

## “The One of Whom We are Afraid”

by Tara Rhiannon Dawn Fietz

I am going to tell you a story. It is a fractured story about a family, about people I've never known. Or rather, it's about the one person I *have* known. My father. I've never met his siblings, and only 'met' his parents once at seven months old when they stalwartly believed I was not actually his child. But in growing up with my father, I understand some portions of his childhood and the people in it through the stories he told me. I am, however, still struggling to understand *him*, and the rationale behind his actions, if there is any. It's time to say it outright: my father has abused and sexually assaulted me since I was a small child until I was a teenager. And, in looking back, I am confident that this was a direct causation from his childhood and the psychosis that was allowed to develop unchecked during it.

Our parents told all of us childhood stories, right? My father was no different in that capacity but, hopefully, differed in terms of content. So, I'm going to tell you these stories. They are about my father's youth and my youth and how they intersected with my future and his future and how I would live the rest of my life. These are his stories, turned into my stories, the him into the me. A strange mobius strip of dueling memories.

How many of us can remember one of our childhood toothbrushes? I know mine. It was purple, glossy, and had a serpentine handle that was supposed to give an easier grip to my small hand. I remember how my father's hand was too big for that little purple squiggle when he stayed in the upstairs bathroom with me at bedtime, how he would sometimes hand me the brush; how once he wrapped his fingers around it like a giant clutching an infant's leg and slowly pushed the end down my throat while staring into my eyes with his eyes that were exactly like my eyes because we shared the same ice blue irises. He held my head upright by the chin so I wouldn't flinch, and said he wanted to test my gag reflex, “just so he knew”. I was seven years old.

It was that upstairs bathroom where the stories began. His perch was the closed toilet lid, where he would lean back and watch me perform my bedtime routine. From there, he always began the same way—*when I was your age*.... He called them “Daddy Stories” where I learned how he grew up, what he did as a child, and similarities to his treatment of me which I doubt even he perceived, but I did. Which I do. Which I'll never be able to forget.

His own father was a forensic photographer with the police force in Canada's capitol of Ottawa, Ontario. As such, he said he was accustomed to images of violence and crime from a young age. He told me once that no work of art is similar to such scenes. They simply lacked the intensity, he said, as if discussing the merits of a Monet over Salvador Dali, instead of detailing a photograph his father smuggled home of a murder scene. Oh yes, his father did love to bring work home with him—crime scene photos, jars of fingerprint powder, handcuffs, graphic descriptions of what atrocities he'd witnessed that day. It was the end of the nineteen-sixties, and my father's childhood was peppered with the Beatles, fantasy novels, and all the violence he could soak up.

His policeman father didn't just bring home gruesome tales and images. He brought his frustrations back to his family. I don't remember my father ever telling me about being beaten, as so many stories of disturbed childhoods include, but I know his mother was the brunt of violence, as my own mother was after her. My father never talked about her in great detail—the comments he reserved for his mother were that he hated her for not protecting him from his father, which he never elaborated upon. He claimed she was stupid, a puppet, a fraud of a mother, a woman he wished he could kill, and later compared my own mother—his wife—to her. He never told me why he loathed his mother to his core, but in reflection it makes sense given his hatred of women. He never expanded on what his mother could have protected him from, but I can only imagine what could have gone on in such a family. Furthermore, my father's younger sister was the prime target for his "pranks", as he called them. These formed a great portion of the stories he regaled me with as he watched me during the evening, in the oversized t-shirt (which he gave me from his wardrobe, coincidentally) that barely made it to the edge of my bottom and no further, because he forbade me from wearing pajamas or even underwear to bed until I was thirteen and the appearance of menstruation required more coverage. The bathroom was small, and inevitably his hand would wind its way into the hem of my shirt that was his shirt and coil it up as he talked. This was normal for me. Uncomfortable in a way I didn't know existed, but normal. It was as if he didn't even know his limb was moving; he never broke narrative.

