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Born: 1982, in New York, New York

*Tommy saw his house on fire,
His mother in the flames expire;
His father killed by falling brick
And Tommy laughed — 'till he was sick.*

— Marcus Ordayne in “Morals for the Young”

LS:

So here's the idea... young people go through a transition around their teenage years, somewhere between 10 and 20. It's when you move out of your parents' circle and find a circle of your own. It used to be a very important transition and there was a social, family ceremony of growing up, and all kinds of stuff happened. But now there isn't any of that. People get taken away from their parents and get put into school, and then they get turned into robots, or something.

CT:

And they also stay children for a very long time. People are now at the mental age of 15 year olds' when they're 30. They prolong their childhood indefinitely; they never grow up. You see all these people having kids when they're 40 who are awful parents, because it's basically like a teenager trying to raise a kid. Their kids are assholes; it's very annoying, especially when you have to deal with the parents and their children.

I kind of skipped straight into middle age. For me, the process of becoming an adult was very... abrupt.

Basically, I had not a very good childhood, I had a bad relationship with my parents. My stepmother had Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy. She would invent mental illnesses and have me medicated for them. It's when you make your children sick for attention. Some people do it and poison their kids. She would say that I was hearing voices, and suicidal, and cutting myself when I wasn't. I was always a “clumsy slash active” child, so I would get hurt all the time because I would do stupid shit, like fall down and get hurt, and she would go, “Oh, she hurt herself on purpose!” I had a very twisted childhood.

LS:

Where was this?

CT:

My father was in the Army, so I grew up all over, mostly in Germany.

And then when I was a teenager, my mother, who I've never had any contact with my whole life and who passed away in 2002, was actually mentally ill. So my stepmother said, “She's just like her mother. She's inherited it. It's genetic.



When I was in my late teens she convinced doctors that I had Bipolar Disorder, which I didn't, obviously: like I'm not on medication for like 5 years now, and I support a child by myself and take care of him, and have an apartment, and a job, and my child is vaccinated, and... you know what I mean? Like, I take care of the everyday details of life. Clearly, if I had a debilitating mental illness, and was hallucinating and was cutting myself, you know, there would be evidence of it, and my child would not be OK.

I spent my late teens in a lot of mental hospitals. I almost didn't graduate high school because of it. And then I left college early because she had me hospitalized every semester and I could never take my finals, and there was no point in going over and over again. I was working to pay for my own college, and it was just insane.

GT (her son Hunter, who is 4 years old):
I ran through the sprinkler!

CT:
I see that! Go run through again... I'm watching!

I wound up leaving. They were living in Poughkeepsie, so I came back to Poughkeepsie and was working a couple of jobs. I was teaching and running a music program at a Head Start Program. I played viola. I wasn't happy, and I didn't like living with my parents, so I wound up quitting and moving to the City.

And then I got raped, and I got pregnant with my son, at a party by some random guy who I don't know, and I still don't know who he is. And after that I went nuts. I was 20.

I knew I was pregnant right away, immediately; I don't know how, I just knew. I'm an atheist and I'm pro-choice but I really, I really had a feeling that it was the right thing to do, for my life, to keep the baby. It turned out it was the best decision I've ever made in my life. But my parents put me in a mental hospital right after this happened because I was crazy, because I was upset from it, obviously, it was very violent and bad.

GT:
What do you have?

CT:
I have some pineapple Sweetheart... and I have your train. So why don't you take your train and your ball on the slide. Go ahead. Hunter, come on: go.

They found out I was pregnant and they came into this mental hospital and said to me, "If you don't have an abortion, we're never going to speak to you again." And I was, like, "Really! Fine! I'm not having an abortion. Goodbye." It was very difficult because even though it's a very twisted and bad relationship, it's still your parents, and so it was tough.

Once they found out they were liable if anything happens they kept me in the hospital. They refused to let me out. They said they were going to keep me for 9 months and then take the



baby. So I went to court, I took them to court, and they let me out. Then I was homeless for 7 months of my pregnancy. I'd lost my apartment, lost my job because I was in there for 2 months.

I was on the streets. For a few weeks I slept in a cemetery behind a church, because everyone's superstitious and I am not, and I was, like, "It's quiet, there's no noise, nobody's going to bother me there sleeping on somebody's grave." Whatever.

