

# RIVER STYX

105/  
106





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## IN THEIR EYES

*Sara Orozco*

**M**y first client of the afternoon, who I'll refer to here as Camila, was a seven-year-old girl who had lost her mother to domestic violence.

"You ready?" I asked her. She was sitting in the waiting room snuggled next to her mother's sister, Tia Sonia, who looked like she'd fit better in a corporate Boston office than she did amidst the mismatched furniture and old stuffed animals that greeted our clients. Camila was wearing her usual school uniform: a plaid jumper over a white short-sleeved blouse, the collar softly flopped over her shoulders like dog ears, and thin white knee socks over her flat calves. She nodded yes then slipped off her chair, hand lingering on her aunt's leg.

"I'll be right here when you get out," Tia Sonia reassured her.

After Camila and I got into my office and closed the door, she took a book from the top shelf of my bookcase, where I kept a few children's books for my youngest clients, including a Spanish one about a girl Camila's age who had only one emotion: anger.

This was Camila's favorite book.

"What do you think she's feeling here?" I asked Camila, pointing my finger at the girl in the picture, hiding in a tree, her face bright as a red-hot pepper.

Camila had the same dark-brown eyes and olive skin as mine. She picked at the glittery blue butterfly tattoo on her arm, thinking about my question. In the six months she had been in treatment with me, I pieced together details of the day her mother's boyfriend brutally killed her mother. Camila had woken to the sound of her mother screaming at her abusive boyfriend to go away. She hated their fights and covered her ears to block out the sounds of crashing glass as she hid in her closet, waiting for the police to arrive and for her mother to join her.

Neither happened.

At some point, when it had been quiet for a while, Camila snuck to the neighbor's house, and they were the ones who called 911 and contacted Sonia. Soon after that, Camila moved in with her.

"I wonder if she's sad?" I said, putting a weepy expression on my face. "Or maybe she's scared?" My face mirrored Camila's frown.

She flipped to the end of the book, as she had done a dozen times before, and studied the last page. On it, the girl was looking up at the tree, smiling, proud that she had learned to let go of her anger. Camila closed the book. I knew she wasn't ready to talk about her hurt. Not yet. One day. Maybe never.

"Read it again," she said plaintively. Finally, she placed her thumb in her mouth and sucked on it, a habit she had restarted soon after her mother died. I wasn't concerned about her new infantile behaviors as long as they remained temporarily, a part of her grieving process that she would outgrow in time with healing and patience.

Sonia had shared with me at last week's caregiver session that Camila complained of having a stomachache on school days.

"Camila's afraid to leave the house," Sonia said. "She's also been waking up in the middle of the night, screaming. Says she saw her mother's boyfriend standing in the hallway. And she started wetting the bed at night."

"It's not unusual for children who've had the stress that your niece experienced to revert to more childlike behaviors,"



*Tim Foley*

I explained. I didn't mention that I was concerned about Camila's nightmares, afraid those horrifying images would haunt her for the rest of her life.

I would have been around Camila's age when Mami woke me and my brother in the middle of the night after one of Papi's drunken rages. Mami whispered, "¡Apúrate!" as she glanced anxiously over her shoulder. I quickly put my shoes on and tiptoed through the hallway in my pajamas, past my parents' bedroom. Papi was snoring. My brother and I had learned to walk as if thick cotton wrapped the bottom of our shoes. We escaped out the back door and ran as fast as we could through the empty unkempt field, tall weeds higher than our

knees, power grid towers behind our backyard disappearing into the darkness, Mami and I holding hands. When we were far enough from our house, Mami stopped once, hesitated, and then heaved Papi's handgun into the field. In the moonlight, I saw the swelling under her left eye and the look of terror on her face, as though a hungry tiger had been chasing us.

My father never stood behind me with a knife or a gun. Nor did he ever physically attack or abuse me. But for most of my adult life I had a recurring vision of a man standing behind me with a silver butcher knife, about to stab me. When I turn around, the man in my mind's eye is faceless. I'm never stabbed or killed in this imaginary scene, but the feeling that I'm about to die is so real and so terrifying that my palms sweat and my heart races. The panic is so overwhelming that I have to dash out of whatever room I'm in, repeating over and over, "He is not real."

"She's terrified that I'm going to die," Camila's aunt continued. "Her teacher and I have set up an arrangement for Camila to call me twice a day so she can hear my voice."

