

## Shades of Grey

*The moon is just a giant rock. Made of a few basic elements— silica, alumina, lime, iron oxide, and traces of sodium oxide. It is one of the most simplistic pieces of the solar system. It has no capability to sustain life. It is dark and cold.*

...

Two men. One couch. One chair. The last memory I have of my mother. I was four years old.

My dad and brothers were still at work at the family business. He had never taken me to work before, but I always asked him about it. He told me he would show me one day—when I was old enough. So for now I got to spend my time at home with my mom and baby sister, and honestly I was pretty happy about it. Or at least I think I was; I can't quite remember. I know she always made the best peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and let me watch cartoons, so it couldn't have been that bad.

It was early evening, and my favorite cartoon, "Dexter's Lab" had just come on. I never heard a knock at the door, but it opened. Looking outside, I could see the moon. It was big and hung low in the sky. I had never seen the men standing in the entrance before, but they walked right into our small two-bedroom apartment. Some pans dropped in the kitchen where my mother was cooking dinner. The two men sat me on the couch and told me not to move as they headed in the direction of the noise.

They walked through the narrow hallway that led from the kitchen to the bedrooms. They must have looked in the room that I shared with my brothers first because I heard my Lego tower crash to the floor. I had spent hours working out the perfect configuration of each piece. I was heartbroken.

The men then kicked down the door to my parents' room—I remember thinking that was odd since my parents only locked their door late at night, when they needed to have “adult conversations.”

My mom let out a small yelp as the one man dragged her toward the living room by her hair. The other man pulled up a chair from the kitchen table and placed it across from me.

They sat my mom down and tied her hands behind the chair. She was crying but didn't make a sound; she looked straight into my eyes. The man who had pulled her by the hair then came and sat down next to me. “Your father needs to learn. You might as well too. This is life.”

With that, the man who stood next to my mother pulled out a gun from behind his back. I looked at my mother, who hadn't taken her eyes off me. She just stared. I stared back. Men should never cry.

One shot.

The men left without saying anything else. I got up and walked over to where my mother sat hunched over. I crawled up and sat on her lap until the police arrived.

...

*Gravity and nuclear fission. The two things that make a star shine. Stars form when a large ball of gas is acted upon by gravity, pulling all the contents toward one giant center. The atoms are pulled closer and closer and they start to heat up. The intense heat causes the nuclei of atoms to fuse together releasing an extreme amount of energy in the form of light.*

...

When I was 7 (2000), I was initiated into the gang life. It was the family business and I was finally old enough to learn the trade. At first my father and new “brothers” kept me with them at all times, and I did what they said. Count these, put those in baggies, take this to the safe, get my gun.

Do as you were told and they will take care of you. Disobey and suffer the consequences.

As I spent more time working, they let me do things by myself, until one day I was upgraded to working my own corner. My dad told me that this was a big day, and I deserved something special. He went to the safe and pulled out a wrinkled brown bag. It was heavy and cold. As I reached into the bag, I could tell what it was—a pistol that was still a little too big for my hands. It was all black with a gold trigger and my initials engraved on the handle.

I looked up at my father to see a face I saw very few times in my life. It was the look he had when my brothers finished their first day at work. It was the look that he had when he made his first “bonus” at work (which turned out to be 2 new pistols and dope for his own recreation). It was the look he had when he found out my mom was having a baby girl. This was the first and only time my father looked at me in that way. My father was so proud.

I took the gun and put it in the back of my jeans like I had seen my father do many times before. I went to the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and South just as my father had told me. I was to look for people who looked like they were in need of a fix. A brief handshake would be exchanged, and we would both get what we needed. My father would even have me skip school on Friday to help—weekends were always the busiest.

I was good at working the street and my dad let me continue for a few weeks, but at the end of the month that all changed. I went to make another deal as I had done so many times before. I handed a guy a white pouch, but he didn't hand me money. Instead he handed me his police badge and told me to walk quietly around the corner, where his car was waiting.

That drive was the longest of my life. We went to the apartment where my father, sister, and I were still living—the one where my mother was shot—and instead of leaving me there, we just picked up my sister and kept driving until the car stopped in a neighborhood that was familiar to

me—my grandma’s neighborhood. This was my new home.

