly allowed a slew of assaults on my body to occur with no space for words or compassion. This paper functions as a means of self-disclosing my narrative to counteract years of compounded trauma (Gueta et al., 2020). In these pages, I analyze how I have survived highly violent and volatile moments of trauma and in what ways varying forms of anger have informed my means of that survival.

(Dis)embodied Manifestations of Anger and The Internal Family System.

Nearly seventeen years of silence and sexual retraumatization have resulted in a slow boil of anger that has become a near staple in my personhood. Griffin (2022) calls me to examine the manifestations of my anger. Spry (2022) informs me that “by paying somatic attention to how and what (my) body feels as an element with other materialities and storied matter” (p. 171), I can develop an embodied knowledge of my experiences with both anger and survival.

However, I argue that attempting to embody volatile emotional states, like anger, poses too much risk for retraumatization. Instead, I offer a different tactic--(dis)embodiment. I propose that (dis)embodying an emotion is a system of extrospection. Instead of traveling inward to observe an emotion, the emotion is pulled from the body, where the author can examine it from an external perspective.

This method of writing follows a line of already established therapeutic methods under the Internal Family Systems Model (IFS). Developed by Schwartz (1995), IFS is a system of psychodynamic therapy often used in post-assault therapy to help individuals isolate and understand differing trauma responses. Schwartz (2013) explains, “IFS views the mind as a dynamic system comprising many subminds, called parts” (p. 807). Each of these parts categorizes and oversees a different type of response, whether that be impulsivity or the desire to flee. Generally speaking, the subminds (or parts) are categorized in one of three ways. The first, *Exiles*, tend to be understood as the part of the system directly damaged by traumatic events. Commonly referred to as *The Inner Child* (McGuire, 1993), the Exile submind tends to be repressed by the overall Self. The second, *Managers*, refers to the protective and controlling submind. Managers tend to be interested in the success of the overall person and works to positively direct the mind in moments of conflict. Finally, the third, *Firefighters*, are used to describe the reactionary submind. When the other parts of the system actively fail to protect the Exile, Firefighter subminds rush to mitigate damage before the Exile’s trauma overwhelms the Self (Green, 2008). In addition to the three established subminds, I offer a fourth submind to make sense of the stories presented throughout this essay. I contend that there is an additional part of

the psyche that actively sits in the back of the system and continuously takes stock of the surrounding environment while simultaneously planning ways to mitigate, balance, or reverse damage done via trauma. The *Accountant* submind is calculative and decisive. Where Managers are working to keep the system from falling apart, the Accountant weighs the system on a cost-benefit scale and actively seeks payment for the damage done. As Green (2008) explains, “all parts are attempting to regulate the internal system—by adopting behaviors or rules for behavior that protect themselves or other parts from hurt or that attempt to gain benefits for the individual” (p.127). Using this understanding of IFS as a theoretical baseline, I narratively construct my anger as entities that live separately from my person but are intricately chained to me by the wrist.

Sometimes, I imagine my anger is still a small boy, a child left in the dark, digging his bloody nails into that unforgiving leather couch. He is tired, exhausted from years of fighting for somebody to listen and care for him. I imagine his throat is dry and blistered, sore from screaming into the silence. Other times, my anger is a horny, rage-filled teenager. He strips his body naked and spits at the reflection in the mirror. He files his canine teeth to a point, always ready to bite. He stands guard, and when things go wrong, he is the first to interject. Occasionally, my anger is a grown woman. She hushes the enraged child within me. She knows that there is a better life for her if she could just reach it. In this form, she is my matron saint. She is the protector of small children, guiding us through long parts of each night, leading us to a better land. Every so often, my anger takes the form of a young man. I imagine that he is objectively handsome; in this way, he can enact revenge. He is internally erratic but calm on the surface. He is cold, clever, and uncontrollable. Nothing that has been given to him is good enough, and that is what makes him so dangerous. At any point, all these separate entities are me and I them. Each of them has served a unique purpose in keeping me alive in situations that would have inevitably ended in my own demise. I have only survived on their behalf. As such, I give life to and personify these entities as a means of gratitude for their ability to keep me alive.

Methodological Underpinnings of a Second-Person Narrative

The stories laid here are *messy* (Tamas, 2009); they are raw, painful, and challenging to relive. As such, I acknowledge the fact that reliving them through the act of writing holds a high potential for retraumatization through re-exposure to traumatic stressors (Banyard et al., 2003). Thus, it is crucial to consider Chatham-Carpenter’s (2010) argument and construct the narrative within these pages in a manner that safeguards my physical and mental well-being.

