

LIFE WITH FATHER

OFFICE OF DOCTOR ROBERT BENNET, Psy.D., BCBA-D

EMERALD CITY COUNSELING, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

“Why don’t I speak to my mother? Simple—theft. She robbed me of a life with my father. Sometimes a person cannot bring themselves to overcome a larceny cut so deep.”

“What do you remember about that day?”

“Everything. September 21, 2003. Thirteen years ago next week. I know it’s cliché to say, but I remember as if it were yesterday. Warm. An autumn morning gave way to a shower spring would be proud to host. Rain whispering through a pale-grey sky, the house basked in a muted glow begging for a curl up with a good book. Sorry, been taking a creative writing class online. My virtual instructor suggested I be more descriptive.”

“Well, you nailed it. Now, Bea, back to September 21th please.”

“Our dog, Oreo, coiled tight against my bed pillows as he always did when it rained. He was a small dog, loving though not very smart, nor very brave. Let a bit of rain fall and Oreo became a vibrating bundle of nerves. The poor fellow—and he didn’t weigh more than seven pounds—could shake you off the bed, given the proper thunderclap.

Anyway, it was a Sunday and, since we had recently taken to attending the four-thirty service because of Daddy’s obligations on Sunday mornings—work and all—I had the full day to wrap myself in my latest Boxcar Kids adventure. I was midway through book three, “The Yellow Mystery House,” and couldn’t wait to finish it. I never finished it.”

“What do you recall about your father?”

“I miss him. I know I was only eight when he left, but I really do miss him. He was good to us. Surprising us with toys. Always bringing Mother flowers and presents, especially after one of their fights. They fought a lot. Mother was difficult. She forever picked at Daddy for something. Never appreciated the gifts he gave her. I remember one time, must have been a month before he left, Mother was at the hospital—she tripped getting into her car in the back lot of the old McCrory’s downtown. Hit her head on the curb and busted her kneecap, twisted her arm too. Quite a bit of bruising. Daddy brought her chocolate and books and a new nightgown. I remember him crying when she wouldn’t look at him. He tried to apply the ointment to her bruises but she shrugged him away. I never understood why she let it out on him; she was the one clumsy enough to fall. He just tried to make it better.”

“Anything else you remember about him?”

“He used to bring me lollipops. I especially liked the kind with the owl on them—Tootsie Roll lollipops. I loved those. Daddy wanted the best for us. I mean, he was so concerned he even picked out my clothes a lot of the time. Mom’s too. Saying this aloud, I can see how it might sound strange, though at the time, it felt natural. Daddy just cared. Excuse me, getting a bit overwhelmed.”

“It’s okay. We can take a minute if you need to.”

“No. I’m all right. Just let me catch my breath.”

“Take your time.”

“That’s better. Well, let’s see. He worked a lot to support us. Nights, weekends, Sunday mornings even, as was the case on September 21. Thinking back on it, I wonder how he did it, toiling away all day at the office only to face Mother’s incessant carping through the night. My bedroom abutted theirs so I couldn’t help but hear them argue. Mother screaming. Slapping. Bitching. Sure, Daddy yelled back or blocked himself from the occasional thrown lamp. What else was he to do? A man can only take so much. Still, in spite of Mother’s barrage, come the next morning, Daddy would be up and ready, kissing Mother on the head before heading off to work after breakfast—which near always consisted of boiled eggs,

pancakes and bacon, coffee for my parents and orange juice for us kids. By us kids, I mean my older sister, Charlotte, and me.”

“Tell me about your sister.”

“Charlotte was fifteen. We didn’t get along very well. She was hard to get along with. Charlotte embraced the epitome of what one would term teenage angst. She moped around. Wore dark makeup. Never washed her hair. Had a silver bolt—about a half-inch long—impaled through one ear and a line of three beads bore in the other. I’ve no doubt she would have pierced her nose if Mother let her. I worry about Charlotte.”

“Back to September 21. Did Charlotte go to church with you?”

“No. Charlotte didn’t like church. I did. I didn’t attend normal service, the adult service. I went to Jump Start. Charlotte called it baby church, but it wasn’t for babies. She just said that to get under my skin. Mom signed Charlotte up for high-school church, though I doubt she ever went. High-school church started at six, which gave Charlotte freedom from our parents, me too I reckon, for a good three and a half hours, including drive time. I hate to ponder what she did in those hours.”

