THE QUIET ARCHITECTURE OF RESILIENCE

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My country is a lucky one, and my childhood was not a catalogue of disasters. It was a local weather pattern that kept returning, a wind that knew my name. The monsters were ordinary. They wore shirts. They spoke softly. They kept appointments. They waited for us to walk by. On the beach in the year the news said a girl went missing, mothers called their children in with bright, clipped 1960s voices tinged with trepidation. The light was syrupy and orange. Radios carried cricket scores and advertisements for washing powder. Boys built sand fortresses and then kicked them down. I was a small girl with salt in my hair and grit between my toes. When the tide ran out, the sea left a slick of mica that looked like a promise.

That was the summer I learned the difference between play and danger. It was not the gulls crying or the waves collapsing that warned me. It was the way the air changed when certain men passed. The air grew tight. Laughter thinned like watered cordial. We were told to keep within sight. We were told to say please and thank you and to be careful of strangers. No one said the word stranger with any true shape to it. It sounded like a flimsy fence. We were not warned about the friend of a friend. We weren't warned about the man with a badge. We weren't warned about the salt-sticky hand that masqueraded as safety. We were told to behave. We were told not to make a fuss. I learned to read rooms the way other children read music. I learned to read cars, to hear the rhythm of footsteps that hesitated and then fell into step with mine. I learned to take the long way home, to carry my keys in my fist. I learned to smile with my mouth closed and to look past a man as if I were already late for something that mattered. I learned it early and I kept learning.

At home there was a map no one could see. My mother guarded certain words as if they were expensive. My father guarded silence as if it could feed us. We had rules that clacked like worry beads. We had a shop where adults leaned in and told stories that smelled like cigarette smoke and rain. Between the till and the storeroom, I learned the art of moving without being

seen. The year I turned thirteen I grew taller and quieter. I could feel my bones making decisions. Boys at school noticed the new language of my walk. Girls used razors and secrets and new polish on their nails. I could not stand the casual way the occasional hand landed on my shoulders, the way people touched girls as if we were public objects, small round tables where adults could rest a drink. I could not laugh when a joke turned and cut me. Anger became a slow tide that looked like calm until it lifted everything that was not nailed down.

In the city I took trams that sang on their rails. I liked the way the bell sounded at each stop, the way the doors opened like a shrug. I liked routine and knowing the names of streets before they arrived. One afternoon, after visiting my grandfather, I set off to meet a friend. We were meant to see each other near the gardens, then on the telephone, changed our minds to the station, then changed them again because she had a headache and I had a feeling. Sliding doors if I had known that phrase then. The day was hot enough to make the bitumen shine. A wind carried the smell of bakery sugar and petrol. The city was a living creature and I was walking through its veins.

That day in the late after-school light, I walked along St Kilda Road, my schoolbag bumping against my hip. I watched my step; Mum said those shoes had to last the year. The office towers caught the sun and held it like mirrors pretending to be the latest ideas. At the corner, a police officer leaned against a wall, laughing at something a woman said. Her voice broke apart like a wave. I felt a small lift; authority nearby. If anything went wrong, I could stand under it like shelter. I crossed at the green man, thinking about dinner, the book in my bag, the quietness of home. Then I turned into the side street, the quicker way home.

The lane ran behind the police station. It was ordinary: bins, a cat, a poster curling from brick. The light was tired, as if the day had been used up. A car rolled in behind me, the engine low, like something whispering. A tightening gathered in my throat. Not fear, not yet, just a

knowing. The same knowing that had come once on the beach when men stepped down from the car park.

The car slowed beside me. The window slid down. The man leaned over the passenger seat. His face was the kind you forget. His voice was gentle. “You look lost. Do you need a lift?” There is a point where words collapse and instinct takes over. My feet kept moving. My head turned just enough to make it look like I was thinking. I saw the empty clip where the door lock should be, the neatness of the passenger seat: no ash, no receipts, no sign of a life lived. His hands rested lightly on the wheel. I looked past him to the police station wall. If I screamed, would anyone come? If I ran, would he follow? If I stopped, would I ever start again? “I’m not lost,” I said. “My father’s waiting for me. He’s just there.” I pointed further up the lane and smiled, the way good girls are taught to smile. He didn’t blink. “You shouldn’t walk alone,” he said quietly. “You’re exactly the kind of girl who gets into trouble.”

