

# A STRUGGLE FOR MYSELF

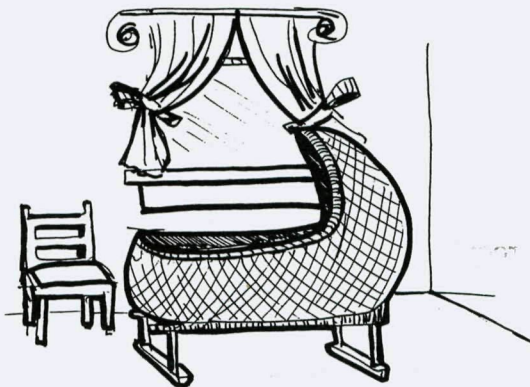
By **Laura Quiros**, Hunter College School of Social Work, second year student

*This narrative focuses on the author's journey to self-discovery and self-recovery. Her growth in the field of social work coincided with her personal growth. She used therapy, introspection and graduate work to overcome childhood loss, and learned to use her experiences to help her clients heal.*



Something didn't feel right. My six-year-old body must have walked up and down those blue carpeted stairs four or five times. It was Christmas Eve. I remember I was alone; my mom had gone out and left me in the care of my aunt who had also decided to leave me alone for just "a few minutes." I was left in charge of my five-month-old baby brother. Daniel was soundly sleeping in his crib. I remember feeling so proud to be in control; I was a responsible six year old. The rule was that I was to check on him, check to make sure everything was okay. His room was dark. The only light came from the reflection of the glistening snow outside. I remember how peaceful it looked outside, and just how excited I was to show Daniel his first winter. Sleigh riding and snowman making were the

Christmas Day plans. He slept so still in his green Jets jumpsuit, remaining motionless even after some pokes and nudges. I remember the phone rang, interrupting my thought process. It was daddy calling to say he would be home soon. "Dad, I feel like something is wrong with Daniel—he is not moving." My father reassured me that Daniel was just sleeping soundly. "He is probably dreaming about how much fun tomorrow is going to be." My father's reassurance soothed me. In his little girl's eyes, daddy was never wrong.



The next five hours are still so blurry. My mom and aunt arrived home minutes apart. My mom came home first. I don't remember her saying hello, although I can almost guess that she kissed me on the forehead before going upstairs to check her son. "My baby isn't breathing!" The scream is still so vivid. Falling down the stairs with



Daniel in her arms, grabbing me. I found myself in the white cold jeep. My aunt was driving, my mom was screaming and crying, and Daniel was still fast asleep in her arms. We were pulled over by a police officer who took my mom and brother. My aunt and I followed. The roads were icy and we were sliding all over the place. It was the hospital, the white sterile hospital I remember next. A police officer befriended me. He brought me to the candy machine, gave me a glass of milk. Cookies and milk, the same treats my dad and I were supposed to leave for Santa.

I remember I was told Daniel had found a new home in the white puffy clouds. "Can't Daddy make Daniel come home to us?" I remember not understanding why my father couldn't make Daniel come home; after all, couldn't Daddy fix everything? Santa never found our house that night. There was no sleigh riding or snowman making. I can't seem to recall many details, but I do remember that I wasn't allowed to go to the funeral. My mom arranged a play date for me the day Daniel was buried. She wanted to protect me. "You're too young, Laura; this is not a place for children." I remember that my mother would often find me in Daniel's room, sometimes even in his crib. The bars were adjustable, so it was easy to crawl in and pretend we were still living together. I remember writing endless letters to Daniel. The subject was always an apology for not being able to save him, for not checking soon enough, for not being more responsible. The "what ifs" were eternal. I remember the first time I was allowed to visit his gravesite. There wasn't a tombstone. Daniel's resting place was physically marked by a feeble plastic stick; our last name was spelled incorrectly. I remem-

ber depositing those letters, laying them across his spot on the ground, believing that he would read them and understand just how sorry I was, and just how much I missed him.