"It must be hard to never miss a call," I sympathized. She was worried she might lose her job at a local architectural firm if her family responsibilities got to be too much.

"I can't let her down," Tia Sonia said. Her head drooped slightly forward like a sunflower, legs crossed at the ankle, arms draped across her stomach. She looked dejected.

"What do you imagine will happen to her if you let her down?"

"She will die."

"I can see how you feel that, Sonia. Both you and Camila experienced a terrible loss," I said. "Is that what you think will happen to you if you let her down? And that somehow you let your sister down the night she died—that you could've done something to save her life?" I tried to keep my feet planted as the child's therapist, not the aunt's, but I couldn't stop myself from asking.

"I knew he was hitting her . . ." she said. She used the balled-up tissue in her hands to press on her eyes gently. Children don't understand or interpret events the same way adults do. They tend to think it was their fault the parents were fighting in the first place. It was hard for me to accept that I wasn't to blame

for the battles inside my home. It was harder for me to understand the adults who saw what was happening but did nothing.

“DO WE HAVE TO READ THIS SAME BOOK OVER AND OVER AGAIN?” I teased Camila the next time I saw her, knowing her answer would be yes.

Her wavy dark brown hair was pulled back tight into a ponytail, the same way Mami tamed mine on those humid Miami days when I was about this age. She scooted on the floor closer to me, her bare toes wiggling in the air. I pointed at them, opened my eyes wide, pinched my nose, puffed my cheeks, and flailed with my other arm in the air as though I were going to pass out.

“Are you done?” she said, annoyed, waiting for me to act my age.

I looked hard at her, and almost, just almost, she smiled.

“One of these days, Camila, I’ll see your teeth.”

We started to read her favorite book together yet again. She needed her stories to start and end the same way each time. Children who have experienced trauma need predictability; it helps make them feel in control of their environment. I knew from my studies that children like Camila who were exposed to domestic violence at home have the same risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder as soldiers do after returning home from combat. It took me four decades to realize the full extent of my own.

“CAMILA?” I CALLED. I waved at Tia Sonia sitting in the waiting room. As Camila and I walked the hallway leading to my office, a door slammed behind us. Camila jumped at the loud unexpected sound then took off running. I found her sitting on my office floor, panting, rocking back and forth, hands over her ears. I sat down next to her.

“Camila,” I whispered. “Can you hear me?” She nodded. “What is your brain saying?”

After a long pause, in a low, soft voice, she sang, “*Pio, Pio, Pio.*” I joined her. “*Cantan los pollitos, cuando tienen hambre, cuando tiene frio.*” My mother sang that same soothing Spanish nursery rhyme to me when I was little. It’s the story of a hen who cares for her newborn chicks when they are cold and hungry. I wondered if this same song played in her ears the night she waited for her

mother to find her. I waited until her rocking slowed and her arms dropped to her sides before I walked over to my play area and grabbed a large white poster board and a thick pencil.

“Camila, want to join me?” I said, but before she could answer, I plopped down next to her and placed the board in front of her. “Before we draw, let’s take a few deep breaths.” We had done this exercise together many times before.

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I took in a deep breath, pushed my stomach out, then exaggerated my exhale. Camila sat up straight and without a word imitated me for three deep breaths.

“Ready to draw?” I asked her. She nodded. It was OK that Camila had

no spoken words for me now. Children her age who have experienced trauma speak through their hands. “Please close your eyes and try your best to find any physical feelings you have inside your body at this time. For example, my lungs feel like jelly after so much breathing. Raise your finger when you have found a few.” When I saw her index finger lift, I asked her to draw an outline of a body. Camila rolled her eyes at me, but when she saw I was serious, she slipped onto her stomach and drew a person that mostly resembled Casper the Friendly Ghost. I then handed her the markers.

“Can you please place an X on each body part you found inside your body where you felt something?” Camila sat up and stared at her sketch. Then with the red marker she placed a large X that covered her belly, legs, arms, shoulders, and head.

“So not in your toes, right?” She nodded. “What did you feel in your shoulder?” I asked her. She thought about this then reached over and squeezed my arm. “Your shoulders were tight?”

“Yes,” Camila said.

I had Camila squeeze her shoulders in tightly. I prompted her, “Tighter, tighter.” When Camila’s shoulders were up by her ears, I told her to release them. We did this exercise three more times until I could see that her shoulders were more relaxed.