He reached to open the door from the inside. It didn’t move. The handle was gone, raw metal where it should have been. A sliding door, and I was on the right side of it. I raised my arm and waved as if greeting someone I loved. Warmth in my voice, perfect mimicry. His eyes flicked to the mirror. It was only a second, but it was enough. I turned and ran, not a scatter, but a clean, deliberate run. Arms sure. Breath steady. At the front of the police station, the glass caught my reflection. Two of me; one pale, one certain. I pressed my palm to the cool surface. Behind me, the car idled, reversed, then drifted away. The officer from before stepped out and asked if I was all right. His voice carried the shape of forms to be filled. I nodded and said I’d tripped. Said I was fine. He looked at me, then past me, then back again. “Be careful,” he said. “The city’s full of surprises.” He went inside. I stood for a moment longer, breathing. The street was ordinary again.

I walked to the tram with my heart in the wrong place. Something deep inside me understood what my thoughts refused to say. The world had tried to fold me into it, and I had

refused. That refusal was a fragile boat. I rode it home. I did not tell my mother. I did not tell my father. I ran a bath and put my ears under so the water made a roar like a conch. I watched the ceiling go soft. That night the news spoke of another missing girl from another suburb. The reporter's voice carried a formal sadness. The camera found a gate, a teddy bear, a woman crying into her sleeve. I felt a private vow take root behind my ribs. It did not look noble. It looked practical. Learn the rooms. Learn the cars. Learn your own speed. Learn the face you wear when you are not safe. Learn the sentences that close a door without waking the monster in a man. Learn the long way home and love it for keeping you. Leave touch when it is wrong. Call touch when it is right. Teach instinct to speak first. Teach your voice to follow.

In bed I made a list of names I did not know. Names from the newspaper. Names from beaches in other summers. Names that never came home. I repeated them like a quiet prayer. Their absence weighed the air and gave me instructions. Live for them. Notice for them. Be brave in the ordinary way. Say no clearly. Say yes to joy with the same clarity. I pressed my hand to my chest and felt my heart count the present. The count was steady. The count was mine. Somewhere a girl stepped into a car because a man told her he was a friend of her father. Somewhere a child believed the tender lie because she had been taught to be polite. Somewhere a boy walked the wrong street and did not come back. I grew into a person who would not forget them. I grew into a person who would tell the truth and make it sing. I had a lane. I had a car with a missing handle. I had a will that chose itself and ran.

They said it was the age of progress, the sixties and seventies turning golden, but the air trembled with absence. Every few months a new name was spoken at the dinner table, another child whose face stared out from the newsprint. We were a nation that still left doors unlocked and yet we whispered about monsters living among us. They had learned to drive cars and speak politely. I grew up inside that weather. It soaked the walls of our kitchen and followed me into sleep. My parents did not censor the news; they thought that truth was

armour. At night, my mother would turn the radio down low. The announcer's voice slid through the house like smoke. Two schoolgirls, missing. Three siblings, gone from a beach. A seven-year-old vanished near the funfair. A twelve-year-old taken at knifepoint. The words were clean, official, drained of blood, but my body understood what was not said. The wind outside changed direction. The curtains breathed in.

Folks spoke the names as if repeating them could bring the children home. Marianne Schmidt and Christine Sharrock at Wanda Beach; Grant, Aarna and Jane Beaumont at Glenelg; Linda Stilwell in St Kilda; Yvonne Tuohey at Warneet. Joanne Ratcliffe and Kirste Gordon at Adelaide Oval. Each name became a place of warning; a dark map laid over the country. They became folklore. In the mornings, the talk would continue over tea. My father would shake his head and say, “the police have no leads.” My mother would lament, “poor parents, poor children,” and glance toward me as if measuring the distance between our table and their tragedy. I watched her hand tighten on the handle of her cup. I saw fear take root in ordinary gestures.

On the way to school I looked at every parked car as if it could open and swallow me. My friends and I made rules that felt like spells. Never get in a stranger's car. Never go to the toilets alone. Always walk the main street. If a man speaks to you, keep your distance but not your politeness. We recited these rules like multiplication tables. We believed good manners might save us. Sometimes we played on the swings and talked about the girls who had gone missing, trying to fit their stories into our size. “What did they feel? Did they scream? Did they see the sky last?” The questions were heavy, but we carried them easily, the way children carry secrets. We were already learning to live beside horror, to fold it into conversation and then into silence.

