

Dead Splintered

You never wanted me. I search childhood memories. I can't remember you or Mama. I remember hiding behind the big TV and you yelling at me to get out of there. *All my life, feeling scared. What did I have to be scared of? I was not even 5-years-old, then, I was not 10. But, when I was almost 18, I knew.* You wanted me dead. Ah ha! Was that why I lived in my bedroom with the door locked? Did your fantasy seep through the walls? Was that why Mama had to beg you to let her take me to the doctor when my fever was high and I was close to death? Why did she have to even ask?

Or did my mother poison my mind about you? Repeating abusive stories I heard about but did not see. Or maybe I forgot those, too. Or did my grandmother mistreat you so badly blaming you for the accidental death of your little brother, that you swallowed her insanity? Or did you remember her stories about how her father was murdered by his nieces and nephews after a drunken ride home. They said he fell out of the car but the family believed they pushed him out.

The family tree is splintered and diseased. This disease sickens all the leaves on that side of the tree. The sickness you inherited made me and Mama walk on eggshells. I suppressed my feelings because they were emotionally tied to yours. I suppressed my words except to learn "I'm fine" would get me through. I remember praying you would not ruin every damn event – like Christmas - every year. To this day I hate Christmas. We always gave you gifts and you always grunted and threw them aside. No thank you, no smile. I don't know why we tried.

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When I was almost 18, during the last days of my senior year, my teacher had fallen in love with me and carried my books to the school bus. He was dismissed from his job. A good man, he thought he did the right thing by showing up at my house unannounced, with a Constable, to tell my parents he would never do anything to hurt their daughter. In case there were rumors.

He never predicted what happened. Who would? He knew nothing about the splintered side. As far as he knew, I was always "fine."

Daddy came into the room dressed in denim for work at the mill, ready to leave for the night shift. My teacher was dressed in a black tweed sport jacket, white shirt and tie; the constable wore kacki pants and shirt. I don't why I remember this. I don't know what I wore. I do remember I held my cat, Dolly, named after Dolly Parton's song, "Coat of Many Colors."

The eggshells broke.

Daddy asked no questions. I saw the look in his eyes harden. He looked at me and said "you're just a god damn whore " over and over. I cried "I'm not! I'm not!" My teacher told him "she's not. She's done

nothing wrong!" And then He said "I'm not having a god damn whore in this house. Get out. Be gone when I get home or you'll leave in a pine box. "The constable interrupted him and said "hey, hey, don't say that; you don't want to do that."

But, he didn't answer, he just left. Just like that. He left.

We were all horrified as the gravity of the situation sunk in. Where would I go? How would I go? My cries sounded like a scared animal. My mother did not comfort me. She told my teacher and the Constable "he means it." I knew she was right. They didn't really know but we did.

They just stood there until my teacher said "go pack your things. I know a place where you'll be safe. "

I didn't have a lot of things but I packed what I had. Someone had given me blue luggage as a graduation present. It felt so weird, like I was going on vacation but I knew I was packing a past that would haunt me forever.

What about my cat? She was my companion, the one thing on this earth that I could allow to touch me and that I could love. Mama found a box. She didn't want anything else to take care of. Truth be known, she was complicit.

I could hear my teacher and the Constable talking about what just happened. I heard my teacher say that he would take me to his mother's house where Daddy would not find me, should he come looking. But, I knew he would never come looking for me. He was freed of any pretense of obligations he never planned to fulfill.

The little suitcases lined up, the men took them out to the car and still crying, I hugged Mama good bye.

As my teacher pulled out of the driveway, I knew I was crossing a threshold from pretending everything was "fine" to creating a new life where I hoped it would be authentically fine.

I felt so sorry for my teacher and embarrassed that he had witnessed the family secret.

I didn't want any more people to know, especially his mother. "I don't know your mother," I said.

Meanwhile, my teacher's mood lightened and he was acting like he had won the lottery. I thought he probably had won a booby prize – me.

The drive ended at his house. It was sparse and neat. Furniture was missing as the result of a recent divorce.

He showed me a closet and a couple of empty dresser drawers and I unpacked. Unpacking clothes was easy enough. It would take me a lifetime to unpack my childhood and reckon with suppressed emotions and find my authentic voice.

I had stopped crying and finally could catch my breath. My "I'm fine" mode was growing stronger as I suppressed the meaning of what happened.

While my teacher - now, not my teacher - found a place for Dolly in the utility room, I rummaged in the kitchen and found the makings for hot chocolate. I offered him a cup.

The two of us sat at the small table.. My insanity of dealing with terror was to project "I'm fine" to the world. And so I said, "so tell me Mr. Smith, how was your day?" And he looked at me as though I'd lost my mind, which I had in order to suppress the anxiety I felt. But, he played along and hit the high points of his day until he got to the part about tonight at my house. Under his breath he said "I guess now I've kidnapped you." And, I said lightly, "they can't charge you with anything if you marry me."

I saw a twinkle in his blue eyes.

"I'm fine" did not last long. I wanted to take a bath. I wanted to scrub away all that happened to me for my entire life. I ran the water hot. I turned out the lights before I got into the tub and pulled the shower curtain closed. It was like a cocoon and I was the stunted worm not knowing a way out and certainly not able to think of becoming a butterfly/ myself. "I'm fine" dissolved into tears and gasps that I could not control. I tried to stifle the sounds by pulling my knees to my chest and with a washcloth covering my face, laying my face between my knees. I'm not sure how long this went on but long enough that he heard me. He tapped softly on the bathroom door and stepped inside. He couldn't see well with the light off but the hall light shed a little glow into the bathroom. He knelt down by the tub and pulled the shower curtain back a little so he could ask if I was okay and ask "what's the matter?"

Between sobs I managed to choke out "I feel so bad for you. I don't want to be a burden to you because I love you. There, I said it. I love you". The next thing I knew I saw him pulling off his socks and clothes and he said, "I'm coming in." He stepped into the tub, hot water and all, and sat opposite me. To say I was shocked would be an understatement. I had never seen a naked man and had never fantasized about anyone climbing into a bath with me! But, there we were. He pulled me close to him and I laid my head on his shoulder while he kissed the hurts away.

That night was the beginning of a nighttime ritual we kept all our lives. We took baths together. Sometimes we turned out the lights or lit candles. It was our time to talk about what had happened during our day. We shared our feelings; we could be ourselves. No soap or body wash made me feel as clean as I did while unraveling my inside self to the man I loved – the man who rescued me from the dead tree.

"I can't believe I told you that" I said to my therapist.