“Do you think you can practice squeezing your shoulders like that once a day until I see you next time?”

“OK,” she said. When she left my office, I looked down at my hands, and they were shaking. Not because I too was triggered by the banging of the door but the opposite. I was full of adrenaline and optimism.

Unlike Camila and the many other children coming through this clinic, I never saw a therapist while I was growing up. It wasn't until I experienced a series of panic attacks in college that I sought out a therapist, and even then I didn't talk about what it was like to press my ears against Mami's locked bedroom door and hear her whimper after a fight with my father. Unbeknownst to me, and over time, I had bolted shut my sadness behind a wall of shame, and I didn't make a sound. If I had had a child therapist at the time, I might have opened up sooner to let others love me without my pushing them away when all I wanted was closeness.

Sometimes, when I meet with family members like Camila's aunt and see how much they love the children, I get teary-eyed, the same way I do when I read a story of how a lost dog found its way home after a long absence. It's that resolved reunion at the end that hits me the hardest. It's easier for me to identify with a stranger's emotional intensity and vulnerability than to feel my own. Part of my work is to create a safe space for my young clients to weep and feel fear, anger, and any other emotion they could not express at the time of their trauma. It's to let them know what's stuffed inside them will not overwhelm them. Privately, to myself, I hope that is true.

AFTER SEVERAL APPOINTMENTS WITH CAMILA, I asked her Tia to meet with me on a more regular basis for what I called Tune-Ups, an opportunity to check in with each other about Camila and her progress.

“How's Camila doing with you?” Tia Sonia asked on one of those visits.

“She's talking more,” I said. “How's it going at home? Is she still having nightmares?”

“Not every night,” she said, but her eyes filled with tears.

“What just came up for you?” I asked.

Sonia's eyes looked past me then dropped down, where they remained flat



for a while. I let the silence speak. I heard the clock ticking and her red fingernails tapping the side of the couch.

“Have you been in touch with her father?” I asked.

“We’ve talked a couple of times.”

“Does Camila know you’ve been talking to him?”

“No.”

“What does he want?”

“He wants to take Camila to California with him. The other side of the world. A hot-tempered bum that hasn’t lived with her since she was practically a baby, and now he wants to be the father of the year,” she said. “He met a woman. Thinks they can start fresh, somewhere new and warm.”

I pictured Camila walking out of my office, brown ponytail tapping her on the back, tiny tattoo glitter dust scattered around the area she last sat.

USING CRAYONS AND STICK FIGURES AT OUR NEXT SESSION, Camila drew a picture of herself, smiling, standing in front of a yellow house, waving, her hair neatly braided. Camila’s new home. I felt hope at times, too. My parents fought a lot, but it wasn’t always like that between them. When they weren’t fighting, Papi was playful and flirty with Mami. On those few days, Mami’s eyes would sparkle. Back then, I wanted to believe that my parents loved each other, that Papi’s charm would beat out his brutality, and that he would never leave us. But when I entered my teenage years, his violent rampages continued, and our terror of him rose; I wanted him gone from our lives.

“¡Déjalo!” I would beg Mami. But instead of leaving him, Mami left me for the hollow darkness that existed in her bedroom, where she slept her days away. At the time, it made no sense to me why she stayed. It seemed so simple to leave him. I accused her of being weak, of having no courage to stand up to my father. The more I pushed her, the more she fought back, accusing me of being ungrateful for the sacrifices she had made for us.

“What sacrifices?” I yelled. At some point, she stopped fighting me, but I kept pushing, building a wall between us that blocked me from seeing Mami slip into a deep depression. It took me listening to the many mothers who had sat in my office crying, sharing with me how their abusive husbands threatened to kill them if they did not return, to realize that Mami had stayed with Papi

because she knew it was the safer option for us. She must have calculated the risks. We had a better chance of staying alive with him nearby than with him chasing us. My brother and I had a better chance of growing up with a mother if she always let him win. I had not, at the time, appreciated that Mami had been the brave one. She had saved our lives.

After Camila left that day, I hung her drawing on my bulletin board, alongside the other painted dreams my other clients have gifted me. Many of those images will never materialize for my kids, but they don't know that yet. When I see their hands holding a crayon, body leaning over my coffee table with their slim arms moving back and forth across construction paper, increasingly bold red, green, yellow, purple, and orange stripes appearing on a previously blank page, I know, for that one moment, they feel hope in their hearts, and that makes me feel happy for them.