“Please, continue.”

“It had been a good morning. I read while mother cleaned the house and Charlotte did whatever it was Charlotte did when she wore her headphones, which mostly meant nothing more than don a scowl. Daddy came back home from his obligations around four. Mother was in a spit of a mood by then. I don’t know why, the church was only ten minutes away so we weren’t going to be late. She started cursing as soon as Daddy’s car, a royal-blue Buick LeSabre—I remember it because my crayons stained one of the white seats a bleached pink—pulled in the driveway. By the time he opened the front door, Mother’s face wore the shade of a roasted beet and I swear fire shot from her tongue. She let go such an acerbic cascade, I knew she would spend the full of Pastor Steven’s service in apology to His Almighty. Can’t imagine

how many Hail Mary's that absolution required. Mother grew up Catholic, by the way. Kept a rosary chain hanging on a cross in the kitchen."

"What did your father do?"

"Daddy just smiled. He let Mother's anger slide off without even looking at her. He tussled Charlotte's hair—she was slouched on the living room sofa, headphones on—and lifted me into the air so high I nearly hit my head on the ceiling fan. He twirled me around so I faced Mother's ire over his shoulder. It was odd, as I think about it. Mother usually confined her diatribes to their bedroom; guess she didn't want us kids to see the real her. Not that day, though. She let it out that day."

"You pause. Have we hit on a painful memory?"

"No, just something I find peculiar. I remember the smell of Daddy that morning. Sweet and smoky, must have been a new aftershave. I don't recall him wearing aftershave or cologne before the previous month or two, but I noticed he did near daily around that time. Anyway, he plopped me down on the sofa and planted a kiss on Charlotte's forehead. "How's my bundle of joy," I remember him asking her. How Daddy could be so nice to Charlotte after she treated him with such disgust amazed me. A good dad, my father."

"What happened then?"

"Well, Daddy walked over to Mother and grabbed her around the waist, giving her heavy kisses and hushing the vile adjectives spewing from her mouth. I remember how tight he pressed his lips to her's and how she fought him. Mother's face turned a deeper shade of red, almost black, like the darkest cherries at the grocery store. She followed him into their bedroom. I heard the hollering. I heard the slapping. I couldn't understand why Daddy put up with it. I guess at the end of it, he decided not to.

We went to church and came home and Charlotte was already gone and Mother and Daddy left and I fell asleep in my bed reading, with Oreos curled up in the crook of my knee.

Daddy was gone the next morning. I never saw him again. Mother said it was for the best but I knew she ran him off. She was always such a selfish woman. I suspect she still is. Haven't spoken to her since the day I dropped out of State."

OFFICE OF DOCTOR DIANNE CORNISH, M.D., PC.

ENGLEWOOD, OHIO

“Why don’t we pick up where we left off last time? Take me back to the last day you saw your father.”

“Why can’t we talk about something else?”

“This lies at the root of your anger. We must bring it out to deal with it.”

“I was angry before then. Some people are born angry.”

“Indulge me.”

“Okay. Well, I will never forget it. Sunday September 21, 2003. I mark September 21 every year in my calendar and celebrate it as a holiday. Liberation Day, I call it.”

“Tell me about your home life at the time.”

“Life at our house was not what one would term atrocious—I’m sure other families had it worse—though it was far from all chocolate and roses. We lived on the industrial side of town, not a poor area but miles segregated from the wealthiest arc of the city. Our house was a simple ranch, mid-century modern they call it now—that’s all the rage on HGTV you know—with an AC as reliable as the weather forecast, used to piss Dad off something fierce. Our back yard flooded when it rained, like it did that day.”

“What about your parents?”

“Dad harbored a mean streak wider than the Mississippi and Mom a stubborn one as deep as the river is broad. Never understood why those two ended up married. If ever the saying opposites attract applied, it was to my mom and dad, though they long lost the attraction by then.

Dad was a neat freak. A perfectionist of sorts. The lawn had to be mown every Tuesday. The bushes trimmed once a month. Cars washed on Saturday. Mom could only wear pencil skirts in public. She looked like Samantha from Bewitched. He even laid out our clothes.”

“How did you feel about that?”

“Seriously? I hated it. Bea, she was too young to care much and Mom? Well I guess Mom had her reasons for going along. I didn’t take it. He left me alone after a while, but not the other two.”