### **After Daniel**

My family and I moved shortly after Daniel's death. Daniel never left me, and as naive as it may seem, for a long time I attributed most of my good fortune to him; Daniel watched over me. Two years after Daniel's death my mother became pregnant, and I was blessed with another baby brother, Jeffrey. But Jeffrey was not Daniel. In his first few years of life, I distanced myself from Jeffrey, scared to get too close. I hated to baby-sit. I can remember those few times I was responsible for Jeffrey, I would do everything and anything to keep him up, just as long as he didn't fall asleep.

At the same time, I learned ways to keep Daniel alive. In elementary school, drawing and writing became my creative form of expression. I drew pictures of Daniel and me sleigh riding. My family portraits always included my dead brother, and I even wrote short poems



that I would recite to him when I was alone in my room. **Writing became my coping mechanism.** As a sophomore in high school, I wrote my first real story about the death of my brother. It was a short story titled "Simon and Simona," written for a classroom assignment based on fairytales. Simon was Daniel and I was Simona — the big sister who loved her baby brother more than anything else. Daniel was the subject of many of my creative writing assignments throughout high school, even my college essay.

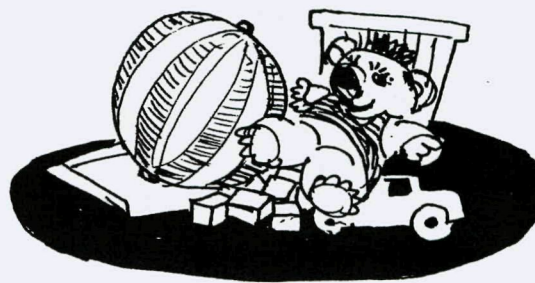
It was during the summer after I graduated from high school that I decided to work with children. I began as a camp counselor and quickly found myself needing to protect could-have-been Daniels. I felt as if I had to prove to myself that I was a good person and that children don't automatically die in my care. I was motivated by loss and plagued by my deep feelings of guilt—I still believed that Daniel had died because of something I didn't do.

I had become a victim of my past, owning feelings of guilt that stayed with me until this year. I graduated from college in 1996 with the desperate passion to work with young children, still feeling an unyielding pressure to fix my mistake. My belief was that if I couldn't save Daniel, at least I could change one child's life, and then I would be okay. I would be deemed the savior instead of the failure.

### A Re-Creation

When I began working with children professionally, I discovered that I was able to recreate my childhood. My first job after college was at Four Winds Psychiatric Hospital. Originally assigned to be a "floater"—someone who works on every unit—I quickly re-

quested that I be placed only on the children's unit. I was able to convince others and myself that I just wasn't ready to work with adults. Hospitalized children ages five to eight, mostly from the inner city, were my specialty. For many children, the hospital was home. Few parents would visit on Sundays. I worked 13-hour shifts, three days a week. I woke them, fed them, dressed them, played inside and outside with them, colored, watched movies, cuddled, tucked them in, and even monitored their medications. I was a caretaker. One night a week I worked the night shift, and I rarely fell asleep. My hall checks were perfect. After a year of intensive work I resigned from Four Winds. However, Daniel was still missing, and I felt unsatisfied. I needed to do more. I remained in the sphere of illusion and self-deception, still unable to fix my mistake.



I decided the Board of Education would be the perfect setting. I realized that what had frustrated me at Four Winds was that these children were all the way in upstate New York receiving individual services. Rarely was there collateral work done with their families, or any influential participants in the children's lives. I wanted to work with children in their home environment. I secured a job as a Substance Abuse Prevention Intervention Specialist at both an elementary school and a junior



high school in the South Bronx. The focus was to save these "at-risk" innocent children from the hardships of inner city life. I was recognized and sometimes even praised for my intrinsic empathetic nature, compassion, and caring, but I didn't believe the praise and nothing seemed to fill the void. I was unable to change the desperate and unjust social conditions the children were living under, nor was I able to change their home situations or their occasionally explosive and violent behavior. I took these failures by society and the children personally. I was easily frustrated and spent many hours crying over my inability to "fix" the children.