As the oldest child, he was generally expected to take care of his two younger siblings in many ways. Every Wednesday bath night, he would send his sister to the bathroom to clean up for bed, and then follow her there. This act was completely mirrored in his behaviour with me, when I took showers—in both cases, he would sit by the side of tub and watch our cleansing, then insist on checking that the body was clean. He didn't elaborate on the particulars with his sister, but when I objected to such actions, he assured me it was his place to do so. I can only imagine he performed

the same acts on his sister in such case, as he confidently told me it was the expected thing to be done— “checking that you’re clean” with fingers pressed into private areas, and then assisting with the drying of body and the swirl of the towel inside, to prevent “damp areas”. I admit to feelings of disgust, but also shame because of my fear, as he told me previously and repeatedly how his “unruly” sister had to be punished by being held under her bathwater when she refused his ministrations, to make her obedient. I can’t decide if fear is a sin or not, when it is given into, but I certainly governed my budding adolescent life by that emotion.

His more “normal” behaviours were immortalized in his tales, including telling me how he used to burn small animals alive, such as trap-caught mice, using a trail of black powder, stolen from his father’s ammunition reloading bench in the garage; how he plucked the wings from flying insects like butterflies or the legs from spiders, and left them as helpless bodies on ant hills, and watched them writhe as they were dragged within. This was amplified to an entirely different level when he experimented once at twelve with his elderly neighbour’s cocker spaniel, a kitchen blade, and anatomical knowledge of hamstrings. Yet even after the dog was found with splayed and useless limbs in the back alley, he was deemed too nice to have done it. Too sweet of a boy. It would seem that his confidence in destroying living creatures only expanded, unchecked, from there, as well as his ability to wear the mask of a genuinely good person with ever increasing convincingness.

I remember the first inkling of something not right in my own childhood — after my father drunkenly shoved me down the stairs at age nine, ending in a trip to the emergency room for a dislocated collarbone and arm, the nurses stared at him as he lounged wide-legged in the uncomfortable plastic waiting-room chairs and chatted nonchalantly. I heard them whisper things about “psychotic” and “what are they *doing* with him”. The attending doctor quietly asked my mother to clarify my shaky coverup story that expunged him from blame, telling her that it was fine to be honest, *were we alright?* She insisted in the affirmative, clutching onto my unhurt arm, even when the doctor drew the curtain tighter around us and whispered, “that man displays tendencies that won’t get any better than this. So far, you’ve been lucky.” I suppose neither my mother nor I believed him. To us, and more pointedly, to *me*, this man was just my father, and I’d angered him earlier by not putting away the laundry. This was a simple cause and effect situation. Of course, this is absolutely the kind of occurrence that is textbook abuse. But, to join the many voices who have already said it, when this is what you have been born into and grow up with, it is perfectly normal. Unpleasant, terrifying, and unpredictable, but normal.

I wish his siblings had realized it *wasn't* normal. That his parents had. How his behaviour was not just cruel, it was entirely psychopathic. And this is not a term I use lightly— *oh, he's a psycho*. No. This is the term his own physician used against him in police proceedings when I finally came out with my experiences. I blamed myself for not noticing sooner, for believing the lie that such a life experience of terror was normal. After all, to echo the patient police detective who sat with me for many hours, all the markers for psychosis were present in those stories he used as entertainment since I was a little child.

While his psychopathy was greatly centred around females, one story involved his younger brother's guinea pig, a pet that he was so thrilled to finally be allowed to have. Now, I expect most people have an immediate inkling of where this story leads; as a child, however, I did not. When his brother was sent away to a summer camp to “make friends”, my father was put in charge of the pet. According to him, it lasted two weeks before it became a burden. That summer, my father was sixteen and coincidentally studying for his driver's license, and he told me without a hitch in his voice how he placed the guinea pig in a grocery store sack one afternoon, weighed it down with rocks on the driveway, and proceeded to drive over the shuddering form eight times—forward and reverse, only stopping the guinea pig's living movement on the fifth advance, as the legs kept getting caught under the tire and not the entire body. He exited the vehicle to check after each pass, and told me the squirming of the animal was more fulfilling than the final *crunch* of its bones. I can only imagine this was a similar instance the day I returned home from the first attempt my mother made to move us to a battered women's shelter when I was fourteen, but came back after two days. I found my beloved pet parakeet with her neck snapped clean and lying on the bottom of her cage, as my father grasped my mother's coat collar, said “you'll never leave again.” I later learned that abuse of animals is a hallmark of the twisted mind.