Television showed their faces in grainy black and white. The pictures faded but the stories stayed. A girl in shorts, smiling at the camera. A family of three walking toward the

surf. A small boy clutching a bucket. Their names entered my bloodstream. I felt them move through me like a low voltage. I began talking to them in my head. At night, when the house was quiet and the fridge hummed like a guardian, I whispered to them. Marianne and Christine from the dunes. Jane, Arnna, and little Grant from the beach. Yvonne from Warneet. Joanne and Kirste from the oval. Linda from Luna Park, to whom I was closest. We had both grown up in St.Kilda; but for chance, it might have been me. I told them all I would not forget. I told them, I would walk carefully. I told them, I would live for them. We were a club of the unwilling, bound by what was taken from us. Their deaths were the open wound; my survival was the scar. The adults thought they were protecting us by talking. They wanted us alert, prepared. Yet every retelling rubbed innocence thinner. We began to see menace where there might have been kindness. We watched the way a man looked at a child, the way his eyes lingered or didn't. We became small detectives without wanting the job. But knowing is different from protection. Awareness sharpens you, but it also exhausts. You live half a second ahead of yourself, forever scanning. And even that vigilance cannot save you from what you cannot yet name.

Years later, when I began to meet men on my own, that early schooling still pulsed under my skin. I could sense danger before it arrived, but I mistook charm for warmth, authority for safety, attention for love. The men who would wound me did not hide in lanes. They smiled across tables. They said I was special. They asked for trust the way others ask for air. The child who once scanned every parked car grew into a young woman who scanned faces, looking for sincerity, for decency, for the myth of protection. I had been raised to fear the stranger, not the familiar. I knew how to run from the man in the car, not from the one who said my name gently. The missing and murdered children remained my companions. When I walked home after dark, I felt them around me like a constellation. Their absence was instruction. They taught me to notice, to pause, to listen to the tiny hairs on my arms when they

rose. They taught me that survival is not luck but practice. By the time I reached sixteen, I had stopped asking why some were taken and others spared. The question had no answer that could soothe. Instead, I began to ask what I owed to the ones who did not return. The answer came quietly: attention, truth, tenderness toward the frightened child still inside me. So, I carried them with me as I moved toward womanhood. They were the chorus that hummed beneath every choice. I would not forget their names. I would not let the world forget them either.

In my family, love and deception were neighbours. My father was a man of easy charm and restless eyes. From an early age I could feel the tension in the air, the turbulence between Mum and Dad that always seemed to hover around a woman I knew as Auntie Joyce. She worked in my parents' children's clothing shop, where they first came to know her two years before I was born. As I grew up, I witnessed my parents often socialising with Joyce and her husband, Uncle Jim. The laughter was always a little too loud, the pauses too long. There was an abundance of alcohol with the pungent smell of brandy and dry ginger signalling another of their soirees. I was the only child in the room, orbiting their adult world like a small moon, old enough to read the mood but too young to change it. My half brother and sister were grown and gone, leaving me as the silent witness to all that brightness and unease.

Auntie Joyce was vibrant, loud and funny, the kind of woman who filled a room with oxygen. She was also gentle with me, too gentle, as if kindness could hide guilt. She used to give me violet Life Savers, and from that time on I always associated her with the scent of violets. I remember her, too, by the scar on my left forefinger. I cut it while slicing roast lamb for dinner at her house; the blood was vivid like her. Although unrelated biologically, I called her Auntie because I grew up with her and loved her like a second mother. She was the bubbly outward spark juxtaposed with my mother's self-conscious nature. Mum was always jealous of her, sensing what she could not prove. Even as a child I noticed the double life of words, what was said and what was meant were never the same.

Years later Mum told me that on the night I was born, she was sure my father was at Joyce's home. He couldn't be contacted, and his car was seen outside her house, as it often was. Uncle Jim drove trams and was often on night shift. Whether the rumours were true or not, suspicion became its own truth, filling our house with an unease that never quite lifted. Through it all my mother remained upright, held together by something stronger than pride. She was resilience itself. Bruised, wary, but unbroken; teaching me that survival can live quietly inside the most turbulent rooms. There were other women. When Mum went overseas, Dad began seeing a woman twenty-seven years younger. When Mum came back, he asked for a divorce. Her strict Catholic parents forbade the relationship, and the proposed marriage collapsed. After eighteen months of separation, with me stuck in the middle, Mum took him back.