“What else about that time in your life?”

“I’m not sure what you’re looking for. We were a typical family, outside the monster in the closet.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Listen, I’m not here to pass judgement. Both of them deserved whatever wrath they received. I mean, let’s face it. Dad with those flowers and that cheap drugstore chocolate. Did he really think that would make it all better? Absolve him of his sins. And Mom; she reaped what she sowed.”

“Let’s go back to that day. What do you remember?”

“That day, a Sunday of all days, was the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. Dad went out before church, as he always did, at least for the prior month or so. Said he had things to do at the office, a project to catch up on, reports to file, some lame excuse like that. Seemed good old Dad just couldn’t keep up at work any longer.

Over the past couple of years, Dad took to working late two or three days a week. Round about March that year, he added Friday and Saturday nights to his regimen—meetings with a client, he always said. Dad was a staff accountant for a soufflé cup manufacturer, so naturally he entertained clients on weekends.”

“Was his going to work on Sunday normal?”

“Nothing about my dad was normal but, yeah, by then not even Sunday morning was sacred. Like a wolf chasing a rabbit, Dad would rush from the breakfast table before the rest of us finished eating.”

“And how did his work habits make you feel?”

“I don’t know. It didn’t bother me that he missed my piano recitals, my plays at school, my parent-teacher conferences. I mean, who wants to explain a drunk father to their friends? But poor Bea. She’d always say, “it’s okay Daddy.” Bea was young and had activities like Donuts with Dads and Father-Daughter dances. That’s what really pissed me off, him missing her things. Well, that and the way he treated Mom.”

“How so?”

“I’m not going to defend her. Look, Mom was no dummy; she knew what was going on. No one forced her acceptance. The only thing more infuriating than Dad’s fucking around, and the frequent bruising Mom attempted to cover up with those oversized sunglasses and long-sleeved blouses, was that my mother—the woman I am supposed to look up to, who told me I, as a woman, could do anything I wanted and achieve any goal I set my mind to, who said I was as strong as any boy and needn’t back down to any challenge, my college-educated mother—stood by and took it. Sure, she would curse Dad out and make him spend a night on the couch, but that would amount to the sum of it. Next evening, he’d return from work and Mom would have dinner ready and they would eat as if nothing happened. It wouldn’t take long before the cycle started again—Dad works late, Dad comes home with lipstick on the collar, smelling of cigarettes and alcohol and cheap perfume. Mom blows a gasket. Mom takes a left hook to the temple. Yadda, fucking yadda. Of course, I didn’t really know whether the perfume she—the other woman, or women—wore was cheap or not, but I always assumed it cheap. Cheap like her. Dad didn’t let me wear perfume. Kept the alcohol in the house under lock and key. Got angry whenever mom wore

lipstick or makeup. What a sanctimonious, self-righteous shit. Well, September 21 was the day I guess Mom had enough.”

“How is your relationship with your mother?”

“Relationship? I wouldn’t call what we have a relationship. I admit I hold a certain degree of admiration. I mean, I never thought she had it in her. But she is equally to blame. Whatever happened, happened as much due to her acquiescence as his volatility. Let’s be clear about that.

Looks like my time is up. Can I get my script now?”

OFFICE OF DOCTOR CARSON LANE, PSYCHIATRIST, M.D.

SUNNYDALE INSTITUTE, DAYTON, OHIO

“Maybe I shouldn’t have done it. Sure, he deserved it—gallivanting around, coming home drunk and flaunting the smell of his tarts in my face, their lipstick on his shirt. Beating me subconscious behind the closed door of our bedroom. I don’t know what I ever saw in him. Frank was a hard man. The girls were better off with him out of their life.”

“Let’s talk specifically about that day, September 21, 2003.”

“Well, it was a Sunday. Frank broke free just after breakfast, before the other three of us finished breakfast, and didn’t get back until quarter past four. That gave us only fifteen minutes to make the drive to church—which sometimes took up to a half-hour—park, and get seated. We used to go to the eleven a.m. service. At the eleven o’clock, you get to see Pastor Stevens live. At the four-thirty, you only watch a video of Pastor Stevens on a large projector screen, like a movie theatre. I liked the eleven o’clock better, though I’ve gotten used to watching Pastor Stevens on a screen.”

“So why the change?”