After that I got into a shelter in Poughkeepsie, it was a Catholic shelter. I had only been down in the city for a few months so my residency wasn't New York City, it was still Poughkeepsie. Battered women's shelters wouldn't take me, they're, like, "Well, you have to go get in a shelter where you were raped." And then I would come here, and, "No, you have to get in to a shelter where you have residency." Nobody would take me.

Then I got into this horrible Catholic shelter where their whole goal is to have you never have sex again, for you to be abstinent, which I think by the time you're pregnant is a little too late. It's like you've kind of missed the boat.

They moved me to the Bronx because, like, "You don't know anybody there, so you're not going to be tempted." So they moved me to the Bronx, but they'd already opened a case for me at Social Services in Poughkeepsie. Then they opened a case for me in the Bronx. There was a lot of violence in the Bronx shelter with this group of girls, so they separated everybody and spread us to different shelters. They moved me to White Plains, and they opened another case for me with White Plains Social Services, without closing any of the previous cases.

GT:

I lost my ball!

CT:

Where did it go? You've got to run and look for it Love. Go run and look for it, it's around here someplace. I'm sure you'll find it. Go look.

Because of all the open cases I got "red flagged" at Social Services. I was apparently trying to commit fraud, and nobody would give me any services. So then I was screwed. I wound up sleeping in the park, and being in the shelter system. I was raped again. I was stabbed twice while at the shelters, once in the belly while I was pregnant, and once underneath my arm when I got in a fight with a girl with a knife.

LS:

So what did you feel about all this?

CT:

What a lot of people don't understand about situations like this is that when you're doing it you don't feel anything. You just have to get through, and you just do what you gotta do. It's like anybody in a very difficult situation: you ask them what was it like when you were there and, like, "What am I going to do: sit here and cry when I'm starving? Or am I going to go out and try to figure a way to eat?" You know what I mean? It's almost easier to be in constant turmoil because you don't have any time to think about it. You just do what you have to do.



I remember landing in the shelter and thinking, “If I get murdered here, nobody’s going to know. Who’s going to know? I don’t talk to anybody. Nobody in the world has any idea of where I am.”

The girls in the shelter, some of them were very nice, but because I’m white I had a lot of problems. They wouldn’t let me eat. They would threaten me because I’m this white bitch and da-da-da-da. And then I would get robbed and stuff. It was definitely... I don’t remember being upset about it at the time, because there’s more important things to worry about than wallowing in self-pity.

The psychological trauma doesn’t happen until after you’re OK. And for me, I deal with it very well, but a lot of it doesn’t even seem real, like it never even happened. I have scars, I know that it happened, I have medical records, but you kind of disconnect from it in a way. It took me a few years after I was out of this situation to calm down ‘cause I was very jumpy.

LS:

What could you do while you were in that situation? Could you have a job, could you have a life?

CT:

No, there’s no way to have a job when you’re homeless, because who’s going to hire you without an address or a phone number?

I stole food. I got arrested for stealing food — I just cleared the bench warrant now, because I got moved to a different county so I couldn’t go to court — I got arrested for stealing yogurt. I would go into restaurants where you get food, and then you go pay, and I would steal the food.

My grandmother in Florida sent me \$100 by Western Union, because I still had my driver’s license. And I never missed a prenatal doctor’s appointment either — I always had a new hospital when I moved, but I always went to every single doctor’s appointment — I did whatever I had to do.

I was 7 months pregnant, my grandma sent me \$100, and I got a bed in a youth hostel for a week. It just so happened that it was unstaffed at night, so I broke into the office and stole keys. Then I’d let myself in every night, and I’d sleep on the floor.

From there I actually applied for a job at American Ballet Theatre, they were hiring a temporary fund raising, marketing person for the winter holidays. I used the youth hostel as my address, and got the job, which was insane. The first couple of weeks that I was working there I was sleeping on the floor at this youth hostel.

Then this guy who was working there needed a roommate, so I was, like, “All right.” I wound up moving in with him, but it turned out it was bad because it was this tiny studio and he was an alcoholic. He couldn’t pay the rent because of the alcohol, and he wound up, like, assaulting me when I was 9 months pregnant.