The police told me that my father no longer wanted custody of my sister and me so we had to move away.

I was confused. I thought I was making him proud.

...

*Carl Gustav Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist and thinker, focusing most of his life on a topic he coined “individuation”. Individuation is a process of personal psychological development. The essential three parts of the human psyche must be distinguished and separated into its three major parts.*

...

1. *The collective unconscious: the collective memory of human thought and experience, instincts and archetypes.*

...

I was just a kid trying to make my parent proud. I had already lost my mom, so my dad was the only one left. I saw the way he looked at my brothers when they brought money home. They were providing for the family—the job of the men of the house.

I was supposed to take care of my sister. Keep her safe, make sure she had a clean place to sleep, tuck her in at night. So, in turn, I had to sneak out of work early to pick her up from school on Fridays and walk her home.

That was our time. We would stop and get McDonalds with some of the money I had made working. One cheeseburger Happy Meal with an additional small drink and a girl’s toy inside. \$3.29. Dinner for two.

After I dropped her off at home, I would run back to the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and South to finish my shift before my dad noticed I was gone.

I never made as much as my brothers, and my father never let me live that down. He said I

needed to work harder for the family so we could have food every night.

...

2. *The personal unconscious: the forgotten and repressed memories.*

...

I never thought much about my mother. She was dead and gone. It wasn't like I hadn't seen death before. It wasn't uncommon to go to a funeral two or three times a month.

I mean I didn't know her anyway, right? I too was young. All I can remember is her stoic face and dead body.

...

3. *The ego: the conscious mind.*

...

In May of 2001, I was shipped to Steady People Foster Home in Savannah, Georgia. It was my worst nightmare. I wanted to stay with my sister, but my grandma couldn't afford it. She shouldn't go to the home. I was eight, and could take care of myself.

I remember it was a cold morning; frost covered the ground. The moon was still out but I could see the sun far away on the horizon.

A police officer picked me up from my grandma's front porch. I barely had enough clothing to fill a shopping bag, so it didn't take long for me to pack up.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." The only words that my grandma kept repeating as she squeezed me tight. I felt guilty. I walked down the steps to the police car slowly, and turned back as the officer opened the car door. I saw my little sister staring at me. She said nothing, but tears rolled slowly down her cheeks. I just stared back.

I stayed at Steady People for a few weeks, until a visitation day came around. I dreaded it. The last thing I wanted to do was move into a strange house with people who didn't understand.

Being adopted meant being permanently separated from my only true family, my sister.

But visitation day came, and there was nothing I could do about it. They spread all of us throughout the house like we were on display, and let prospective parents walk from room to room until they found one they wanted.

I saw two people out of the corner of my eye as I played with my Legos. They walked over to where I was playing and sat for a long time and just stared. They left without saying anything. I thought I was safe for another two weeks.

I was wrong. Within the next fifteen minutes, the woman who ran Steady People came and told me to pack my bags. I told her I didn't have many things so she grabbed my hand and dragged me toward the people who didn't say anything. I met my foster parents on the porch of Steady People and they took my hand and led me to the car. As my "new dad" opened the door, I looked back. No one waited out on the porch. We got in their car, and drove away. It was the last time I ever saw Steady People.

We pulled into the driveway of a two-story home in the middle of suburbia. The house was a light shade of blue with a porch swing and a picket fence. This was definitely some sort of hellish nightmare.

The first days passed slowly with little conversation. The only word we exchanged was the occasional "thank you" for the new clothing and food that they bought me.

Those dark nights at the new house were some of the longest I ever had, mixed with a sense of relief that I had a clean place to sleep and a sense of guilt that I left my sister without one. There was nothing I could do. Wishing on the stars I could see from my bedroom window would do nothing. Wishing is for fools.

Slowly, I adjusted to my home. My foster parents enrolled me in a new school and even let me send some clothes back to my grandma's house. Gradually, I became a member of a new kind of family—one that made sure I had three meals a day and was home after football practice

to do my homework. What if my life could be different from now on?

