

One Story Can Change the World



--by Listra Simmons

*My father killed me and tossed me
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filthy and abandoned, to face the
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My father killed me and tossed me out into the streets, as something filthy and abandoned, to face the brutality of homelessness. I was eighteen, and until that day, I had lived and worked with my parents in their hardware store, sheltered and without survival. My eight siblings and I were not allowed to have friends nor were we allowed to have an opinion. Under the oppressively watchful eyes of my father, I learned the true meaning of fear. I lived and breathe that fear from the moment I became conscious of myself: fear of living, being a woman and of being intelligent. However, I was considered rebellious because I challenged the perception that I was good for nothing but servitude. Unfortunately for my father, I was an inquisitive child whose wild imagination led me to build telescopes and spaceships from discarded bottles. I imagined myself soaring above the confines of my father's brutality. The futility of such imaginings was sharply enforced with constant beatings and a reminder that time must be spent at work not in the pastime of fools. Though my father tried to beat all resistance out of me, I continued to fight. I had come to learn that the slave master's legacy of brutality was passed down to my father's generation, but I would battle against it. I fought with my voice and with my body, because I could not stand by and watch him beat my younger brothers and sister mercilessly. He would reduce them to quivering black and blue bleeding flesh. I spoke up against the injustice, many times putting myself in between his blows and their tiny bodies; for these *sins*, I was evicted. This, according to my father, usurped his authority. My father is a cruel, sadistic man who insisted that women be submissive and unintelligent. And *that* was my life.

I grew up on the twin island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. I lived there for 45 years and struggled to survive. When my father evicted me, I not only became homeless but also unemployed; remember, I had worked in the family business. Ultimately, I was forced to live in an abandoned fruit and vegetable stand, a tiny room that was attached to my aunt's vacant

house, and where she occasionally sold fruits and vegetables. She had migrated to the United States, the little room was unlocked, and it was the only place I could think to go. There was no running water, no toilet, no lights, and many nights bats would enter through the rafters and drop sprigs of a plant I did not recognize, onto the piece of foam that was my bed. Somehow, I took those sprigs as a sign that there was hope for me, although the pain of hunger sometimes made me wish for death.

My grandmother's house was a short distance away from the abandoned room that I lived in, but I was forbidden to go there because it had been willed to my father. My grandmother had passed away many years before, and my uncle lived in the house. To survive, I took a great risk, and snuck into my grandmother's house, knowing that I might find a small fortune in coins that had been long lost between the floor boards over the many decades of life in the old house. I used the money I found to buy tiny pieces of cheese which I made last for as long as I could. My desolation grew with each passing day, but my burning desire for a better life fueled my determination to survive. I refused to die a shadow. I would make an impact on someone. Someone somewhere needed my help.

My body wasted away, my mind burned with visions of my future. And so, out of desperation, I moved into an apartment with a man whom I had dated previously. Thus, began my decent into a nightmare from which there seemed no awakening. He was an alcoholic, tormented by his own cruel past. This past life came to visit every evening as he lashed out at me simply because I was breathing. We battled physically from the evening straight through to the early morning. Oh, how the pain moaned and howled in my belly like a demonic wind. My sadness knew no end. I moved through the world like someone dead. And my starvation continued to gnaw at me; the alcoholic who beat me mercilessly also stole any money I earned from odd jobs. He *hated* my intelligence. He *loathed* my desire to rise above my circumstances. His mission was to beat me down to a size appropriate for the squalor in which we lived. Even as he sat on my chest and knelt on my hands to subdue me, he could *not subdue my dreams*. Yes, he was beating me, but as he did, I was off elsewhere, envisioning myself educated and teaching. I knew there was so much more for me and others like me who had survived their own version of hell and I determined that I would fight to escape the torture.

After seven years in the belly of despair, an old woman, who had learned of my plight, offered to let me live in her tiny apartment until I got a job. I often wonder what moved her to such kindness. She was a hard woman who bore her battle-scarred shell with great dignity; as it turned out she had lived a life very similar to mine, recognized herself in me, and offered help. This woman, though hardened by life, fed me every day until I got a job and could provide for myself. Slowly I began to emerge, albeit emaciated and battered. Incredibly, years had elapsed since my father evicted me and I entered another hell, but now, though I was still lost, I slowly began to rebuild my life.

Soon I met the man who would become my husband, and we lived peacefully for 16 years. But things had changed somewhere, and after all that time he informed me that the marriage was not working. And, inconceivably, he also informed me that I should “find somewhere else to live.” No words can paint the picture of sadness and betrayal that I felt but I hardened myself as I *again* began the process of survival. Though I was employed, my salary could not pay the rent for an apartment. Therefore, the old woman who had first rescued me offered to let me live in her old storage room, the only space she had available at the time. Thus, I settled in among the decades of dust, as if in my tomb. How ironic to be surrounded by broken windows, doors, and rusted, discarded tools. They were all reflections of my broken, discarded condition.