But, it just so happened that across the street from this guy’s apartment a psychiatrist who had taken care of me in one of the mental hospitals when I was, like, 17, had her office. And I wound up...



GT:

I need some help. Can you help me find my train?

CT:

No, you've got to go look for it. I'm sure you can find it, you're a good looker. Go look. Oh, I see it, it's right there! Right underneath the slide... by one of the green things. Go look.

He assaulted me, and she ended up taking me in, and I lived in her apartment for 2 weeks. Then a week before I gave birth to my son I got room in SRO in Washington Heights.

LS:

SRO?

CT:

You share a bathroom in the hall — it's like a tiny room — where I was adopted into this family of Dominicans who lived on the first floor of the building. She's still like my Mom. She doesn't speak any English, I speak fluent Spanish now, I learned Spanish, and that's why I was just in the Dominican Republic, visiting her family. She's like my Dominican Mom, her daughter's like my sister, she's 17 now. I've been helping her. When I met her she was going to get pregnant and drop out of school. Now she wants to go to Columbia, she's trying to get into school, into college.

LS:

How did you do that?

CT:

I just became friends with her, and talked to her, for like 4 years, every day. We talked about stuff and eventually... she's an only child, and she has no father, so it's just like her and her mom. And her mom works all the time.

They had nothing, but when I moved in I had less than them! I was sleeping on the floor, no blanket, no pillow. I had one set of clothes, and that was it. It was amazing, because this is a building in one of the poorest neighborhoods in all of New York. And this building was on a row of buildings in the poorest area in Washington Heights. And the building that I was in, out of all those buildings, was the poorest of all of those buildings. So it was the shittiest apartment on earth.

When I first moved in, this girl, my friend's daughter, came up with the group of teenage girls who lived in the building and knocked on my door. She knocked on my door with her friends, and they're like, "Oh, hi." I was massively pregnant, and white, and the only white person for miles. It's all Dominicans there.

They're like, "What are you doing here?" I didn't say anything, I was, like, "Well..." I just wanted to lock myself... I had a door with a lock on it, and I just wanted to be alone. So she looks behind me and she sees there's nothing in my apartment. So they left, and I went to sleep.



A few hours later I hear a knock on my door and I get up, and they're holding stacks of dishes and sheets. They brought me a microwave. They just randomly collected shit from people in the building.

Basically, I lived in that building for a year after my son was born. I wound up getting a check for ten grand, because I'd been in a car accident when I was 16. So I paid my rent and all my bills. I had WIC and food stamps — Women, Infants and Children — so you get food vouchers. I was breastfeeding, and they give you extra food if you're breastfeeding.

After that, through very shady means, I wound up getting this enormous apartment on 181st street: a 5-bedroom apartment for \$1,100 a month. I sublet three of the rooms and lived off of that for a couple of years. I was a Dominatrix, and a couple of other things, and now I do editing of books.

LS:

Editing of books?

CT:

Yeah, I do freelance. I'm applying for more jobs now because, I mean, I was doing fine, and then the economy crashed. Now it's getting tight again.

LS:

So where did you learn how to do that?

CT:

I just taught myself.

LS:

When the opportunity arose you taught yourself?

CT:

Well, I was working in American Ballet Theater doing fund raising and grant writing for them, when I didn't how to do that, so... I have a facility for language. I learned fluent Spanish in four months from living in Washington Heights. I just learned it; I woke up one day and spoke Spanish. It was weird.

I suck at math. I feel like all of my brain just goes to language. I'm like... people go, "I'm bad at math," and I'm, like, "No, I have a learning disability."

LS:

Well, have you had much chance to study? It sounds like you've been a little busy since you were 15.

CT:

No, I haven't really studied.



LS:

When did all this craziness start, when you lost any stability...

CT:

After high school. But now I've been living in my apartment here in Soho for 2 years. I have a good deal. I have a married boyfriend, who I love dearly, and he helps me out if it's an emergency situation. It's actually a very good relationship: very stable and calm. I mean my life is always going to be a little nutty because I'm not a... suburban person. Do you know what I mean? I'm not... I always crave emotion, and I crave... not drama but, like, action, or something going on.

I feel like a lot of people get stuck in their life, do you know what I mean? They buy into something that they want without really understanding what it is: they want to get married, they want to have kids, they want to move to the suburbs. And they get there and it's like, "Holy shit! I've been doing the same thing for the last 15 years, and I'm really not happy."