I grew up amid that weather. My mother, for all her flaws and the bruises life dealt her, carried a tenacity that seemed woven into her bones. My father had charm and wit but not her endurance. He fractured where she bent. My mother's pain became my education. I learned how to listen, how to soften my voice, how to comfort without crying. I became her counsellor before I left primary school. She spoke and I absorbed, building inside me a tolerance for emotional chaos that would later masquerade as strength. My childhood had already shaped how I understood closeness. I had learned to read danger before desire, to expect disappointment before trust. By the time I reached adolescence, I no longer knew what ordinary affection looked like. Through my teens and into my twenties I never had what others called normal relationships. I was drawn to the familiar language of secrecy and rescue. I mistook turbulence for intimacy because stillness felt foreign.

At nineteen, when I worked for the post office, life looked steady from the outside. Before the fearful dread arrived, there was Peter. He was a country boy, good humoured and fun, easy to be around. We had much in common and became close, although I was more

romantically minded than him. In time, we discussed moving in together, found and leased a small flat, and I bought some household necessities. On the night we collected the keys, we sat in my Holden Belmont car while rain hammered against the glass and I showed him the mugs, the small rug, the lamp. Then he told me he could not move in with me, that he was gay and had been living with his partner, John, all along. He had deceived me from the start. The real betrayal was his silence.

With that news, the world folded in on itself. Sitting in my car, wracked with pain and sobbing my heart out, my tears seemed to flow and merge with the rain outside. My hands trembled against the steering wheel as if trying to hold the world still. Internally, I had been repressing the consequences of other betrayals. After suffering from a bad virus on my twenty-first birthday, pushing myself to attend my party when I was too sick to do so, the panic attacks began. Heart pounding, breath snagging, rooms tilting. Dread lived in my skin. It was fear of the fear of the fear, a spiralling loop of terror. I became terrified of myself, scared I would lose control, scared I would go mad. Agoraphobia overtook me. Later, my psychologist told me that people who truly go mad do not know it is happening, and somehow that thought steadied me.

My boss, the postmaster, was compassion personified. He gave me days off and showed unwavering support. His kindness felt like sunlight through fog. Work offered distraction. He was married, yet he showed me affection, and in my distressed state, I reciprocated. For a time, I believed our mutual but unconsummated closeness might quieten my fear. When we decided to temper our interactions, the silence left a familiar ache. In those months, I could barely step outside, yet a stubborn part of me refused to vanish. Each morning, I forced myself out the door, trembling, certain I would faint, certain I would die, but walking anyway. The smell of freshly cut grass hit me as I stepped into daylight, grounding me in the living world. I learned that courage is not a feeling but a motion. You move, and the fear follows until it tires.

Each anxiety attack survived became evidence that I could keep going. The fear shrank when faced; it only grew when avoided. During that fragile season, I met the man who would become the father of my eldest daughter. His energy was bright, outward, full of plans. He pulled me toward daylight. Yet by then I understood something vital: survival does not depend on who holds your hand. It depends on the part of you that refuses to let go. Looking back, those years were not just a series of mistakes. They were lessons in calibration. I was learning where truth lived inside me, how to tell the difference between a warm hand and a silencing one. My resilience was being shaped quietly, each betrayal polishing it like stone in a river. My trust manifested as hope that my suffering would dissipate.

I had weathered childhood by listening, adolescence by enduring, young adulthood by refusing to collapse. The strength that grew was not dramatic; it was cellular. It lived in the decision to get out of bed, to breathe through fear, to walk into the world again. There comes a time when survival grows too small. You realise that holding your breath is different from breathing, and composure is different from peace. For years I mistook control for strength, a careful performance that kept the chaos at bay. I smiled when I wanted to scream and endured when I should have left. That was false strength, born from fear of collapse. True strength is quieter. It needs no audience. It begins when the performance ends and you finally tell the truth, first to yourself, then to the world. Somewhere beneath that truth, hope begins to stir. The residue of early betrayal settled like fine dust over everything. I learned too soon that danger could wear a kind face, that trust could be twisted. Childhood taught me to read the room before I could read words. When betrayal arrives before language, the compass falters. The intuitive antenna bends, and for years it sends confused signals. You stop trusting the very sense meant to protect you. That damaged antenna made me susceptible to red flags disguised as warmth. I learned to override instinct to keep the peace, to silence what my body knew. The child who survives betrayal grows into an adult who doubts her own perception.