Traditionally, autoethnographers overwhelmingly utilize the first-person narrative in their work as it often makes the most sense when telling one’s own story. However, throughout the method, autoethnographers have played

with a variety of narrative perspectives for different purposes. Rambo (2007) switches between the first and third-person narrative to a nuanced perspective to her interactions with the IRB at her home institution. Adams (2011) uses a variety of performative perspectives to invoke relationality between him and his audience. Boylorn and Orbe (2021) expound:

...narratives can be told through various points of view-- they can be local or distant, universal or idiosyncratic, or reflective of a character's view or the view of the narrator. The most powerful narratives are written in styles that draw the reader into the story in meaningful ways. (p. 230)

In any instance, different narrative perspectives find themselves centralized in the methodology.

The choice to construct this paper through second-person narration serves a key purpose, protecting my current self from reliving the traumatic experiences of past variations while still allowing me the ability to speak on those experiences. In this way, the second person perspective functions as a way for me to engage and speak to different parts of myself by attempting "to project the narrator into the narration as a self-reflexive site of curiosity" (Crawford, 1996, as cited in Adams & Holman Jones, 2018, p. 149). The power of the second-person narrative is that it allows me to position my current identity as absent from the story; this protects me from the potential of self-induced retraumatization, and it provides a safe standpoint to identify the nuanced variations of the self over time.

Fourteen Years Old

The leather seats of Jacob's classic 1965 Mustang stick to the skin of your youthful back. Jacob, your first boyfriend, presses the flesh of his torso against yours. His shaven chest scratches the smooth skin of your own as his overly soft lips rest gently against your neck. Your small teenage body seizes with excitement and anxiety. You instinctually wrap your legs around his waist and pull his body harder against your own. In turn, he pushes your body deeper into the leather of the seat.

The older boy's hands are hard in the way they grip at your waist. He digs his fingers into the crevices of your hips that sit above the waistband of your cotton sweatpants.

"You are so soft," he whispers before he gently bites at the soft spot below your ear. You moan as your body tenses reflexively. *Soft Boy*. "Do you like that?" he asks. *You love me, don't you, boy?*

"Yes," you whimper between small but sharp intakes of breath.

"Good." *Good boy*.

The air in the car is heavy and wet. The moisture of your collective breath has created a screen of humidity that covers all of the windows, closing you off entirely from the outside world. It is just the two of you enclosed in the foggy embrace of each other.

Jacob moves his hand and grips at the waistband of your pants, and before you know it, you are entirely naked. The boy's hands continue to explore your lower body as you grind your waist against him. His grip returns to your hips, and with a slow twist of his hands, he turns you on your stomach. He places his lips to skin between your shoulders as he puts his hands on the back of your hands.

As the boy continues to kiss your neck, you can hear him unbuckle his belt. There is a swift movement of denim, and then he, too, is naked. You can feel the heat of his body as it covers your own. His hot breath sits in your ear. You are enveloped in youthful lust.

Suddenly, there is a hard pressure and a sharp pain in your lower body. You feel your body stiffen with an old but familiar fear. *Stop*. You inhale deeply and try to pull your body forward. Jacob presses his body harder against yours, pinning you into the seat of the car. You jerk your waist as the pain goes deeper inside of you.

"Jacob, stop," you cry as you struggle to pull yourself from underneath his body. He pushes one of his hands between your shoulders, pinning you in place. He takes his other hand and seals it across your mouth.

"It's okay. We've already started. You're okay" *It's okay because you love me, don't you, boy? Why are you crying, boy? I don't mean to hurt you. You're just being a soft boy. Soft boy. Don't be so soft, boy. Don't be so soft. Stop.* As you struggle against Jacob's hold, a wave of heat engulfs you. Anger spreads through your body. It hugs you like an old friend. *Don't be so soft, boy. Stop.* Your anger tells you to fight. *You will not be the only one hurt this time, it tells you. Don't be so soft, boy.*

With a firm jerk of your head, you loosen Jacob's hand.

"I said stop!" you scream as you bite down into the soft spot of his hand between his thumb and forefinger. The boy winces in pain and tries to pull his hand from your mouth, but you bite harder. Like a dog with a rope, you tear on his flesh with your canines and incisors.

