

The Vicious Cycle



By Anna Wostenberg

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My mom had enrolled me in dance classes; she'd always told me that her own mother wouldn't pay for her dance lessons, so she wanted to be nothing like her own mother and for me to live out her dream of being a ballerina. Except that I hated ballet. It bored me but I had to take it in order to take the fun classes. So I relented, but complained every week as I struggled into the itchy pink tights and too-tight black leotard that highlighted my extra pale complexion and while my mom painfully bobby-pinned my long hair into a huge cinnamon bun sticking off the back of my tiny head.

"I don't wanna go to ballet!" I'd whine. "I'm too tired."

"Well then I guess you're too tired for jazz class after, too, huh," my mom would reply unsympathetically as she fixed me a water bottle. At my protests against missing out on my favorite class she'd call out, "Alright then, get your dance bag. We're gonna be late!" already halfway out the door.

I was seven years old, maybe, and performing in one of my first dance recitals. I wore a cute oversized t-shirt with black frills on the sleeves and a pink felt poodle on the breast. We danced to "The Shoop Shoop Song." The one by Betty Everett. I was so excited to be on that stage! It filled me with such a natural high and I always wanted to be up there.

After my recital, my mom and dad met me backstage to gather all my things. My dad had a bouquet of the most beautiful flowers in his hands for me, and my face lit up. I loved my daddy. I ran to him for a hug and I probably hugged my mom, too, because I was seven and didn't notice any of her flaws yet.

“That was great!” he said enthusiastically. I grinned from ear to ear, the gaping whole from my missing front tooth smiling out at him.

“That was good, Muffinator!” my mom cheered. “But for, like, 30 whole seconds, you were just staring off to the wings of the stage! Don’t do that while you’re performing. What was even over there that was so exciting?” she asked. She let out an awkward chuckle, a trait I would grow to abhor as I got older. I remember being embarrassed by this but trying to brush it off because I was so proud of myself. I didn’t care if I’d looked off to the wings; I’d had a blast up there!

I was fourteen years old when I experienced my first real tragedy. It was February 9th, a Saturday. AOL Instant Messenger was the latest fad and I even had my own laptop to log on with.

This particular Saturday I’d carted my laptop into the kitchen with me so I could instant message my best friend Emily while I made cookies or something. My family was in the dark family room, mesmerized by the TV. “Boston Public” was probably on or maybe “The Simpsons,” and at every noise I made I’d get shushed by my mom or one of my brothers.

Emily dropped a bomb on me. “I heard Devon Marvin died,” she typed. “I heard she committed suicide.” I was speechless.

“How do you know??” I responded as quickly as possible.

“My brother and her brother are in the same Cub Scout troop and they announced it at the meeting on Friday.”

I remember picking up my laptop and carrying it out to the family room. “Mom?” I asked. She promptly shushed me, telling me to wait for a commercial. “Mom, this is important,” I think I said. To my mom, nothing in my world was very important to her because EVERYTHING in my world seemed important to me all the time.

“What?” she snapped. She didn't even look at me.

“Emily told me Devon Marvin committed suicide this weekend.” I was quiet, apathetic because I was in shock. I didn't know what to think or do because I'd never faced something like this before.

“Who is Devon Marvin?” she asked. Her attention was still focused on the television.

“My friend from school! We were in ‘Once Upon A Mattress’ together and she’s a Soaring Eagle with me? She was at Ashley Salzman’s slumber party last September?”

My mom was skeptical, but loud as usual but she finally turned to look at me. “I don’t believe that. That’s probably just a rumor. Emily *has* been known to make some things up. She's probably going to show up at school on Monday. I wouldn’t worry about it.” But she could tell I wasn't convinced. "Really, don't worry about it," she half-heartedly tried and with that, went back to her show.

But I was still numb, unsettled, trying to convince myself that Devon was still alive, that this was all some cruel joke that we'd all laugh about during lunch in Ms. Williams' choir classroom. But I found myself shaking with nerves as I walked into school Monday morning.

Devon had actually died. She'd hanged herself. I'd never even really known much about suicide; it hadn't yet permeated the Danville Bubble until this tragedy. My world was thrown out of orbit. Emily and I were pretty shaken up over it; Devon and I had been friends. Not best friends, but our friend groups ran together and we often sat at the same lunch table. Regardless, this tragedy was a difficult one to process and I can't even remember my mom having any conversations with me about it. In fact, I remember Emily's mom talking more to us about it, showing more concern. Emily's mom took us to the funeral; Emily's mom sat us down and talked to us about depression, about seeking help if we needed it. My mom is just not present in my memories from this time. She was going through her own shit, something I didn't realize until much later.

But I could say that I just hadn't realized how much she was actually doing for me; that she was actually a great mom and I'd just been taking advantage of her as a mother, and I was, on some level. Every child does. But she still was going through her depression with no idea how to handle it and it was unfair to me as a kid going through such a tough experience.

