West Side, San Antonio, Texas-November 1983

It was just another day in November, seemingly no different from the rest. My mom busied herself with her usual routine. She picked me up from kindergarten. I ran inside and plopped down on the couch, turning on the TV hoping to catch *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, but settling for *Looney Tunes* while I waited. I was a quiet, introverted child who preferred to do my own thing rather than interact with anyone. On this afternoon, my attention was focused on the television. The volume was abnormally loud and my mother had not made it into the house to tell me to turn it down yet.

My father was away, undoubtedly becoming alienated from the enlisted soldier working-class grind that was keeping the family afloat, and my older sister would be on her way home from school soon. As my mom walked into the house, the screen door began to close slowly behind her. It suddenly banged back open, and a tall man rushed her. He put a gun to her head and marched her through the hallway to the kitchen. A thin sliver of a wall between us, I sat on the living room couch, motionless, watching the roadrunner outwit the coyote. Perplexed and amused at the constant bumbling of this cartoon stalker, my five-year-old mind had no awareness or comprehension that a very real predator had invaded our home.

The man forced my mother to lay on the floor. "You better be quiet or I will blow your little boy away." With my safety in jeopardy, she could hardly fight back when he told her to take her pants off. He pulled her shirt up over her head so that she couldn't see anything. The whole time she was praying that this wouldn't happen to her. My five-year-old self, hearing the commotion, walked into the kitchen just as he began to rape her. I saw my mother naked on the floor with someone wrapped around her, and he saw me. "I'm not going to hurt you," he said and stopped what he was doing. My mother thought he was talking to her. She could not see and did not know I had walked into the kitchen. I walked back out and sat on the couch

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again, stock still, like an animal trapped by headlights. He got off of her and fled the same way that he came in.

The terror and confusion clouded my mind as the aftermath of the assault unfolded. The police came, but ignored my presence and experience as they took reports that never amounted to anything. The man was never caught. No one ever knew that I had entered the kitchen. No one ever asked. While I'm sure that my five-year-old mind could not fully comprehend abstract values like justice, whatever semblance of understanding I had of justice, safety, and security, was shattered that day. My mother was the guardian of my world and she was not safe. No one made things right for her. No one seemed to care about the horror that we lived through. The stark realization of personal violence and the societal indifference to our victimization sowed the seeds of resentment deep within me.

I struggled after that. As a kindergartner, at naptime I would run away from school to go home, only one street away. This infraction greatly upset the school administration. Either they were not very good at communicating with me or I was not very good at communicating with them. I only wanted to check on my mom to make sure nothing bad was happening to her. She was going through a spell of depression, which I did not have the capacity to understand. Running away from school was just the first step in a long road to delinquency. After that, my elementary school experience would be a roller coaster of destructive behavior, fed by emotional distress that created anger issues and mistrust of others' intentions. As I grew older, I approached the world with hypervigilance and wariness of everyone, as they all had the potential to harm me or someone I loved.

In the 1980s, psychologists began reporting that children who personally witnessed violence and traumatic events had a significantly increased risk for developing anxiety, depression, conduct disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In a study of 100 uninjured children who witnessed violent trauma, psychologists found that 80 percent could clearly be diagnosed with PTSD, the symptoms of which include distorted patterns of thinking, as well as agitated, disorganized, and reckless behavior. A more recent study of 1,539 adult males found that gang members were more likely than gang affiliates and other violent men to have experienced severe violence and trauma, resulting in high levels of anxiety and implying an increased likelihood for developing PTSD and engaging in future violence.² Unfortunately for me, I would never be assessed, diagnosed, treated, or even counseled. In my family, like so many others who experienced trauma, the event was never discussed. Many people feel ashamed when they are victimized, and they hide it the best that they can. My mother coped with her depression through religious faith. No one even thought to consider the

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effects on the children. Using household victimization surveys, the same psychologists conservatively estimated in the 1980s that 25,000 children a year witnessed a rape in the home. How many of them had to navigate the trauma with underdeveloped cognition and no guidance? How many of them were also set on a path to destruction?