"What the fuck!" Jacob yells as he fights for control of his hand. As he pulls against you, a warm viscous liquid runs across your lips. The metallic taste of blood shocks you into releasing your teeth. The boy pulls out from inside of you, and you lock eyes in silence.

* * *

When I was fourteen years old, a slightly older boy attempted to take me from myself as another man had in the past. Unfortunately, this is not an experience unique to me. Queer boys experience higher rates of interrelationship violence and assault (Dank et al., 2014; Freedner, 2002). For many of us, sexual revictimization from intimate partners stems from a system of compliance with unspoken norms regarding sexual exchange (Vannier & Sullivan, 2010). The perpetuation of *power and control* (Kalhe, 2017) allows for cycles of violence to continue among partners. Luckily for me, I met Rage early on in my boyhood. Together, we quickly discovered a

way to disrupt the cycle. By embracing an increased level of aggression that is common for situations like mine (Walker et al., 2021) and allowing Rage to dictate the choices made, I was able to get away from my attacker. Thus, the first of the several theoretical manifestations of my anger that requires attention is the embodied character of Rage.

Rage

Rage was, and still is, a watchdog of a boy. I say boy because that is how I have always seen him, small and youthful, just coming of age. I imagine him in this way because of his rash, boylike impulsivity. When considering the tenets of IFS, Rage is easily understood as anger's manifestation of the Firefighter submind; quick to interject when things go wrong. Rage is the one who bit Jacob to protect me from his hand. It is he that drew that boy's blood with his teeth. Rage knows only to protect, to fight, and then to run. He is the reason that I made it out of that Mustang with less damage than I would have had otherwise.

Rage carried my limp, naked body from the back of that car. That night, he placed me into my bed and lulled me to sleep. In the morning, it was Rage that walked me to the bathroom. Together we scrubbed the blood from my mouth. Rage pointed out the bloodstains that had dried on the back of my legs. Rage screamed with me in the shower as I cleaned myself.

It was then that Rage promised that no man would get away with hurting me in this way ever again. While he may not be able to stop them from doing damage, there would be no stopping him from getting his pound of flesh in return.

Since then, Rage has remained leashed at my side, always ready to guard or attack if and when necessary. When I beckon, he comes. He snaps when I command.

Seventeen Years Old

Sitting on the floor, you lean against the side of the hotel sofa and, with your thumbs, peel back the flesh of a navel orange. The sickeningly sweet scent of citrus wafts with the aroma of nail polish remover and cat piss that you have come to associate with burning meth. When you finish peeling the orange, the fruit lays spread before you on the coffee-table-turned-operating-room. You, the surgeon, pick at the fruits of your labored dissection and place them onto your seventeen-year-old tongue. You suck the juice from the orange slices and then spit the pulp onto a day-old McDonald's napkin. You watch as the man, Lee, who you met online months ago, meticulously handles the white powder that covers his side of the table. Lee places a powder into a small, blue-tinted glass pipe with dusty fingers. As he puts the pipe to his lips, you scrape what is left of the powder into what remains of your fifth cup of coffee for the evening. You stir the coffee with your finger as Lee lights the silver Zippo lighter he retrieved from his pocket. The coffee masks

the overwhelmingly bitter taste of the drug. It's also safer than smoking it, and it leaves all your teeth intact. That's the reason you keep taking it this way, isn't it?

"Every navel orange has an underdeveloped twin grafted to its flesh, did you know that?" you ask, observing the remnants of fruit in your hand. You had read it somewhere on the internet, once.

"A twin?" the older man questions, redirecting his attention towards you from the spot on the wall he had been fixated on. "What does that even mean?"

"Navel oranges are seedless, meaning they have no natural form of reproduction. Citrus farmers have to cultivate the fruit through a series of propagation methods," you explain, turning over chunks of orange peel on the table. "Cut pieces of the fruit are grafted onto a fresh stock in order to grow. This results in new fruit forming onto the grafted flesh, leaving them with this attached underdeveloped mass, like a twin, or a clone rather."

"Or a tumor," Lee says jokingly as he picks up his pipe from the table and places it against his mouth.

"Yeah, or a tumor," you echo. You watch as the chemical smoke pours from the man's mouth. "You know, the human body doesn't naturally produce Vitamin C? It's something we have to take from other substances, like the orange," you say, grabbing another one from the plastic bag on the floor next to the table.