### **The Value of Education and Self-Exploration**

It was during my year in the schools that I made the commitment to myself to further my education. I applied to Hunter knowing that I would receive formalized training in how to change unjust social conditions for the benefit of children. It was this decision to continue my education that helped to release me from my past. Through the education I have received at Hunter, as well as through serious personal reflection, I've acquired an acute sense of self-awareness and a new belief in myself. Perhaps the most valuable realization I had during this time was that I was not responsible for the death of my brother. I learned the difference between helping and fixing. Readings, class assignments, and work at my internship guided me through the process of self-exploration, allowing me to form connections and make associations surrounding my consistent need to work in the helping field, specifically with children. I worked hard to create a safe environment where taking risks did not seem so

scary. Once I openly admitted that I had held myself responsible for Daniel's death, I grew to learn that my need to work with children stemmed from the pressures of trying to make up for a loss that I believed I caused. I had always associated working with children as helping Daniel. I allowed myself to mourn and began my own healing process.

It has been with the help of my own personal therapy that I have realized that personal exploration leads to effective work. In September of 1998, as a first-year casework major, I was placed at a homeless shelter for women and children. My role as a social work intern was to work with the women, primarily homeless women of color who were recovering addicts; a population I was most fearful of simply because I didn't believe that I could help them. I was young and I was not an addict. However, I realize now that I viewed myself as a child—powerless, helpless, and vulnerable. How could a child work with adults? I was forced into this role, but now I am most grateful for this experience. As I began to work with these women, exploring and probing their discomfort, I began to look at myself and my role as an adult woman. The focus became empathetic understanding, acceptance, and self-determination. I became aware that I was no longer a powerless child but an adult with choices. I now had the power to choose and change and create my own reality. I began the process of understanding and accepting myself, positively affecting the quality of my work.

Additionally, I was able to identify with the women's feelings of loss and personal inadequacy. They chose substances to numb their pain, whereas I chose exercise. I was introduced to the



addict in me; I am addicted to control and schedules. Similar to my women clients, I tend to look outside of myself not only for approval, but also for a sense of adequacy. My sense of internal safety was lacking and I had a difficult time listening to my inner voice. I was desperate for my clients to like me, and eager to heal them, as well as myself. It was during this time that I gained an intense desire to work with poor women of color in the social service system. It is interesting how my personal development coincided with the population I was eager "to heal." Like these women, I needed to mourn my loss and let go of past behaviors and familiar defenses before I could grow—I had been slowed by an acute fear of loss.

### Moving Beyond

More recently, I have realized that it was difficult for me to move beyond my identification with Daniel. Too often, I was attributing all of my good fortune to him, his spirit guiding me through my life, praising me with gifts of success and punishing me with failed attempts and lost relationships. My self-esteem was often directly related to my deceased brother. Anything I accomplished, anything I achieved, any relationship in my life, I felt had nothing to do with my talents or my loving and generous spirit. Success was solely because Daniel's spirit had blessed me with good fortune—Daniel's spirit had helped to connect me to the people in my life. I had structured my world in a way that did not allow me to take pride in my accomplishments. My vision and my true self were blurred. The thought of moving beyond my intense identification with Daniel scared me. Not giving him the credit for all of my good fortune felt disloyal. However, through the integra-

tion of all my experiences related to this helping field of social work, I now realize that my attraction to the field goes beyond Daniel.

My past identification with Daniel has recently become uncomfortable. At the age of 25, I am learning to believe in myself. I'm trusting myself and trying to recreate Daniel instead of living Daniel. I am discovering that to me, social work is about establishing connections and building relationships. My work in this field, particularly with children, is expanding for me. I am no longer trying to change my clients, particularly children, but instead, trying to connect with them. This entails providing safe havens to play, explore, talk, and listen. I have the ability to form mutually gratifying connections with creative actions. To paraphrase Assata Shakur (1987): my energy continues to dance; I'm caught up in the music of struggle. This high energy level and free spirited nature allows me to play on the floor and sit Indian style on the carpet. Additionally, I have used relaxation and meditation techniques to help heal. This work has become a true joy, not something I am using to make up for previous loss. Daniel's death was the beginning of my lifetime journey. It was this tragic, early childhood experience that ultimately delivered me to the world of social work, but it's my attraction to people, my love of connection, and my ability to fight through the struggle that keeps me invested. □

• Shakur, A. (1987). *Assata: An Autobiography by Assata Shakur*. Chicago, Lawrence Hill Books.

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