Here I was – *homeless again*. But no matter the depth of darkness into which I had been thrown, I never once lost the desire to become educated, to rise out of poverty, and leave behind the ever-present threat of homelessness.

And then I had an accident; it felt cruel, almost unbearable. I had fallen down a flight of stairs and sprained both my ankles so badly that I was ordered to bed for one month. During this time, the reality of life’s brevity troubled my conscience. I was stumbling through life denying my aspirations. Lying in that bed, my bitterness and regret festered. However, I used my period of confinement to research the lives of slaves who had left a written legacy of their triumph over darkness and found the life story of Frederick Douglass, learning of his struggle to emerge from mental darkness changed the trajectory of my life forever. I realized that I had squandered the opportunities that Frederick Douglass risked his life to give me. I vowed to live my life from then on with awareness that these freedoms were gotten with the blood of those who fought for them, and that they were *not free*.

In late 2015, my Green Card (which my mother, who had immigrated 20 years earlier to prepare the way for her children to escape poverty and mental stagnation had applied for) was finally approved and I was given the opportunity to immigrate to the United States and begin a new life. I was newly divorced, and had just emerged from my *second homeless experience*, yet I still knew that in the United States, there would be great opportunities if I worked hard.

Though I had attended high school in Trinidad and Tobago, some 30 years had elapsed since that time. Therefore, rather than struggle with the sluggish and outdated system in Trinidad to have my files found, I decided to begin my education anew. I began by attending adult education classes at the Urban League of Greater Hartford, but because I knew I had to begin paying taxes to be able to apply for financial aid to attend college, I decided to prepare for the GED on my own. And I did. At about the same time, I started working at Target. I completed my GED in four months and waited, barely breathing for tax time to come around. I applied to Manchester Community College and was accepted! By then it was almost the summer of 2016, and I wanted to start college as soon as possible. However, to start in summer I had to be matriculated. Determined for this to happen, I wore down the carpet between the Registrar's office and the Financial Aid office, right down to the bare threads. I refused to give up. I had no money to pay for classes. I had arrived here, as many immigrants before me, with nothing but the clothes on my back and my dreams. I begged The Registrar's Office to allow me to matriculate -- and unbelievably! -- they agreed! And so...I was able to start college with financial aid in the summer of 2016.

At last! I was finally able to attend college, my life-long dream! Each day that I am on the campus of Manchester Community College, I feel that I am on hallowed ground. At MCC I have been able to live fearlessly by challenging myself. Enrolling in the Honors College honed my research and writing skill but more importantly allowed me to work closely with various professors who graciously shared their knowledge.

The faculty at MCC have become a great source of strength and support for me and I owe so much to them because they help me to become confident and to recognize my strengths .

I have re-discovered my love of writing with the help of professor Jeanine M DeRusha. Imagine my excitement when I discovered that her English 101 syllabus included an essay based on the

life of Frederick Douglas, I was ecstatic and almost jumped out of my seat! To be able to study the life of a slave who had changed my life was a phenomenal experience.

Professor Malton D. Edwards ignited a hunger in me to understand Finance and Macroeconomics. Before meeting professor Edwards, the thought of understanding Finance or numbers filled me with dread. However, he transferred his love for methodically “writing out the formula and filling in the numbers,” which he repeated rhythmically each time he wrote a formula and it became my mantra. Suddenly the thought of understanding financial concepts did not appear so daunting. In fact, I became so enthralled by economics that I became part of the Manchester Community College team that competed in the New England competition 2017 College Federal Reserve Challenge that took place at the Boston Federal reserve under expert guidance of professor Edwards. The experience made me feel that if I could compete at that level then I could do anything.

The renowned poet, John L. Stanizzi, professor of Literature, infused me with incredible excitement and love for poetry along with the great poets such as Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. I was awakened to the powerful impact that Literature has in drawing attention to injustice and in healing the broken soul. I wrote my first poem in his class and discovered that not only did I have a poetic voice but also that writing poetry allowed me to use that voice to empower others.

Another pivotal mentor was professor Steve Straight who helped me to refine my poetry writing skills in his Creative Writing – Poetry class. I can say that writing poetry is so much more difficult than it appears, and I gained a deep respect for writers in all genres. There were many times that I felt close to tears when trying to come up with an idea for a poem, but I persisted and handed my work in for professor Straight’s critique which came back in the form of carefully written notes in Purple ink. Through this process, I was able to push past the temporary discomfort of learning a new skill to the exhilaration of having a completed poem with professor Straight’s stamp of approval. One of my poems was published in *Shapes* magazine. I was also honored with MCC’s 2018 Young Poet Award, an honor which I share with the outstanding faculty of MCC who gave me direction, inspiration and friendship.



Receiving the Young Poet Award presented by Steve Straight

My desire is to someday write my story and leave it as a trail that others may follow out of their own darkness. I also want to help others to gain a love for language and to accomplish this I am working toward becoming an English professor. I dream to write the many stories of struggle and triumph — my own as well as others which have been entrusted to me over the years. It was my ability to *write my pain* that was so instrumental in saving my life and I believe that one story can change the world.