The older man laughs as he sets the pipe back on the table. He reaches out and takes the orange from your hand. "Didn't your mother teach you not to play with your food?" he asks.

"My mother never really taught me much of anything," you reply, taking the fruit back from Lee's hand.

"Right."

Silence falls over you. Gripping the orange in your fist, you think about your mother. You haven't seen her in a year, and that doesn't bother you, but you can't help but wonder what she is doing.

"I'm just like her, my mother," you say despondently. "We're just like the oranges, her and I." With a sharp intake of breath, you press your thumbs deep into the navel of the orange. "At this point, we're almost exactly the same. Like a clone, I suppose." Releasing an exasperated sigh, you pry the mass from the middle of the fruit and throw it onto the table. "I've never seen her happy, you know?" You wait for a response but only receive an empty stare from eyes that had long since stopped caring about the conversation. "Do you think our bodies may have stopped being able to produce happiness on their own?"

You look around the room, which suddenly reminds you of the dingy apartment in Flint, Michigan, you lived in as a child. For the first time, you notice how dirty it all is. Empty McDonald's bags and cups lay scattered across the floor. A pile of sweat-stained clothes gathers next to the bed. You

didn't want to have sex with him, but you did anyway; you felt obligated to. A film of smoke residue covers the once-white walls. "Do you think any of this helps?" you ask, looking up at the man who lies sprawled across the sofa.

Again, silence.

Lee lays silently above you. You turn your attention upward and observe the man. How drained he looks. As you watch, you remember Adam, your mother's former boyfriend, and you realize he couldn't have been much older than Lee is now, *forty-five*? You remember how you would hide in the kitchen cupboard for hours so he wouldn't touch you. You remember that he touched you. You remember he forced you to eat rotten fruit.

You look at the orange in your hand and begin to clench your fist. The flesh of the fruit splits open, and its juice slowly drains down your arm. You want to kill Adam. You want to kill Lee. You squeeze harder and continue to crush the fruit. Pulp squishes and seeps through your fingers. You press until none of the fluid remains, and then you release your grip. Your eyes follow the fruit to the floor, and you watch as it sits there, unmoving.

You look at the older addict, now fully submerged into the fabric of the couch, shaking slightly and over salivating. You feel an unnerving childish attachment to the man. "I think about killing you, sometimes, and then leaving, leaving and never coming back," you say, knowing full well that, like your mother, you may never actually leave.

* * *

Rage and I were naive, as many young boys are. All I wanted was to be seen and loved. At seventeen, I met a man who said he could help. We believed him. Instead, that man introduced me to all the inherent *wonder* of methamphetamines. I was groomed.

Lee offered money, housing, and safety. In return, I ingested his drugs and had sex with him occasionally, whether or not I wanted to. Admittedly, I very much enjoyed methamphetamines. I probably enjoyed them more than I should openly admit. However, Xian et al. (2017) remind me I am not alone. They inform me that "LGBTQ youth experiencing these stressors [homelessness, abuse, mental health issues] may come to fully rely on substances to cope" (p.142). It is unfortunate and sad, but it is true. I became entirely reliant on both Lee and the drugs.

Honestly, I would have probably never left that hotel room in Grand Rapids if it were up to me. Instead, I would have simply just died there. Rage had lost so much energy from years of battle and bloodshed. He was tired and weak. I was tired too. However, it was in that room that I met Resilience. It was she that determined we were not going to die there, not on her watch.

Resilience

Resilience is the loving mother figure I never had in my biological mother. I figure that I see her in this manner because of some deep desire for maternal guidance that I have never been afforded. Resilience is clearly the

Manager of the system. She is the voice of reason and rationale that thinks before acting. Some may say that she is unrelated to anger entirely. However, she is just as angry as the rest. She is fueled by nothing more than spite. She has always been determined to find a way to carry us through, even when I thought we wouldn't make it.

In that hotel room, when Rage contemplated killing Lee where he sat on that couch, it was Resilience that slapped his hand and told him no. *Patience, children*, she said. Resilience planned our escape. Late into the dark part of the night, she plotted how she would get us to freedom.

When Lee finally fell asleep, Resilience snuck us out of the hotel. She bought us plane tickets with what little money we had and carried us on her back to the airport. She held our hands as we walked through security, still high and equally as frightened. Resilience buckled us into our seats and held our hands as we took off. *Never look back, children. Never look back*, she told us.

