



Age of Innocence

One of 360's own reflects on how her mother's abusive boyfriend affected her childhood

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I sit on the edge of the couch biting my lip, staring at the pile of gifts from my fourth birthday a few days before, trying to focus on anything but the screaming. My mom and her boyfriend Chris argue in the kitchen as she washes the dishes.

"I know you're lying to me!" he shouts.

"I swear, I'm telling you the truth! Nothing happened!" my mom pleads.

I stare at a small hole in the arm of the couch and try to remember if I was the one who made it. I trace the hole and pick at the stuffing peeking out.

"You're a terrible liar and a bad mother," Chris says. "Instead of working or spending time with your daughter, you're out fucking every guy you see."

"Nothing happened! I swear! I was at work all day!" my mom shouts.

"Don't raise your voice at me!" Chris yells as he grabs my mom's hair and drags her out of the room.

When I first met Chris, I hated him. He was tall and smelled of liquor and dirt. He wore a plaid shirt buttoned over a slightly bulging stomach and faded jeans tucked into dusty cowboy boots. He strutted in the room and gave a charming introduction to my grandmother

and aunt. When he looked at me, I could see the dislike in his eyes. I was going through my hairstylist phase, so I rambled on and on about the different hairstyles I would create and the magic shampoos and conditioners I would invent. Everyone seemed to be amused, except for Chris and my mom. He seemed utterly bored and she was staring at him.

Later, after Chris had left, Mom asked me what I thought about him.

"I don't really like him that much," I said.

"Why not?" Mom asked me.

I stood in my room, clutching a stuffed bear, and stared at the emptiness around me.

"I'm not sure," I said. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I tried. "He's kind of fat."

"Well, sweetie, that's no reason not to like someone," Mom told me. "I think if you just give him a chance, you'll see that you do like him."

Within a week, he moved in with us. Mom went to work, I went to daycare, and Chris stayed home and sat on his ass. Whenever we came home, he would be so upset about being trapped in the house all day that he would

accuse my mom of cheating on him, storm out, take the car, and go out drinking somewhere.

They began fighting all the time.

One day, I had just taken a bath and was trying to get dressed. Mom and Chris were sitting in the living room watching TV. Chris was drinking something out of a Mason jar while Mom cuddled up to him.

"Mom!" I shouted. "I can't find my shorts!"

"They're in the top drawer, Sweetie," Mom called to me.

I walked out into the hallway. "I can't reach the top drawer."

"OK, one second." Mom started to get up.

"No," Chris said as he grabbed my mom's arm. "She can get whatever she needs herself."

"The drawer is too high for her to reach. I need to help her." Mom pulled against Chris and began walking my way.

All of a sudden, Chris took his Mason jar and threw it on the carpet. Somehow it shattered into a thousand pieces and the smell of alcohol engulfed the room. Mom started crying, so I tried to walk to her.

"No! Stay there, Sweetie!" she ordered. "I don't want you walking across the glass."

"Naw, it'll be fine," Chris said as he waved me forward. "Come on, it'll be fine." I guess he wanted to see me in pain.

A few months later, I was back in my spot on the couch, listening to Mom and Chris yelling from their bedroom. She was crying and begging.

"No," she pleaded. "Please don't hurt her."

Later that night, we packed a few small bags and fled to her friend's house. We stayed there for a few weeks before going back to the house to get the rest of our stuff. There were hundreds of empty beer cans all over the house. Dirty pots and pans littered the kitchen and dining room. Our shelves had been ransacked and many of our movies and books were missing. My two hamsters ran loose around the house.

I stood in my room, clutching a stuffed bear, and stared at the emptiness around me.

"Sweetie? Are you OK?" Mom asked me.

I didn't move.

"I'm really sorry about all of this. I should have listened to you from the beginning," she said. "I love you. You know that?"

I didn't move.

"Sweetie? Are you OK?"

I finally came back to life. "Mhmm. I'm fine."