I remember one of the most disturbing things I ever heard him say. I was helping him with the yard-work, digging out weeds as he wielded a large pair of tree branch trimmers. Out of nowhere, my father said these words: “You know, everyone has the tendency to kill a person inside of them. It's just a daily battle of mind over matter. Everyone wants to see for themselves how much blood would come out if they did.” I can only suppose this was mental detritus from his childhood, where he told me that he would force his sister to self-harm and collect the fluid in a big glass measuring cup, in order to see how much could be expended. I believe he only encouraged her in this act a handful of times, until their parents became aware and punished her. *Her*, not him. And I'm deeply ashamed to admit to you that it stayed with me, in the back of my mind, all these years.

Until last January, when I actually decided to see for myself and took a knife to my arm. That's just how much of a hold I hate to say that my father still has on me.

But he did continue to torture his sister—or prank her, in his mind—in other ways. A favourite story was whenever their parents would go out for the evening, my father would lock his sister into the tiny downstairs bathroom cabinet, knowing full well that she was deeply claustrophobic. He would threaten to harm her unless she spent an hour or more folded in there, always with the caveat that if their parents found out, she would be incredibly sorry. Several times, he borrowed his boyhood friend's pet tarantula and placed it in with his sister, a severe arachnophobe, and if she made a noise or tried to get out, he would beat her. This behaviour continued into his parenting of me, when he tipped out a mason jar of garden-caught spiders and covered me with them in my bed at six years old, whispering that if I moved he would kill himself in front of me. This was a consistent threat, one that I suppose I should have seen right through. He enjoyed his reign far too much to die. Whenever I seemed to become autonomous or aware that the actions against me were not considered strictly normal, he detailed how he was about to commit suicide. He would occasionally disappear for hours or days after such a threat, adding to the plausibility and my guilty remorse when he returned. This was apparently a learned tactic from his upbringing—whenever his own parents argued, his father would confront his mother with a loaded pistol either aimed at her head or tucked into his own mouth. He told me of how he waited on the stairwell, watching these events in silence, just as I did as a child, and witnessed him throwing my petite mother across the living room hard enough to leave a soccer ball sized hole in the drywall that she dutifully patched up the next morning, the back of her head swollen and still oozing.

Once, he told me how he pointed his father's pistol at his sister. I still remember his voice—a strange mixture of regret and pride. It was the same expression he carried when he dabbed healing ointment on my mother's arm when he had attacked her with a steak knife. He had aimed, squinted through one eye, and pulled the trigger—of course, it wasn't loaded, just like the historic RCMP Lee Enfield rifle he pointed at me one day when I was fifteen and refused to sleep in the same bed with him anymore. But that small, hollow *click* still carried with it the weight of terror. See, now I often wonder, was I a replacement to his sister? A small girl he could torture without repercussion simply because I was irrevocably and genetically *his*?

I am here to say that the man who abused both his siblings and then me in so many ways is not the man who I will allow to shape my future. He may have formed an important part of my past, but that is a thing I can move on from. It's the strangest juxtaposition: to have the man who is your

father and who gave you life, be your worst enemy. Both the man you miss, and the man who sexually abused you. I suppose I share this feeling not only with people around the world today, but with his siblings and others who experienced his violence.

Still, I suppose the most preposterous part of this is how I managed to love him, unconditionally and intimately, for all those years. How those stories never lead me to suspect the man I called Daddy was not healthy. How I was oblivious to any feelings of absolute wrongness for so long. How I rationalized his fingers in parts of my body where they shouldn't have been. Well, no more. Now I'm trying to accept the gullible and trusting child I was and battle against the hold he has on me. As the sexual abuse by my father is deemed "historic" in the Canadian judicial system, I cannot pursue prosecution, even though he failed each question on the polygraph test administered by the authorities. But knowing that a police detective has reviewed and believed my case is closure enough for now, both for me and perhaps for the children whom he abused as a child himself. I may not believe in much, but I am quite certain that there's a version of the afterlife awaiting this man that Dante would be afraid to experience. Perhaps that's something we both have ahead of us, me in my inability to forgive, and my father, the one of whom we were afraid.

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