

Picture this: a tall, gawky girl made completely of elbows and knobby knees, on the sidelines during gym class, watching her classmates run back and forth on the basketball court with delight, literally bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. This is me in the sixth grade, at the height of a terrible home life where I was sexually abused and beaten into mental submission by my then-stepfather on a daily basis.

That girl, caught up in the moment and bursting with the joy of being alive, is who I was then and who I still am today.

My name is Carlene. I am an unrelenting optimist, and it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance.

To me, growing older isn't about age, it's about becoming your best self. Everybody always says, "If you could go back but know everything you know now, what would you change?" I think it's like using the warp whistles in Super Mario Bros 3; I wonder if Nintendo was disappointed they put the effort into designing worlds 2-7 when everyone just wanted to go straight from 1 to 8.

My fiancé asked me that question the other day, and I told him that I don't think I would take back anything, that I liked who I am now. "But what about the abuse?" he asked, "Wouldn't you undo that?"

There's a loaded question; if I could go back and get my childhood back from the man who stole it, would I?

I often shock people with my complete disregard for social niceties and my lack of fear – or, as I like to call it, my excess of bravery. Is that the price of a lost childhood? To not possess any fear of living my life as fully as I want to? If that's the case, I would call it freedom.

As shocking as it seems to equate ten years of mental prison with freedom – being manipulated, living my life in fear, lying to the faces of the people I desperately wished would save me – when it left my life it took with it the fear factor.

When I decided to change courses, to start pursuing music again to feed my soul, I heard the same negative shocked reactions, just phrased differently. "Well, Carlene, you know how hard it is to make it in the music industry," "Why are you going to Nashville when there are recording studios right here in New Hampshire?" "You know that everyone there is trying to do the same thing as you, right," "But what are you going to do with your business?"

That's where the unexpected benefit from living through childhood abuse kicked in. I am no longer the type of person to listen to what my Sandler Sales training course referred to as "head trash," at least not when it comes to people trying to take a crap all over my dreams. I don't just have dreams, I have *goals*, and I make those goals realities on a regular basis by thumbing my nose at the people who don't "get" what I'm doing and dealing exclusively with the people who fit effortlessly into my life.

I don't have to explain my goals as though they're indecipherable. I want to share my music with people who appreciate what I have to say. Period. That's the end of it. And at the heart of that statement is the key to self-improvement.

While I can only speak for myself, I will go out on a limb and say that many of us keep our best selves hidden. The quirks and qualities that make us so brilliant and fun to be around are the things we are terrified to show the world. If someone mocks us for those quirks and qualities, they've found our hidden heart and stuck a knife in it.

The way I became free – free from the abuse, free from the fear, free from the inability to find the proverbial cliff and jump off without hesitation – was to make a conscious decision to put my hidden heart on display. Want to see it? Here it is:

My name is Carlene and I am totally uncool. I have big feet, size 11, and my toes are long, which grosses me out. My right boob is bigger than my left, and I wear push-up bras so no one can tell. I think I am technically 5'11 and a *HALF* but I lie and tell people I'm 6' tall because that half inch is *just* more interesting. I had braces for two years and my left front tooth still sticks out farther than my right. When I laugh, I actually "guffaw" just like Goofy. I have scars up and down my arms from cutting myself as a teenager, and I am embarrassed when people stare at them. I hate when there is a "w" pronounced in food – "Fewd." I secretly wish I could stop playing guitar while performing because I'm not very good at it, and also so I could have long fingernails again. I had acne F.O.R.E.V.E.R. and I still get zits at 26 years old. I went through high school believing everyone hated me...then I got Facebook and got real. I love to listen to my own songs but don't want anyone to know, so I hit the "Next" button on my iTunes so the play count stays low. I believe in the Universe the way that some people believe in Jesus. I secretly love the Twilight series and Nora Roberts novels. I would put a Darwin fish on the back of my car but don't want my car keyed.

There you are. There's my hidden heart. Stab away, I'm not ashamed, because even with my secrets out I am still an unrelenting optimist, and it's still a pleasure to make your acquaintance.