...

*On a clear night, over 8,000 stars are visible to the naked eye, although it is estimated that there are over 100 million in the Milky Way galaxy. Within the Galaxy there are a number of different types of stars burning within the heavens.*

...

It was a Saturday evening in October 2002. My foster parents had dropped me off early that morning at the field, even though they were angry with me.

The night before I had taken the scissors from the kitchen and snuck into my room where I began to saw through the royal blue cast on my left leg. My leg had shrunk from being in the cast for a few weeks, so I only needed to cut a small section by my toes in order to wiggle my leg free. I had broken it during football practice and I couldn't wait to get back on the field.

Tonight was the championship game and I knew my team needed me. We were a family.

At the stadium, I suited up in my green and orange. "Savannah Stars" was written across the front of my jersey, and the number 2 was displayed across my back. I put my helmet on and ran to the field. It hurt.

Coach was hesitant to put me in, so I watched the game from the sidelines for the first half, and nothing was going as planned. Half time ended and the game continued downhill. At the end of the third quarter we were down by 21.

Finally, coach called me over and told me a series of plays, tapped my helmet, and nudged me on to the field. I could see my foster mom and dad in the stadium along with 6 of my older brothers and my younger sister who had traveled the two hours to see me play. I smiled; they looked nervous.

The rest of the game was a blur. Run, catch, tackle, stay light on your feet, don't forget

to look for the lane. Breathe. It was like nothing I had felt before.

At the end of the game I turned to look at the scoreboard. 42-35. I did it.

Initially I struggled to remember the details of the last few minutes, but as I sat on the bleachers with my family, it slowly came back to me. In the last 12 minutes, I had even managed to score to help put us ahead by 7.

From that game on, my new family didn't miss a game. They took me to every practice and training camp Georgia had to offer. If I worked hard enough, this could be something big. Football became something special.

...

*I have been one acquainted with the night.  
I have walked out in rain -- and back in rain.  
I have outwalked the furthest city light.*

*I have looked down the saddest city lane.  
I have passed by the watchman on his beat  
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.*

*I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet  
When far away an interrupted cry  
Came over houses from another street,*

*But not to call me back or say good-bye;  
And further still at an unearthly height,  
O luminary clock against the sky*

*Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor  
right.  
I have been one acquainted with the night.*

*--Robert Frost*

...

In 2004, I failed my sister for the first time in my life. She was only seven years old. I hadn't seen her in a year or so. I tried to keep in touch, but we only were allowed to call each other once every two weeks.



I was sitting at the dinner table with my foster parents when the phone rang. My foster father got up and answered the call.

I could hear a female voice coming through the receiver. The conversation was short and the only words I remember my foster father saying were hello, what, and where.

He hung up abruptly walked toward the table. He told me to go up to my room and put my shoes on and get right in the car—don't waste anytime. I tried to ask what was going on, but he had already begun moving about the house collecting our coats and trying to find the car keys.

My foster parents and I got in the car and drove down the empty highway in silence. Over an hour later we pulled into the parking lot located just outside the city lights—The Children's Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia.

They walked me into the emergency department and straight to a back room with a sliding glass door. The hospital smelled awful—sterile and cold; it was not a place for children.

My grandma walked out of the sliding glass door and reached down to hug me. Her hands were cold and her breathing was shallow. Nobody spoke. We walked into the room.

My sister's body lay motionless on the hospital gurney. She had a large bandage across her left forehead and a bruise in the shape of a hand on her right forearm.

The doctor came in and explained to me that my sister had been raped by an unidentified man from my grandmother's neighborhood, and that she was hurt pretty badly. A neighbor had found her in the alley across the street from the local park and called 9-1-1, but she hadn't been awake in a very long time. The doctor said that she should be ok eventually, but it would be a long time before she would act the way I remembered. I asked if I could touch her; he told me that I wouldn't hurt her.

With that, he left.

I walked over to the bed and crawled next to my sister and held her on my lap like I used to when she was a baby.

A few minutes later, my foster parents told me that it was time to go. My sister hadn't opened her eyes while I was there, so I didn't even get to say goodbye.