For my older brother Eric's college graduation, my grandparents flew out from Wisconsin and my family and I drove down to LA from Danville. The ceremony droned on and I slept through most of it. I was 15. I can't remember if my other brother Dane was there, too, but he probably was. Finally, it was Eric's turn to walk. My mom and I had left our seats at the top of the mountain of an arena to seek out a better vantage point for pictures. We fought the hundreds of other Engineer moms to get to the front. We found the perfect spot; a place where we could call down to Eric and ask him to smile.

“Eric! Stop for a picture!” my mom had called with pride in her voice. He looked up and smiled, but kept walking. There was a line of other grads waiting for their turn. “He didn’t fucking stop! I can’t believe he didn’t fucking stop,” she said with her signature half chuckle, even though she was actually really pissed and didn’t find the situation funny at all.

Her first words to him when we were all gathered in the crowded courtyard full of happy reunions, hugs, and congratulations, were, “You’re a dick.” She wore a scowl on her face and you could tell she was really hurt that he hadn’t stopped; she’d taken it personally.

Eric futilely tried to defend himself, sputtering out an excuse: “We weren’t allowed to stop. The security guards told us we couldn’t stop for pictures...”

“You could have stopped for, like, five seconds so I could take a damn picture,” she snipped.

After that, Eric stopped speaking to my mother. He wouldn’t answer her phone calls, he wouldn’t respond to emails, and when he came home for holidays, he barely said a word to her. He’d talk to me and my dad, but not my mom. He even stopped getting her Christmas gifts. It’s been seven years and he still doesn’t.

Sometime during my eighth grade year, my mom changed. Every morning when my dad would go to kiss her goodbye as he left for work she’d turn her face, only offering her cheek for him to kiss. She still performed all her motherly duties: packing us kids and my dad a lunch, getting us showered and fed, getting us off to our various carpools. But now she’d go into our home office and sit on the computer for hours and

hours. She'd emerge only to cook dinner and clean up. Then it was right back to the office. And I never noticed this change in behavior because I was still young and absorbed in my own life. I never noticed because by this point, I was the only child left in the house; my older brothers were both off at college. Life in the Wostenberg household pretty much revolved around me now.

I was living pretty well. Every Friday night my friends and I would get dropped off at the local pizza parlor. We'd get pizza, walk through Draegers Grocery to buy candy, and head over to the movie theater on the other side of the shopping center. At the end of the night we'd get dropped off at our respective homes and I'd see them all the next day, unless of course I had a dance competition.

I'd gotten through the death of Devon. I still thought about her a lot, sometimes even cried for her in the shower, but I was still able to live my life and be happy. I was dancing through life, as the cast of *Wicked* sang.

That's why, when I came home on January 2nd, 2009 from a mini vacation to San Diego with Emily, I was caught completely off guard when my mom stopped me in the kitchen. I hadn't even been home for twenty minutes; the airplane smell still lingered and I was starving. My face was oily from the travel and I wore my Juicy Couture sweats. I was exhausted: the sewage in Emily's condo in San Diego had ruptured, covering the floors in smelly, swampy grossness; in an attempt to entertain ourselves and vacate the premises, we'd decided to go see "Marley & Me" which was a big mistake. We'd both cried through the whole movie. My face's puffiness had just barely subsided by the time I arrived home.

“I have to tell you something,” my mother’s voice quavered. We were standing in the kitchen, facing each other.

“Okay...” I remember saying uncomfortably.

“I’m moving out.”

I didn’t process what she’d said right away. “What?” My face contorted into an awkward frown as the tears overflowed.

“But you can’t cry. You have to be strong for me. I’m having a really hard time with things right now and I’m going to start seeing a therapist.” The world began to spin and I felt weightless, like I couldn’t stand any longer. My hand gripped the familiar curved wood of the kitchen chair, my knuckles aching as I held on for dear life.

“What do you mean I can’t cry? You’re moving out!” My mom was crying too by this point. She tried to hug me, but I remained stiff, the tears tracing paths down my cheeks, my jaw clenched in hatred.

I hadn't known this at the time, but my mother had been planning on moving out for six months before she actually did. She hadn't disclosed this to anyone except my grandmother, who had told me about it several years after it had already happened, once I was 16 and could better understand. I was visiting my grandma all by myself, my first big trip alone. We'd stayed up late on her lanai with tea and hot cocoa and talked about everything that had occurred with my mother.

"She was sick, she still is. She's depressed. I don't know why, but she's always been that way, even since she was a little girl. Always so volatile," my grandmother explained. "I know I'm just her step-mother, but I've been around since she was, like, 8

years old and I could never figure out where her anger came from." And I felt betrayed by this knowledge that my mother had been planning her escape for six whole months without telling my father or me, so I harbored even more hatred toward her. She didn't even try to fix things with my dad; she just gave up.