Viktor Frankl wrote that between stimulus and response there is a space, and in that space lies our power to choose. For years I had no space, only reflex. But gradually the pause lengthened. I began to listen for the small, insistent voice that had never stopped trying to reach me. That voice was hope in its earliest form, quiet and persistent, refusing to vanish. Integration came through practice. Leaving a room that felt wrong. Saying no without apology. Trusting perception over persuasion. Each act rewired the circuitry of intuition. I remember the first time I felt the shift. I was thirty-four, sitting across from a man who was saying all the right things. He leaned forward with practiced warmth. His smile was easy. His questions felt like interest. But something in my body said *no*. Not loudly. Not dramatically. Just a steady hum of wrongness beneath his words. In the past, I would have ignored it. I would have smiled back, given him my number, overridden my unease with politeness. Instead, I excused myself. I walked out of the café into afternoon light that felt like permission. My hands were steady. My breath was even. I had trusted the antenna, and it had spoken true.

The rebuilding was not a single moment but a thousand small ones. Learning to end phone calls that felt draining. Noticing when someone's story didn't match their actions. Walking away from jobs, friendships, situations that required me to silence myself. Each time I honoured my instinct, it grew stronger. Each time I chose truth over comfort, the space between stimulus and response widened. I began to write. At first it was just fragments, moments captured on paper. The lane behind the police station. The rain on the windshield of my car. My mother's hand tightening on her teacup. The words were clumsy at first, but they were mine. Writing became the place where I could tell the truth without apology, where I could bear witness to what had been and what I was becoming. The missing children were still with me, but they no longer haunted. They accompanied. I wrote their names into the margins of my notebooks. I thought of them when I taught my daughters to trust their instincts, to say

no clearly, to run when their bodies told them to run. I was keeping the promise I had made at thirteen: to live for them, to notice for them, to tell the truth and make it sing.

My daughters grew into women who knew their own minds. They questioned. They challenged. They left situations that diminished them. Watching them, I understood that resilience can be inherited not through blood but through example. I had given them what I'd had to learn the hard way: permission to trust themselves. Now, in my sixties, I walk differently. I still notice parked cars and read rooms and listen to the quality of silence. But the vigilance has transformed from fear into awareness. I can distinguish between caution and paranoia, between protection and prison. The antenna is no longer damaged. It is finely tuned. Last month I was walking through the city near where that lane once was. The police station is different now, the buildings changed, but the geography of memory remains. I stood where the girl once stood, where I once stood, and felt the distance between then and now. She saved me by running. I honour her by living fully, by choosing presence over performance.

Hope, I have learned, is not optimism. It is not the belief that everything will be fine. Hope is the decision to keep engaging with life even when you know how fragile it is, how quickly it can turn. Hope is showing up for your own existence with honesty and courage. It is the willingness to build something beautiful on ground that has known pain. Resilience is hope in action. It is the daily practice of choosing meaning over bitterness, connection over isolation, truth over convenience. It is what Viktor Frankl knew in the camps: that everything can be taken except the freedom to choose your response. That freedom is the bedrock of human dignity.

I think of my mother, taking my father back after eighteen months, and I understand her differently now. She was not weak. She was making a choice with the tools she had, in the world she inhabited. Her resilience looked like endurance. Mine looks like discernment. Both are valid. Both are hard-won. The years of panic attacks taught me that courage is not the

absence of fear but the willingness to move through it. Every morning, I walked out the door terrified was a morning I chose life over paralysis. That choice, repeated a thousand times, became the foundation of who I am. I write this now as an act of remembrance and an act of hope. For the children who did not come home. For the women who learned to navigate a world that saw them as prey. For anyone who has had to rebuild their compass after betrayal shattered it. For my younger self, trembling in a lane, who trusted her instinct and ran.

The long way home is not the safest path. It is the path that keeps you awake, alert, alive to the fullness of your own existence. It is the path where you learn to hear the voice inside that knows danger from desire, harm from help, performance from presence.

I am still learning. The work is never finished. But I am here, courageous and whole in the way that only broken and mended things can be whole, carrying my scars as evidence of survival, my vigilance as proof of care, my hope as an act of defiance against every force that tried to silence me. The count is steady. The count is mine.