
JUANITA

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Juanita was born on January 24, 1964 in Mexico where her mother's family had settled after leaving the United States during the Great Depression. Fleeing an abusive and alcoholic husband, Juanita's mother returned to her country of birth in order to provide four-year old Juanita with a better life. Once back in the United States, her mother became very secretive, disclosing very little about herself or her past. It is believed that the hardships endured by Juanita's mother prompted this level of secrecy and that Juanita herself has been greatly affected by them, often struggling to avoid repeating her mistakes.

Juanita grew up as an only child. Though her mother never remarried, she did have a significant other who lived with the family for many years. This man grew close to Juanita and her mother and even went through the process of legal adoption in order to secure her citizenship at age eleven. However, the positive feelings generated by this action were overshadowed by a pattern of sexual abuse and molestation that began when Juanita was in the third grade and continued through age sixteen. The abuse made her extremely submissive and insecure, leaving her with the feeling of being trapped when she was at home. Her body became a source of shame. She recalls compulsively cleaning herself to remove the guilt she felt about her body and wishing that she could rip off her flesh. Her abuser used threats and the authority her adoption had granted him to keep Juanita from confiding in her mother. A recurring threat was that he would take her mother from her.

The effects of sexual abuse were compounded by verbal humiliation and mental control. Juanita vividly remembers being regularly belittled in public places and struck in the face by him for even the smallest offenses. His ability to control her is illustrated by her story of sitting in a car in front of a tailor shop for an entire day while he got drunk with his friends. She remembers thinking that she could simply open the car door and walk home but that his control over her seemed more powerful than metal shackles. Juanita continued to endure sexual, physical, and emotional abuse for years to come and began to think that her experience was the norm.

Unfortunately, Juanita's relationship with her mother did not provide her with a sanctuary from the abuse she endured. Her mother suffered from depression and alcoholism. Constant drinking made her extremely gullible and trusting of the man who was supposed to care for Juanita. She regularly allowed him to take Juanita with him to spend weekends in Santa Ana, which became the setting for his most severe abuse. The lack of care and attention filled her with rage; she did not understand why her mother was not more suspicious of this man's actions and could not accept the lack of maternal protection. For Juanita, it was as though she was being fed to a hideous wolf by her very own mother. She was also angry

about the many episodes of depression her mother had. Included in those episodes was a drunken suicide attempt on the 101 freeway when her mother opened the car door and tried not only to jump out, but to pull Juanita with her. Reflecting upon these events, Juanita is now able to see her mother as a very depressed woman who lacked the ability to care for her as a loving and nurturing mother.

Facing continued abuse at home, and the inability of her mother to protect her from it, school became a sanctuary where Juanita could escape the hell she experienced at home. Weekends were dreaded. Her goal was to survive them so that she could return to school the following week. Any time at school was cherished. It was there that she felt most validated. She liked the feeling and tried to excel in as many subjects as she could, especially math, in order to earn validation and even admiration from her teachers. Receiving healthy attention from adults was something new for her. Whereas so much of her home life was designed to make her feel inferior, gender discrimination and inequality were not a part of her school experience. Juanita remembers being smarter than most of the boys in her class and holds open the possibility that her positive school experience may have made her unaware of any inequality.

The school desegregation movement during the 1970s marked a turning point for Juanita's experience in the education system. Without being given a choice in the matter, she was transferred to the predominantly white Madison Junior High. Her bus ride from East Los Angeles to the San Fernando Valley each morning took nearly two hours. However, her performance on her new school's standardized tests identified Juanita as gifted. She recalls being filled with a sense of fear when summoned to the counselor's office to learn of her score. Her fear vanished when told she was excelling in her classes and was going to be placed in several honors classes.

While gender inequalities were not at the forefront of her experience at school, Juanita does recount an incident in which her high school boyfriend pressured her to adopt negative gender stereotypes. At the time, she had been excelling in math and was taking advanced courses. Her boyfriend Tony struggled with the subject and was at a remedial level, but also believed that "guys were smart and chicks were not." Juanita's response was to consciously act less intelligent around him so that he would not be offended by her. Her attempts at minimizing her intelligence went as far as trying to present herself as less smart so that she could join Tony in the remedial math class.

One of the most important female figures for Juanita was Ms. Williams, her high school basketball coach. She remembers trying out for the basketball team and being picked over one of the star basketball players. Her coach made it clear to Juanita that she did not make the team because she had better skills than the star basketball player, but because of her determination. She also admired her coach because of her unconventional position at her school as a female physical education instructor. She admired the message of empowerment her coach delivered to her female students by working in a profession, which at the time, was dominated by men.

