

BEING TOUCHED

For JAMIE HANNA, reclaiming her body after being sexually abused as a young child took patience – and a whole lot of love.

I SAT ON THE COUNTER in a frilly pink dress, my hair in two pigtails. The smell of warm corn tortillas and sweet butter wafted under my nose. Burt turned away from the stove, and walked towards me. He grasped my 5-year-old hips with his bronze hands. “Your panties are very pretty,” he said as he lifted my dress. He looked up at me with dilated pupils in his intense brown eyes. I averted his gaze. But I was proud, happy that he noticed my new undies.

His hands stroked my tummy as he lowered his chin between my legs, resting his square jaw on top of my pubic bone. He went down further, his hot, heavy breath penetrating my cotton underwear. I could feel the prickly shadow of his beard scratching my skin. I wanted him to stop. I wanted him to continue. I felt nervous. Scared. Good. Strange.

In those moments, Burt awakened my sexuality. He was the first to make my body tingle with sensation. That made him powerful and it held me captive. I don’t know how many times it happened. Maybe just that once. Maybe 10 times. No idea.

A child’s memory is completely incomplete. I do know that I loved those corn tortillas. The only time I ate them was with Burt.

He was my dad’s tennis buddy; his wife, Espy, my mom’s friend. They were my after-school playmates. Espy hosted tea parties for me, and Burt made tasty snacks. About once a week, I came home from school and told Mom I was going next door for a visit. They lived there for four years.

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I never knew why they moved away. I never asked questions. I never told. I even wondered if it was real. And it wasn’t that my parents never talked about molestation. The words were ingrained in my head: “If anyone ever touches you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable, you must always tell us. Never be afraid to tell.”

But in my childhood mind, their plea didn’t apply to Burt. He was part of our family’s circle. So I convinced myself that he didn’t do anything wrong, that I imagined the extent of his fondling. But several years later, I received validation, when I discovered that I wasn’t the

only one. One out of three girls are sexually abused before the age of 18. In my family, it was three out of three. I have two sisters: All of us were his victims.

I was in my early teens when a “For Sale” sign once again pierced the front garden of Burt and Espy’s old home. The mid-morning sun shone brightly as Mom busied herself with the laundry. Surrounded by bleach, washing powder and fabric softener, she pinned clean clothes on the clothesline while I brought out the wet towels. I looked over at the empty house and asked, “What happened to Burt and Espy?”

She looked like I had slapped her across the face. From three metres away, I saw rage take over her body – almost like a cartoon character slowly turning bright red with anger. “Why? Did he do something to you?” she asked, her voice shaking. At that moment, I knew it was real. I knew it had happened. And I knew it was wrong.

Her face transformed into a grimace of disgust as she described Burt’s repeated attempts to kiss my eldest sister, how he had exposed himself to my middle sister and how he had betrayed all of us with his indiscretions. “I never imagined he touched you,” she said as she dropped her head into her hands with defeat. “You were so young.” Maybe she didn’t ask because she didn’t want to know. If I never spoke of his illicit behaviour, I must have been safe. Only I wasn’t.

Her words were unnecessary. The anger, pain and anguish in her eyes expressed everything. He violated each of her daughters, and she wanted nothing more than to cleanse our souls of his filth. But she was powerless. She didn’t know. He was our friend.

At the time, I was facing my first period, feigning interest in boys and obsessing about being part of the



popular crowd. But one thing remained childlike – my reaction to sex. I was more than just a late bloomer; I was petrified. My first “real” kiss didn’t happen until I was 17. When male hands approached my stomach, hips or anywhere near my upper thighs, I recoiled. It was a visceral reaction, completely unconscious.

I didn’t connect the dots until I was well into my twenties, wrestling on the couch with a new beau. He began to lightly tickle me, then lifted my shirt to play with my belly. His blue eyes bored into me. But I didn’t look away. They were gentle, patient and kind. I trusted them. I trusted him. I felt safe. And yet, this was entirely new territory for both of us. I’d never embraced my sexuality; he had never discovered someone so slowly. He fell in love before making love. He learnt the power of non-physical intimacy.

“One of the most rewarding things about our relationship is knowing that

we work even without sex,” he often said. In a weird way, the sexual abuse made our connection deeper, because we couldn’t use make-up sex to put a plaster over our problems. Instead, we communicated with words.

His patience was astounding. His hands wandered below my waist. I squirmed. He stopped, held me close and told me how much he loved me. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I know I am a freak.” Without either of us even realising it, he became my therapy. “You’re not a freak. You’re beautiful. I love you. We’ll work through this – together,” he said. Over and over and over again. It was like behavioural therapy, where people who are afraid of flying get into simulators and go through the motions until they’re able to set foot on an aeroplane. It was the same with me – except I loved flying. I just didn’t know it yet.

I was 26 when I was finally able to reclaim what Burt took away. My

boyfriend’s gentle, loving hands helped me realise my body wasn’t dirty, bad or wrong. It was beautiful ... just a little scarred. He made it clear I was safe with him – that he would never push me. He taught me to trust. Gradually, he melted the ice encasing me.

I can never take Burt to trial or prevent him from touching someone else – the statute of limitations for this crime has long since passed. But I know now that if I don’t enjoy my sexuality, if I don’t treat my body as beautiful, and if I don’t allow the man I love to pleasure me without pain, then Burt wins. I won’t let him win.

As I sit on my kitchen counter watching my boyfriend layer ingredients for lasagne, I’m reminded how far I’ve come, how much I’ve lost – and then regained. And I make a decision: “I’m going to have sex on the kitchen floor. Glorious, shameless sex.”

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