But from the moment she told me she was leaving, I began to avoid my mother. I resented her so much for walking out on my dad and me. She'd never actually gone to therapy, as she'd promised she would. I started to sleep in my dad's bed, even though I was fifteen. Despite the fact that she'd only moved about ten minutes away, I never wanted to see her. She practically forced me to spend Tuesday nights there, and even then, I hated to because I had to get an inconvenient carpool to school because she couldn't drive me there herself. Walking into her apartment felt like walking into a prison.

Our relationship was awful. She tried to buy my affections, taking me shopping, cooking me dinner, buying me concert tickets. And I took advantage of that. I'd let her buy me all this stuff, even though I knew we couldn't afford it. But we fought all the time, disagreed on everything. She was always scolding me and yelling at me and I was always biting my tongue, the snide remarks building up behind the dam of my lips.

I started hanging out with a rougher crowd, staying out late, coming home even later at night when I was staying with her. One night I came home particularly late and my mom was not happy.

From the darkness of her room, she called out to me as I tried to sneak quietly into my room. "Anna?"

“Yeah...”

“It’s 2:15 in the fucking morning! Where were you?”

“Out with friends,” was my terse reply. I never told her anything about my life.

She didn’t deserve to know.

“Which friends?”

“Friends.”

“Why won’t you ever tell me who you’re out with?” By this time, I’d entered the dark cavern and stood at the foot of the bed. I was tired and just wanted to go to sleep.

“I was just out with friends! I was with Michael,” I conceded. I shifted my weight and folded my arms across my chest. She couldn’t see me roll my eyes in the blackness.

Her tone shifted. “How come you never come home at a reasonable time when you’re staying here? You’re always out late with your friends! It’s like you do it on purpose so you never have to spend time with me!” She was no longer groggy from sleep, but the pitch of her voice rose.

“That’s not true!” I tried to defend myself. “I’m a teenager! I just like to hang out with my friends! It’s what we do.” I felt the redness tingling across my cheeks. I hated being called out for my behavior.

“No. You do it on purpose. You don’t love me.” Clearly her anti-depressants weren’t working. She’d pulled this before and I hated her games. I was done begging for her forgiveness.

“Yes, that’s exactly it,” I said sarcastically. I turned and started to walk out of the room.

“Well, if I overdose on the drugs, you’ll know why,” she snapped.

I fell to the floor in a fit of silent sobs. “That’s not fucking funny to me! That’s not a fucking joke!” I screamed at her. After a moment, I somehow managed to pick myself up from the floor, grab my keys, and run out the door, letting it slam behind me.

One day when I was in high school, or maybe home for the summer from college, I was sitting on the couch with my dad, talking about how frustrating I find my mother. By this point, there was no longer much animosity between my mother and I. We’d never talked about our relationship, but we were able to get along for short periods of time. As I ranted endlessly, my dad just watched me, and a sort of smirk crawled onto his face.

“What?” I asked defensively.

“I’ve had this same conversation with your brother. And I’ll tell you the same thing I told him. You’ve got half your mother’s genes.” I looked at him accusingly, almost hurt that he hadn’t taken my side. “It’s true,” he insisted and continued with something along the lines of, “No matter how much you try to deny it, you’ve got some of your mother’s characteristics. You’re like her and that’s inevitable. Unavoidable. But what’s important is learning how to accept that and become the best person you can be. Use it to your advantage.” And no matter how much it infuriated me to hear this from my dad, I knew he was right. I didn’t want to accept it, but I had to. And I did.

I so desperately don’t want to be like my mother: there is so much wrong with her and she has so many shitty traits. Yet somehow I see it happening, right before my very

own eyes and I'm unable to stop it. It's bred into me because it's what I grew up around. No matter how much I try, some of her behaviors are already ingrained. The bad ones.

Just this past summer I was visiting Eric with a friend from school. She'd never been to California before, so I was pretty prideful, talking up my state and all the cool things there are to do. Eric lived in LA and we were going to Disneyland the next day.

The air mattress that Eric had lent my friend to sleep on had had holes in it, prompting her to crawl onto the small couch with me in the early hours of the morning. I'd told Eric about it in the morning and he uncaringly said he'd take a look at it. When, the following day, he hadn't actually repaired it, I became livid.

I rudely called him out in front of my friend and his roommate. Something my mother would do. "You're such a dick! You're being a terrible host! If I had someone staying at my house and they slept poorly, I'd be so embarrassed! I'd go buy another air mattress first thing!"

Later, before we departed for the six-hour drive back home, Eric pulled me aside. "You're acting just like Mom. You're turning into her. I'm not saying this to lecture you or chastise you, it's just something you should think about." I left in tears, fully aware that he was right.