But for me, I have always tried to do the right thing, whatever it is. I can honestly say that I would not change anything in my life, at all, that has happened, because I'm really happy.

LS:

You mean, you wouldn't change it now, but what would you change if you could have gone back...

CT:

I don't think anything, because I can't imagine a different life. I am, right now, pretty much exactly where I want to be. I don't know how else I would be here. I don't know how to explain it.

(Calling to Hunter) What? All right! I'll put medicine on it when we get home! He has eczema; it's very itchy. He has spots on his feet that itch — Put your shoe on! — When he was born... he looked like a tomato.

LS:

A tomato?

CT:

Yeah, he was covered with eczema when he was born. He has really bad allergies, too.

Everybody would change a couple of things if they could. What would I change in my life, if I could? I don't know. Maybe I would have more kids; I like having kids. But with the married boyfriend situation right now, it's not going to happen any time soon.

LS:

What do you hope to be in 10 years, or where do you hope to be in 10 years? Are you doing something now that you want to continue doing?



CT:

I don't know. I have no idea.

Right now, basically, all of my energy goes in to my son. So in 10 years, hopefully, I'll have had time to think about what I want to do, and figure it out. I'm not much of a planner; I probably could plan a little more than I have already. I just kind of go where life takes me.

Having a goal, especially if there's an interest that you have, is good. But, on the other hand, I think a lot of people over-plan everything to the extent that they pass up a lot of opportunities that would make their life happier, or better.

Again, I'm an atheist, I'm pro-choice, my father was military but he left the military when I was 14, and now he's a lawyer. My parents are lawyers, upper middle class, educated, whatever. I mean, I don't study that much, but I did grow up in a very educated, intellectual household.

I can't think of anyone else, well maybe somebody, but not many people would have chosen the path that I chose. I found out I was pregnant when I was 5, 6 weeks pregnant. I could have had an abortion and said, "Well, I'll learn from this. I'll plan better. I'll do whatever..."

I think that a lot of people, because they plan: "I don't want to have kids until I'm 30, so if I get pregnant before then I'll have an abortion no matter what." They don't even think about it. You're giving up stuff that may be a good thing in your life because you're so focused on a goal. And then, when you get it, you're not even happy.

I know a lot of people who are middle-aged, suburban people, and overwhelmingly they're miserable! They don't like living in isolation, a lot of them are not happy in their marriages, they're not happy with a lot of the choices they made. It's like good money after bad: "I've already committed this many years of my life, so I might as well be miserable for another 30 years." And it's so... bad. And it's bad especially if you've got kids, because you want to give your kids a joyful parent, and a happy parent.

It's not reasonable to expect to be happy all the time. That doesn't work. But most of the time you should be content and happy. And if you're not, you really need to change whatever it is, you know? You need to figure it out.

Just because you have had an idea in your mind about what you wanted to do for X number of years doesn't mean that it's necessarily the right thing to do. What I've learned is that a lot of things that seemed like they were the end of the world, turned out to be the best things that ever happened to me.

LS:

What can you tell kids in their teen years about getting their lives together?

CT:

I think that people need, hmmm... how do I want to say this. People need to realize that doing what other people expect you to do all the time, and living your life with people telling you what you should be doing, is not, you know: you have to figure out what will make you happy. How can you live your life with no regrets? How can you live your life trying always to do the things that are going to be best for you, without hurting anybody, or anything else.



Like my parents: basically their whole idea was that by having a child with no father and no money, that he was going to be miserable, and that I wouldn't be able to raise him, and we were not going to be happy. But the thing is that you've got to make it work. And if you decide to... I don't know... I feel like I'm talking in circles.

It always feels better to be able to take care of yourself, and to be responsible for your own choices. At the end of the day, when you look back on your life and what you've done, you have to answer to yourself.

And the years go by quick! So by doing what everybody expects you to do, and living your life basically as a child because you're taking money from your parents, it's not a good way to live. And if you're doing things because it's what everyone expects you to do, and it's what you're supposed to want, you can get stuck. A lot of times people really aren't happy.

I think the goal of life is to make decisions that make you happy and don't hurt anybody.