“That’s the thing; we changed to the four-thirty just so Frank could work on Sunday mornings. He spun some lie about how the company was growing and he had too much to complete during normal hours. That was a sack of B.S. The company went bankrupt a couple years later.”

“What happened after Frank got home?”

“It was just one of those days. Defining moments, know what I mean? I was already angry because Frank was late, and then he had the audacity to show up smelling of alcohol and lust. Why put

me and the girls through that? Why come home at all? I followed him into the bedroom, bad decision. He started on me as soon as the door shut. Frank was good about restricting his tendencies to the sanctity of our room. Have to give him credit for that.”

“And after church. Tell me what happened that evening.”

“Well, we—Frank, Bea and I—landed back home around six. Charlotte was gone. She went to high-school service. Bea took Oreo out and then hibernated in her room to read. I don’t want to go into too many details. Suffice it to say Frank unleashed another of his rampages. Something about the dishes in the cabinets not being aligned to his taste. See, the smallest thing could set him off and Frank was a big man; when he hit you, you knew it.”

“And how did you react to his violence?”

“Listen, I tried. I prayed for God to strengthen our marriage. For Him to right whatever was wrong in Frank. I tried and I cried. I don’t know what it was; I guess at that point, I’d suffered enough.”

“Take me through your reasoning.”

“Frank grew more violent. Stayed out later. Drank more. Stepped up the abuse. It was as if the man couldn’t control himself. It wasn’t just for my sake Frank had to go. I had the girls to think about. Charlotte and Frank grated against each other coarser than a fingernail on a chalkboard. I could see rage flame up in him when he and she butted heads. It was only a matter of time before Charlotte received what I did.”

“So, what did you do?”

“I told Frank he had to leave. I couldn’t go on living this way. We couldn’t go on living this way.”

“What did Frank say?”

“Excuse me doctor. Time for Mrs. Parker’s medicine.”

“These make me loopy. Thank you nurse.”

“Ready to continue?”

“Where were we?”

“You were about to tell how Frank responded when you told him he had to leave.”

“Right. Frank looked at me and the anger bled from his face, I’ll never forget those eyes. See, I know I said I couldn’t remember why I fell for Frank, but I have to admit, when the man apologized with those big, puppy-dog eyes, my heart quivered. I don’t know, maybe if I gave him another chance, things might have turned out differently. Maybe Frank would have gotten help. Purged the demon that ate his insides. I didn’t offer him another chance. I stood my ground. Frank went into the bedroom to pack a suitcase and I went out on the patio to cry. I remember wondering what took him so long, but I wasn’t about to chance rushing him. I had a small garden just off the patio so I grabbed the shovel to dig a few holes for our seed potatoes. Gardening always calmed me. I wish I still had a garden.”

“Did Frank ever come outside?”

“Oh yeah. He came outside all right. His eyes lost the puppy-dog look by then and I knew I’d done the right thing. Some people just can’t change.”

“Can you share how you feel now about that decision?”

“How should I feel? It’s not a light decision to break up a family. I took a stand that needed taking and thirteen years on, I don’t regret it. Yet, had I not done what I did, had I not stood up against all the cheating and violence, not to mention the out of control spending, I might still occupy a place in my

youngest daughter's life. Bea never forgave me. She holed up in a shell after that dreary, freezing, rain-drenched Sunday and we never regained the relationship we before enjoyed; one a mother and daughter should enjoy. She grew up, went away for college. Dropped out first semester. Followed some boy to Seattle and got married, something I learned of second hand. Bea never got missing her dad out of her system. Probably just as well, at this point, she never learns the truth of her father. I haven't spoken to Bea in nearly three years."

"What about Charlotte?"

"Charlotte? She didn't blame me. If anything, Charlotte was impressed I had the balls to do it. I know I shouldn't talk that way, sorry."

"Not a problem. How did this affect your relationship?"

"Charlotte was too far gone to resurrect any paternal bond by then. I wish I could say we've stayed in touch, but we haven't."

"What do you think about that?"

"About us not staying in touch?"

"Yes."

"I get why she keeps her distance. She blames me. The two of us were never tight. Ours was more a coexistence than a connection. Funny thing is, in a certain, perhaps macabre, way, I believe Charlotte and I are closer for it. If anything, it provided us one commonality. Still, I should never have asked her help in dumping Frank's body; I regret that."

"Wait, what?"

"Lunchtime doctor. See you next week."

THE END