To this day, Resilience still holds my hand when I need her. She strokes my head with tenderness late into the evening when I cannot sleep. She sits and rests with me when the world's weight becomes too heavy to carry. *Keep going, child*, she says. *Keep going*.

Nineteen Years Old

Sweat drips from this ogre of man's body onto your face, and you continue to pretend to be pleased by his weight crushing you into the unbudging firmness of this mattress. *Some people are into this, I suppose*, you think to yourself. *Being nineteen and fucking the older married man. The hotel room (even if it is just a Holiday Inn Express), the booze, the blow. Sure.* You make a conscious effort to moan as this man smashes his pelvis between your legs. You've become very good at acting. *God, is he done yet?* The rhythm of the man's thrusting hitches, his body jerks, his legs tense, and he releases an almost primitive grunt. *Well, I guess that answers that question.*

Wendel, or at least that's what you think this man's name is, rolls off of you. You feel your body rise as the bed evens out its tension from the additional weight. You inhale deeply through your nose and instantly regret it. As you breathe, you are assaulted with the scent of man sweat, vodka, and canned green olives. Wendel, lying flat on his back, releases a burp towards the ceiling and the pungent odor of sex breath wafts with the other aromas. *Disgusting.* You feel like gagging, but you swallow your disgust and grin like you have taught yourself with so many men before.

Pressing your palms into the sweat-drenched duvet, you push yourself up into a sitting position. You swing your legs over the edge of the bed to stand up, and he grabs you by the wrist.

"Where are you going?" he asks as he presses his callouses against your skin. You flinch slightly.

"I'm just getting a glass of water," you say with a full-toothed smile as

you pull your wrist from his grip.

“Will you be good and make me another drink while you’re up? You’re good at that.”

“I’m good at many things,” you laugh. *But if there’s one thing my mother’s alcoholism taught me, it is how to make a mean martini.* “Sure.”

“Good boy.” *Don’t call me that.*

As you walk across the musty carpet towards the kitchenette, you feel a sensation of anger wash over you. You lean into it like an old friend. *Who the fuck does he think he is? I did what we agreed to. I let that man spit in my fucking mouth, and now he wants more? Typical John.* You take a deep breath and regain your rehearsed composure as you reach the fridge where you placed the alcohol a few hours back.

“Dirty?” you ask as you turn back to the man on the bed.

“Who? Little old me?”

“The martini.” *Jesus Christ.*

“Ah, yes, please,” the man says with an assumed chuckle as if completing his own joke.

Why must they all be like this? You ask yourself as you begin assembling the martini in a shaker you grabbed from the counter. You walk yourself through the steps mentally. *Fill with ice. Two and a half ounces of vodka. Half an ounce of vermouth. Half an ounce of olive juice. How do I even measure out half an ounce from this can of olives? Whatever. Close and shake.* You can feel the man watching you from behind. You know his eyes are peeling the skin from your naked body. *He isn’t gonna let this be done any time soon.*

“Ready for round two?” he asks from the bed. *Shit.*

“And round three and four,” you lie flirtatiously. *Why must they all be like this?* “I’m gonna use the restroom really quickly, finish this martini, and then I’m all yours.” You place the unpoured martini on the counter, quickly step into the bathroom, and shut the door behind you. “Fuck,” you whisper to yourself.

The bathroom is the cleanest part of this hotel, and that’s saying something. *You would think that if the man’s paying \$1200 for sex, he could afford a place where the tiles aren’t yellow.* *Focus, Damon.* You pick up your khaki-colored backpack from beside the toilet where you had placed it earlier while you showered. *Please still be here.* You unzip the bag and begin digging through its contents. *Toothbrush. Gum. Tylenol. No. Fuck, where is it?* You frantically start to dump the bag on the floor. *Fuck, fuck, fuck. You do not have the time for this.* You pick up a crumbled pink t-shirt, the only thing from the bag you have yet to examine. You shake out the shirt, and a small glass vial falls from its folds. *Bingo.*

The next fifteen minutes happen in a slow blur. You watch the scene from inside yourself, but you are unable to control what is happening. It all occurs in front of your eyes in short clips. The martini, the way it slid down

his throat. You on the bed. His mouth on your neck. His awful odor. His hand on your thigh. You on his lap. Nothing, just black.

“Goodnight, Wendel.”