When I was new in this field reading therapy books with my young clients, my emotions would swell and I'd have to turn my face away for a split second. Through my healing and professional training, I learned how to stay present in my sessions when working with clients whose life experiences were similar to mine. I tried to tether my gaze to an object: the doorknob, the cup of water on my desk, or the picture of a horse hanging on my wall. Anything that might hold me still as the vivid flashbacks of Papi slipped in and out of my vision. The sound of my mother crying as my father squeezed her jaw; my mother and me hiding in a motel, terrified Papi would find us.

*Stop!* I would say to myself, repeating it over and over again, until my thoughts passed me by like a moving train. *Don't hop on it.* My terrifying images lasted a few seconds, then they were gone. As a therapist, I learned that these momentary lapses were normal, and I secured guardrails to separate my work from my clients' work. I use my clinical training in trauma to inform my practice, my wounds to feel compassion for my young clients, and my clients' hurt to guide their healing. That's how I continue doing this work despite my closeness to the topic.

THE CHILDREN IN OUR CLINIC WERE OFTEN PULLED OUT OF THERAPY TOO SOON. They were moved around by their parents, or they moved in with a relative, or they entered foster care. So I wasn't surprised when Tia Sonia called to cancel

the appointments we had already booked and to see whether I could meet with Camila one more time before she left for California the following week.

The anguish in her voice was palpable as she grappled with the fact that she had lost her battle to keep Camila close. I imagine that caring for Camila had kept Sonia connected to her sister. She asked if I could recommend any child psychologists in Camila's new town but admitted that Camila's father said he wanted Camila to put all of this behind her and probably wouldn't take her to a counselor.

Over the months of our therapy together, Camila and I had developed a strong connection even if we had not explicitly talked about her feelings. I worried that Camila's disrupted patterns of attachment in early childhood, coupled with the violence she had witnessed between two adults who claimed to love each other, could leave her vulnerable, open to infections of the heart, doubtful for most of her life that love can be kind and partners dependable.

It wasn't lost on me that I'd battled the same trust issues and hadn't quite won the war. I'd been in and out of relationships, breaking hearts or having my own heart broken by choosing partners unwisely, for as long as I could remember, hoping not to repeat the patterns imprinted on me in childhood. Hoping, for once and for all, my now being in a loving and long-term relationship would vanquish my own dragon.

"I'M MOVING TO CALIFORNIA," Camila announced during our last session.

"I heard. How do you feel about that?"

"My father's girlfriend painted my room yellow."

"Like the new butterfly tattoo on your arm," I said. "Do you want to read our book one more time?"

She nodded. I opened the book, and together we read how the angry girl climbed to the top of the tree so no one would see her red face. About halfway through the book, Camila flipped to the last page of the book, where the girl was looking up at the tree smiling, proud that she had learned to let go of her anger. Camila paused there, then looked over at my bulletin board where her drawing hung—a picture of herself, smiling, standing in front of her new home.

"The girl is smiling," I said, pointing to the last page. "What do you think she's feeling here?" Camila's eyes sauntered my way before dropping down.

“Camila, it’s OK to feel sad. I know how much you miss your mother and how much she loved you. She’ll be with you when you ride your bike to school and when you make sand animals at the beach and paint yellow butterflies on the sidewalk with chalk. She’s in there,” I said, pointing at her heart.

Camila closed the book gently. “The end,” she said.

“Would you like to take this book with you to California?” I could tell that she was thinking hard about this as she scratched at her arm.

“I want to leave it here,” she said.

“Then here it will stay!” I said in a jolly tone. I pressed the book to my chest. “This book will always remind me of my time with you.”

Camila shook her head as if she was embarrassed for me.

“One of these days, Camila, I’ll see your teeth,” I said. After that, I knew I would never see her again.

After Camila left, I jotted down a few clinical notes and then rushed to the waiting room. I had a new client waiting for me.

“Mari?” I said. I was looking for a twelve-year-old girl. I spotted a skinny brown arm shoot up in the air in the crowded room. I waved her over. She was wearing a bright yellow sundress, black Doc Martens, and a pink puffy winter jacket twice her size. Her long bangs swished back and forth like a soft paint brush across her cheeks. She stomped past me without saying hello. *Determined*, I thought. *Spunky*.

*Maybe this time.* Maybe later. One day.



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