I once heard someone say that even if someone wasn't awake, they could still hear you.

I whispered, "I'm sorry."

...

I waited by the phone for the next few days for a call. Three days later, the phone rang and as soon as my foster father answered, he handed me the phone.

It was my sister.

We didn't talk for long, but she told me that she was feeling better, but was really sleepy, probably from the medicine the doctors had given her. She said that she would be ok, and that she would call as soon as she got home, which would probably be in two days or so.

I told her I wished I could be there, but she said she understood. With that she hung up the phone.

...

*"Behold! Human beings living in a underground cave, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the cave; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets."*

*--Plato's Allegory of the Cave*

...

Unfortunately, moving in with my foster parents only changed my life when I was in their house. Outside, I was still in the gang, and I had to be faithful.

When I was 12, I went to visit my cousins in California. They picked me up from the airport in a green Monte Carlo with tinted windows. It was a beautiful day out, and the sun felt warm. We were driving down the street when someone opened fire on our car.

I spent the next two hours in the back of the car driving in circles looking for the people who had shot at us. We found them at a small park on 63<sup>rd</sup> street, drunk and smoking something out of a milk carton. My cousin reached into the glove box and handed me the gun with my initials. Where did he find it?

“You ready?”

No. But I didn't have a choice. We parked the car on the side of the road and I shot three times in the direction of the park. I didn't look out the window. As we drove away, my cousin told me that I did good for the family. I didn't respond; my chest was too heavy to make a sound.

...

*Some of the brightest stars in the Milky Way galaxy compose Orion — “The Great Hunter.”*

*According to Greek mythology, Orion was the dominator of the northern sky. While hunting, he met Metrope, the daughter of King Oenopion of Chios, and fell madly in love with her. But one day he lost his sight.*

*In order to regain his sight, he consulted an oracle, which told him to travel east and let the rays of the sun strike his eyes.*

*He made the arduous journey to find the sun and, as the oracle promised, regained his sight.*

*Upon completing this he moved to Crete and fell in love with Artemis, goddess of the moon. At times her love for him was so strong, she*

*would forget to light the moon in the evening sky,  
leaving the people without light.*

...

The life I lived made my nights dark—light had no place.

People always asked me why I didn't leave the gang. I couldn't—it was baptism by blood. I would have been shot if they knew I even wanted to.

It was a strange feeling. The gang was my family; therefore it must have been love. My brothers would have done anything for me, so I was obligated to do the same. They called, I came, no questions asked.

...

*Finally, the prisoner of the cave is freed from his chains. He is allowed to turn around and see all that causes the shadows of reality. He can walk from the cave and experience life as it truly is. He can see all that is, all that can be.*

...

It was early evening around Christmas time. I had just turned 14 a few weeks ago, and with that my foster parents had extended my curfew to 10 o'clock. So I decided to enjoy my new freedom and walk around my foster parent's neighborhood. Every house on the street was decorated with lights, garland, and oversized Santas.

I came to the last house on the street that I almost overlooked, as it had no flashy lights. The only piece of decoration was a small manger scene on the steps of the porch.

Normally I would have just passed this by and took it as some overeager Christian family trying to preach love and peace. But they didn't know what it was like where I came from. They had no idea what my real life looked like. How dare they think that their religion could save the life I lived?

I thought of going up and knocking over the plastic replicas. But then I realized, I didn't have to. Here, with my foster parents, my gang life didn't exist. I had a choice.

After Christmas, I joined Mount Bethel Baptist Church and was baptized by water.

I want to make it clear; I did not change because of God. I did not join the church for the actual religion. I just needed somewhere to start my change. I changed for my sister, so she could have a choice too.

...

*When [the soul] is firmly fixed on the domain where truth and reality shine resplendent it apprehends and knows them and appears to possess reason, but when it inclines to that region which is mingled with darkness, the world of becoming and passing away, it opines only and its edge is blunted, and it shifts its opinions hither and thither, and again seems as if it lacked reason.*

*But the sun ... not only furnishes to those that see the power of visibility but it also provides for their generation and growth and nurture though it is not itself generation. ... In like manner, then ... the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power.*

*--Plato's The Republic*

...