When the movie ends, the world returns to full speed, and you come back in control of your body, Wendel is asleep. Reaching down beside you, you pick up his pants from the floor and find his wallet. Opening it, you notice his I.D... *Westley*. Oh, *oops*. You chuckle to yourself. *Really fucked that one up, Damon*. You pull the cash from the main compartment and count it. “Three hundred? Really, Westley?” you ask the unconscious man. “That’s less than you were supposed to pay me to begin with. How disappointing to know.” You think briefly about Adam, Jacob, and Lee. You consider the fact that each of them got what was coming to them in the end. Adam, who’s now dead, got shot in the head a few years ago. Jacob has crashed every expensive car he has ever owned. Lee sits rotting in prison for grooming young boys. Now there’s Westley, who will wake up missing three hundred dollars and will hopefully reconsider the way he decides to lie and touch other boys in the future. “Men like you really make me angry, you know that?” You throw the empty wallet at the man’s body.

* * *

Sometimes escape is the only answer. It does, however, become incredibly difficult to escape issues that seem to be rooted deep in the foundation of your personhood. If there is one thing that I have learned about trauma, it is that it will always find a way to rear its ugly face into a new chapter. Despite being physically distanced from the origin point of my trauma, I found myself emotionally longing for a sense of emotional and sexual validation that I had long been denied in the process of being assaulted over the years. This sense of longing paired with an increased need for financial security resulted in me turning to sex work.

Sex work, specifically escorting, is common among homeless queer youth. Walls and Bell (2010) elaborate, “gay, lesbian, and bisexually identified homeless youth and young adults were significantly more likely than hetero-sexually identified youth to have engaged in survival sex” (p. 432). Like others similar to myself, I turned to this form of work because I deeply believed that it would give me a level of agency I did not have previously in life. Men could not take what I was actively giving to them. Again, I was wrong. On numerous occasions, sexual clients of mine overstepped the boundaries of our agreements, refused to uphold their end of financial arrangements, and –in my instance– physically assaulted me. The more I engaged with men to the capacity, the angrier I became. This anger slowly morphed itself into Revenge. I put Rage and Resilience aside and partnered with Revenge in hopes of finally obtaining what was long owed to me: sexual reparations, power, and freedom. I got none of it.

Revenge

Revenge is the conman of the group. He is a fox of a human being. Revenge is quick-witted and cunning. When we found ourselves in California with no money, Revenge took charge. He devised a strategy to take everything he thought was owed by the men in this world.

Revenge is an Accountant submind. He is not impulsive in the way that Rage is. He does seek a positive end to how Resilience might. No, he seeks only balance—even scales. He is cold and calculative. Much like long-term victims of sexual abuse, Revenge is acutely aware of his surroundings and is always searching for an out, a means to an end.

Revenge lured in the older men with the sexual allure I had as a young man. They would circle me like vultures, but Revenge was always nearby—just out of sight. He would prowl in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to pounce. We were always a good team, him and I.

Westley was only one of several men Revenge had targeted. Every man arguably deserved what Revenge did to them. They were predators, men who purposefully preyed on young boys who typically wouldn't know better. Westley was no different. Westley thought he had picked me out of the crowd. Little did he know, Revenge was watching him before he ever spotted me. It was Revenge that stocked my bag that night. Revenge led us to that Holiday Inn.

Twenty-Three Years Old

You awake with a sharp gasp for air, sitting straight up into the darkness. The lightless room is frigid and silent. Your eyes open to nothing but blackness. *Where am I?* All you can hear is the rattling of your beating heart against your ribcage and the shaking of your own breath. In a panic, you frantically throw your hand onto various parts of the bed. *Where is my phone?* After flailing for what feels like several minutes, you finally find the phone next to your pillow where you had placed it hours prior. You fumble your thumbs across the screen until you can turn the flashlight on. The light quickly fills the space, and your body releases its tension as things become more visible.

Your boyfriend's room remains the way it was when you closed your eyes earlier in the night. Nights have always been the most challenging time, especially in the last few months. The stress of the first semester in graduate school has finally set in. Between your seminars, the class you teach, the students you coach in Speech, and bartending on weekends, you have not had a day off in weeks. It also does not help that you have chosen to undergo this research. You have not spoken openly about Adam, Jacob, Lee, Westley, or any of the other men in years. You haven't even thought about any of them much in that time either. Here you are, though—bringing them all back from the dead—to the forefront of your mind.