Another important female figure was her literature teacher, Ms. Roundtree. Juanita admired her lady-like characteristics, but more so, the influence she had on her life. Ms. Roundtree offered Juanita an escape from her problems by opening up the world of books. She constantly praised Juanita, who thrived on this attention, and nurtured a much-appreciated part of her.

Nurturing relationships with female role models gave Juanita a small sense of security into her high school years. She kept her abuse a secret until she had her first daughter, when she finally told her mother the truth about the man who adopted her. Her mother did not believe that she had been abused by her adopted father and called Juanita a liar. When her mother finally confronted the man who abused Juanita, he too denied the accusation. Like many victims of abuse, she was subjected to the blame and shame of the crime done to her.

Juanita also remembers a time when she had a party to celebrate the baptism of her daughter. She had invited all of her friends from work to celebrate this special occasion. She remembers that towards the end of the night, her adopted father pulled out a rifle and told everyone to leave the party because it was over. Juanita became outraged at the way he had disrupted her daughter's party. She pushed him to the floor and wrestled him for his rifle. Her anger was not only about what happened at the party, but all that she had suffered at the hands of this evil man. It took three men to subdue Juanita and stop her from hurting herself or the man.

Juanita frequently argued with her mother because she could not control her alcoholism. Her mother would take Juanita's daughter and go drinking with her partner. Juanita was extremely angry at her mother's carelessness with her daughter, especially since she had paid for a babysitter. Juanita did not want the past to repeat itself again. She wanted to distance her daughter from the man who abused her as a child and threatened to leave home unless her mother quit drinking and her significant other moved out. Her mother was very controlling and did not want Juanita and her baby to leave, so she called the police. When the police arrived they asked Juanita's age, and after learning she was twenty-two, informed her mother that she was of legal age and could leave if she pleased. That is exactly what she did. Having nowhere to go, she spent a couple of nights in a car with her daughter. This caused Juanita's mother to finally take her threats seriously and change her life. To this day, her mother has not relapsed into alcoholism. Juanita perceives herself as having a love-hate relationship with her mother. Despite all of her actions, she still admires her for her courage to come to a foreign country without knowing the language or having a support group. She also admires her work ethic and remembers when she worked three jobs at a time.

The abuse she endured as a child has distorted Juanita's concept of marriage and caused her to never have considered getting married. Her mother did not want her to get married, and because she was raised to be submissive and attend to her mother's every whim, marriage was never an option. When proposed to in high school, Juanita declined because she wanted to work and go to college, but also because she thought something

better would come along. She is certain that if she had accepted the marriage proposal, she would now be happily divorced because she wasn't ready to be married. At this time, Juanita does not see herself ever getting married, but she does hope her two daughters will experience the joys of marriage. She has worked to instill a sense of strength and independence in them, advises them on relationships, and encourages both girls to be happy by themselves before they seek happiness from a man. She has taught her daughters to respect themselves and be very selfish with their bodies.

Juanita has noticed a change in women's approach to marriage. Women who used to stay in unhappy marriages are now getting divorced. She hears of fewer long-term relationships than before and realizes women now have the choice to remain unmarried without being stigmatized. She remembers that it was not always this way and that women used to be criticized for not being married or having children once they reached a certain age. Juanita believes marriage is now seen as a choice rather than an expected part of life, as unmarried women are no longer thought to be incomplete and unfulfilled. She believes that greater choice in all areas has led to increased independence and empowerment for women. Juanita believes gender equality is important but also wants to be treated as a lady and believes that it is possible to have it both ways. While she believes the United States as a whole promotes gender equality, she is quick to assert that there is much institutional discrimination against women.

Today, Juanita is working as a manager for Housing Services for the city of Los Angeles, where she experiences much gender discrimination. Some men in her field resent her position because they assume she is weak and unable to perform her job. She believes that a man in her position would get better cooperation from coworkers. It took her three years to be able to assert her authority as manager, and to this day, is hesitant to exercise her authority due to the insecurity she feels because she is a woman. She admires women who are comfortable and secure with their authority. Juanita is also in the process of filing a complaint against the agency she works for because it pays women less than men for the same work. Juanita personally gets paid less than a man holding the same position as she does, and sometimes even less than her subordinates. For all of the progress made, she cannot believe that gender inequality is still alive and present in American society.

After being abused to the degree she was, Juanita wonders why she did not become a drunk or abusive person herself. She craves a sense of normalcy and even as an adult struggles with insecurity. She understands that many women become victims of horrific events because of their gender and acknowledges that while these events are obstacles, many women are able to persevere and show resilience in response to their experiences. She believes that the scars from her traumatic past will never completely heal, but she does believe that time has given her a sense of peace and comfort.