For the remainder of my time with my foster family I kept focused. I tried to avoid all contact with my father and the gang. The only person I talked to was my sister. We would exchange phone calls and letters. I would send her my report cards and ribbons, anything that would show her I was going to make it.

I went to high school, and did my best to balance school and sports. In the fall I played

football, and in the spring I ran track and played shortstop for the school's baseball team.

At my school, a lot of kids were affiliated with the gang I was in, but I tried to keep that a secret. The gang was large enough that not every member knew all his or her brothers. I spent only as much time at school as I needed, and while I was there it was either about academics or athletics.

...

*“Per ardua ad astra”*

*[“Through struggle to the stars”]*

...

I decided that I had to get out of high school as soon as possible, so I talked to my counselor about graduating a year early.

He told me that this was nearly impossible. I told him I didn't care. I would do it.

So, together he and I came up with an accelerated graduation program. I would have to take summer classes in math and literature in order to take the necessary AP classes.

I knew that this would be a difficult path to take, but with the encouragement from my teachers, foster parents, and sister, I decided to take the risk.

...

*Stars have a special place in gang life. They represent money and power, control of the area. Many gang members get tattoos as part of their gang initiation; every brother in the Bloods gets a five point star. Four of the points stand for an element of nature, earth, wind, fire, and water and the fifth represents the human spirit—more powerful than all others combined.*

...

Gym was the hardest class I ever took in high school.

It seems counter-intuitive. I was a varsity athlete on multiple teams and in great shape. Hand eye coordination was my strength and I could outrun almost every kid in my class. Plus gym was the only class in my second year schedule that wasn't an accelerated course, involving extra work.

But that was the problem. It wasn't a restrictive class. Everyone at my high school had to take gym, even the kids I tried so hard to avoid. In the gym, I couldn't escape gang affiliation.

We all had to change in the locker room which I always dreaded because I had a gang tattoo across my back, and thought the wrong person might notice it.

It was towards the end of the year, and I was changing after class. I thought that the kids I knew from the gang had already left.

One of my classmates that I hadn't talked to before was still in the locker room with me as I changed, but he had no affiliation that I had known of.

Since we were the only two there, I guess he needed someone to talk to, as he started to make small talk. He asked about the tattoo on my back—five-pointed star with the letters M-O-B underneath it.

I told him that it was for my family and that the letters were my mother's initials.

Luckily, that's all he said about it, and he left the room. I finished getting ready and left. As I opened the door to the locker room, I got hit in the head with the butt of a gun and fell to the ground.

I looked up to see a member of the Bloods above me.

"Don't lie about your family."

He kicked me in the ribs twice and the stomach three times. Then he left.

...

*His high endeavors are an inward light  
That makes the path before him always bright.*

*~William Wordsworth*

...

Fall of my third year of high school rolled around, and everything was on track. I was now starting in every football game, and scouts were starting to take notice.

November came and our team was headed toward the State Championship. I had just finished a long practice and walked in the door to my foster parent's house when the phone rang. It was the coach from The University of Oregon. He told me that he wanted me to come for an official visit.

I didn't know what to say so I just said thank you and hung up the phone. I went out to see the school in January and committed later that year.

I was the first person in my family to go to college and I was going to play football for Division 1, University of Oregon, on a full scholarship.

...

I graduated high school in early June 2011, surrounded by friends and family. My father, brothers, and sister came up for the ceremony and my foster parents let my sister stay with us for the rest of the week.

At the weeks end, I was off to college.

The night before I left, I decided to pack. I sat in my room and looked at all the objects I had amassed over the years: football trophies, letters from my sister, boxes of sneakers, pictures of my family, my high school diploma.

As the moon hung low in the sky outside my window, I put my life in a bag. And in that moment, I realized I had the same feeling that my father had once for me—pride. In a few hours, I would be leaving for Oregon.



It was early in the morning as I got into the taxi but the sun had made it past the horizon. I looked back toward the porch where my foster parents and sister were standing. No one said anything, but as I got in the taxi, I felt a tear roll down my cheek.