Soft boy, Adam says to you in your head. Why are you being so soft? It's been such a long time.

I am going to tell everyone about what you did, you think to yourself.

Who is going to listen? He asks.

Everyone.

* * *

After years of playing Revenge's game, I found myself beaten and tired. I tried to repair the damage done to me as a child for so long. My ability to fight wore out, and my motivation to keep going crumbled before me. I fell into silence so deep I thought no one would ever find me. Silence is a form of traumatized subjectivity in that way. It suffocates any chance of alleviating the ache of trauma. In every instance, silence has kept me isolated with no one to talk to but my anger. In turn, it has stopped me from genuinely healing for seventeen years.

The stories held within the pages act as a means of combatting my silence through written self-disclosure. This is particularly important because, as Gueta et al. (2020) tell me, self-disclosure is "a process of identity reconstruction, from one of a controlled, fragile, and insignificant victim, to that of a[n]... activist... who is in control, safe, powerful, and significant" (p. 630). Moreover, Miller et al. (2007) prize, "in order to be liberated from an experience of sexual abuse, it is essential to give voice to the internal struggles that have been originated as a result of such abuse" (p. 9). This process, the paper, grants me a new avenue of healing. Subsequently, it has forged a new connection to Recovery.

Recovery

Recovery, the Exiled submind, the abused inner child. He is a small boy with a wide smile. He looks just like I did. When I see him for the first time, he runs into my arms. I pull him into an embrace, and I hold him there. The others gather around us. They each place a hand on his shoulders. *We are sorry*, they say. *I am sorry*, I say. *It was never any of your faults*, he tells us. *Each of you did what you must to survive*. I pull him closer to my body. *I am sorry I never did enough to tell anyone about what happened to us*, I weep. *They wouldn't have listened before*, he says as he wipes my tears. *But you will make them listen now*.

Twenty-Four Years Old

You sit down to write about Adam. It is the first time you have mentioned his name since he was murdered. You want to know why it happened. You want to know why it keeps happening. There has to be an answer. The sweat from your palms drips onto your keyboard. Your fingers lock. *Breath child*, a soft voice whispers in your ear. *We can do this*.

You begin pressing the keys on your laptop one finger at a time. Singular words flow into larger sentences that do not feel like your own. You watch

as the pages before you fill with disconnected scenes and names of men who are of no connection to one another. *None of these has anything to do with each other. This doesn't make any sense, you think to yourself. Doesn't it, though?* Resilience asks. *Look closer,* Rage says as he points to the screen.

You stare at the disjointed stories for a long time in silence. You spend hours rereading the passages trying to make sense of their connection. *Think outside of yourself,* Revenge whispers after some time. *Can you see us? Can you see me?* Recovery questions besides you.

Then you see it. You see them. You can almost trace their appearance through the stories. They were always there protecting you, guiding you through the dark. There is never an answer to why these things happen. Sometimes, they just do; but there is an answer to how you made it through. Even when you had nothing else, you had your anger.

Conclusion

Recovery is a continual process, an ongoing journey. I trudge through my own disjointed narrative not as some entirely healed victim of childhood trauma, looking retrospectively at the past, but as an ongoing survivor forever moving towards a healed horizon in the present. I believe it to be unrealistic to denote recovery as an obtainable final destination. Even if it were, I do not suspect I will ever reach it, which is okay.

This paper is rooted in a rejection of the tacitness of silence that has caged the exiled parts of myself through narrative self-disclosure. For the better portion of two decades as a survivor of repeated sexual abuse and oppression, I have been failed by a number of people, including myself. However, as Miller et al. (2007) note, this form of narrative work diverges from the system at hand that has kept me complacent in my silence. In doing so, I have come to a better understanding of the raw and animalistic experience of my own sexual survival and anger responses.

Additionally, while I contend that my engagement in this narrative work—through the tenets of IFS—has provided me with immense emotional clarity, it should be noted that it does not provide me the answers to impossible questions as I may have once hoped it would. That, too, is okay. I will not pretend to have the answers to unjust and unsolvable issues like “why does this keep happening to me?” because there aren't any. As such, I offer this paper to you, reader, not as some researched proclamation of knowledge. Rather, I give this to you as a testament to our shared survival in a world that continues to work against each of us. Know that you may choose to wade through troubled waters in whatever way keeps you best afloat. May you find comfort in knowing even your most violent parts have a purpose. May you let your anger guide you when necessary.

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