...

$$F = G * m * M / r^2$$

*Gravity is the attraction of all objects to one another. It is what keeps the solar system in orbital motion. It is also what makes objects plummet to the ground.*

*If two objects remain the appropriate distance apart they can help each other, providing direction and motion. But if they move even just a few hundred feet closer, gravitational pull between the objects will become too strong and they will crash into one another, destroying both.*

*If the distance between the earth and moon changed ever so slightly, both would be demolished.*

...

I spent the first night of college in the hallway of my dorm room. This wasn't exactly how I pictured college. (I pictured way more girls.) But because I was an athlete I had to move in weeks early to start training.

To pass the time, the team decided to order pizza and get to know each other. The conversation was quiet at first—centered mainly around football and home. I didn't say much, as my home life was a bit more complex than the other players.

In the middle of some story about high school glory days, the kid sitting to my left nudged me. I wasn't quite sure if he meant to, so I ignored it. I then heard, "You're a member of the Bloods."

Glancing down in the direction of the voice, I noticed a Crips gang tattoo on his lower right forearm.

After we finished eating, I was headed back to my room when the kid from earlier stopped me. He introduced himself and started by saying that he wouldn't tell anyone else about my affiliations.

For the rest of the night, we talked about where we came from and how we had become part of a dark life. Before he left, we decided that within the University walls, only our "good" life would exist. We were both there for a reason, and it was strictly business.

Over the ensuing weeks, this kid became more than a teammate—he became a friend. He became my brother.

...

*"Everyone wants to be the sun that lights up your life. But I'd rather be your moon, so I can shine for you during your darkest hour."*

— Anonymous

...

It was a late night in December 2011. The sky was as clear as I had ever remembered. A new friend of mine couldn't sleep and called me, asking me to come keep her company. When I got to her she was already outside so we sat on the porch and talked about everything under the stars. The conversation drifted from snow, to the upcoming spring semester, and experiences of our first weeks of college. She talked about her family and the Christmas they had just celebrated. She asked me what my family did around the holidays.

"I don't go home on the holidays."

I could tell she felt bad for what she had just said, because this usually overly chatty girl didn't say anything. It was ok though, she didn't know.

Suddenly, she began to cry, and for a long time I just let her. She stopped and asked me if she could tell me something. Slowly, she began to talk about a dark past. I told her to tell me what happened and I would take care of her.

She told me that she did not want help. So I sat with her. In the silence of the first snowfall of the year, I began to think about my life. Maybe she should know; maybe she should understand; maybe I could understand. So I began with the story of my mother, told her about my father, my brothers, my trips through the foster care system, my anger, my sins.

I'm still not quite sure if she meant for me to hear her, but muffled by the silence of the moon, she whispered, "You have me now."

...

*Individuation, step two: integration. Integration causes the collective unconscious, personal unconscious, and ego to become one. Through the union, a person becomes an "individual" allowing the person to acknowledge his or her past and use his or her new insight to positively impact their future.*

...

It was a dark and rainy 3:00 AM, early on a Saturday morning in March. The weather was uncommonly warm for the earliest days of spring.

I had been up all night, fighting with my friend on the same porch that I had been on at Christmas time. I was angry with her, because I was done with her and she didn't understand that.

Its not that I didn't enjoy being her friend or she had done something wrong; I just thought I wanted out. She knew too much.

But she was persistent, incessant upon the fact that she wasn't going to let everything go. I was confused. Letting go is easy. And it's a hell of a lot easier than staying up and fighting with me all night. Why cant she just stop?

I decided to refuse to answer any more of her questions in an attempt to get her to shut up and go away. But she didn't leave. So we just sat on the porch and listened to the rain.

"Why don't you think anyone should care about you?" she asked.

"Because no one ever has. Why should you be any different?"

My chest was too heavy to finish my thought. I got up to leave, but she stood up, blocking my way. I told her to move. She didn't. I told her again, and made sure she knew I wasn't joking. In my past life no one would have challenged me, staying in my way. She did. I took a step toward her.

"Get the fuck out of my way."

"Who hurt you so bad?"

I cried.

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