

Sins of the Father

I was skeptical at first. The man told me he had just murdered a family. He also told me it was my fault.

Should I run? This man is clearly crazy. I should get up as soon as possible and run away.

With no idea how he would react if I walked away or interrupted and told him to leave me alone, I sat and listened. From the sound of his story, the man was very troubled indeed, and if not already in the middle of a mental breakdown, any sudden action would set him off.

He introduced himself as Cole Porter, an employee of a state-run DNA lab that ran tests for many of the state's law enforcement officials.

"I am sure you are asking yourself why exactly I picked you to confess my sins to, and you would be very correct in asking me that," Cole told me after he finished reporting how he had slaughtered a family of three in cold blood.

"One of many questions," I said.

"I suppose also," Cole continued, "That if I let you walk away right now you would go to the police and report what I told you. Since you know my name already, they would come and arrest me quite quickly."

Fearing that I might say something wrong, I was silent.

"But I would advise you against going to the police."

This time curiosity got the best of me: "Why would I not go to the police?"

Cole turned and looked straight at me for the first time since sitting down.

His icy stare froze me in place. Locked in a staring contest and lost in his cold dead eyes, I waited for an answer.

“Because your DNA is all over the victims house and on the murder weapon.”

“How can my DNA be somewhere I have never been?”

“I know it is hard to believe but after you do some background checks on me you will know that I am fully capable of taking your DNA and planting it at a crime scene.”

“I’ve never even met you before,” I said, huffing out a deep breath of air. “Why the hell choose me?”

“I have been following you for quite a while,” Cole said.

“Following me? What did I ever do to you?”

“Your father is responsible for the murder of my mother and father.”

“My dad never murdered anyone,” I said, clenching and unclenching my fists. “Are you some patient who just escaped from a mental hospital?”

“I am exactly who I say I am,” He told me. “Now, if you look up the date I am going to give you in the newspaper archives at the local library, you will see front page news about a double homicide. There was only one survivor: me.”

“Why do you think it was my dad?”

“Let’s just say that I have damning evidence.”

“Why don’t you go to the police?”

“I was in the foster care system from the age of twelve to eighteen. I was molested, raped, and beaten once so badly I pissed blood for a week. I want your father to pay for what he did.”

“Why the hell go after me?”

“Because if your father does not go to the police and admit what he did to my parents, you will go to jail, then he can feel the pain I felt when he knows his son is in jail getting the same treatment I got.”

A new feeling came over me now, this time it was anger: simple and pure anger.

“If my dad killed your parents why punish me. I never did a thing to you.”

“Revenge sometimes has collateral damage.”

“So, if I don’t get my dad to confess you will turn me into the police?” I asked.

“You understand the terms of our arrangement then.”

“What if I get him to confess?” I asked.

“Then I will turn myself in to the police, and you will be free to go on living your same old life. I suggest you begin with the news articles.”

He handed me a slip of paper.

“I am giving you two days. If in forty-eight hours you father hasn’t turned himself into the police, I will give them an anonymous tip that will lead them to the murder weapon that has your fingerprints on it.”

Cole got up and walked away, not even bothering to glance back.

I immediately called into work after my meeting with Cole, to take a couple of vacation days. At the library I found newspaper articles from the date Cole had given me.

The headline on the front page caused everything to slow down. I could hear my own breathing in my ears, slow and loud, as if my head was an empty cavern.

“Mother and Father found Dead in Home,” The title read, in large, menacing, block letters.

Coming to the end of the article I started to get dizzy, as if my whole world were being shaken like a snow globe. Cole was telling the truth about his family: they had been murdered.

The case was never solved, and Cole Porter was placed in the welfare system. Since everything Cole had said was true, I had to believe that everything else must be too, including Cole's threats. If I did not force my dad to confess to the double homicide, I would be going to jail.

My dad had never mentioned anyone with the last name Porter, and I could not remember ever knowing Cole, which meant that my dad had not wanted either me or my mother to know that he was involved with either of Cole's parents.

Gary and Denise Porter were only in their mid-thirties when they were killed. They had been killed in bed during the middle of the night. The motive was unclear, so the police had told reporters, and there had been no signs of a robbery.

The police did not know why Cole had been spared. They never figured out why someone had killed two adults and left a possible witness alive.

If there was a link between Cole's parents and my dad, I would make damn sure I found out, after all, my life depended on it.

After doing more research, and forcing myself to eat dinner, I tried to figure out exactly how to prove that my dad murdered Cole's parents. For my dad to tell me the truth, I needed evidence against him, because confronting him without proof would never get him to confess.

So, I found the name of the detective assigned to the case and learned that he had recently retired. Looking through the phone book I found the address, and with all the information I had learned so far, I made my way to his house.

When Detective Fred Wilshire answered the door, he was wearing pajama bottoms and a sleeveless pullover.

“What do you want?” He asked.

Immediately I smelled alcohol on his breath and my confidence that he would be of any help diminished considerably.

“I know you once worked for the police department,” I said, “And I wanted to talk to you about an unsolved homicide some years back.”

“There were a lot of unsolved homicides during my career.”

“I was hoping you would remember something about the one I am looking into; it involved the murder of a mother and a father. The twelve-year-old child was left alive.”

Fred’s face softened at the mention of Cole.

“I do remember that one, probably the worst of all the unsolved cases I ever had.”

“I would like to discuss some of the facts of the investigation with you,” I said.

“You should come in.”

“You want a beer or something?” Fred asked after closing the door.

Although I never really liked beer, I felt the need to have one now.

“That would be nice,” I said, sitting down on a tattered couch that smelled of stale beer, and had stains and tears on every cushion.

Fred went into the kitchen and came out with two beers.

He handed one to me and sat down in a recliner in front of the couch. He popped the top and took a long swig.

“Why you want to know about the case?” Fred asked.

“A case recently came across my desk that had some similarities to your investigation.”

“You a detective?” Fred asked.

“I am just starting out,” I lied, “I’m working on an unsolved triple homicide of our own down in Broward County.”

“Still can’t figure out why anyone would kill both parents and leave the kid alive,” He said.

“That is what I’m trying to figure out. Do you have any idea what motive the killer had?”

“Nothing was taken, probably wasn’t robbery. They really didn’t have anything worth stealing anyway. Checked out the husband and wife, found out the wife was having an affair with some guy she worked with. Checked him out too but never found anything good.”

“Do you remember what the man’s name was?” I asked, on the edge of the couch now, waiting for his answer.

“You have the old case file?” Fred asked.

“I am here just as a preliminary investigation. It is taking a while for your old department to release the file.”

“Bureaucratic bastards,” Fred said, shaking his head.

“So, do you remember his name?”

“I do. Name was Gary Finster.”

The shock must have shown on my face because even though Fred was drunk, he still gave me a strange look and asked, “You OK? Name ring a bell?”

“I have heard that name before is all,” I said, picking up my beer and taking a drink.

Fred eyed me now with a serious expression on his face.

“What you say your name was?”

“Doug, Doug Valley,” I answered quickly, perhaps too quickly.

“You said you’re with the Broward Police Department? You know a guy named Shawn Tarker? Transferred to the Broward department six months ago.”

I was sensing a sudden change in Fred’s demeanor. It started to feel like an interrogation instead of a casual conversation about an unsolved case.

“Maybe I should call him right quick,” Fred said, not waiting for an answer.

“I have somewhere else to be,” I said, jumping to my feet and grabbing my jacket.

I turned and walked quickly towards the open door but stopped when I heard Fred say, “I would stop right there if I were you, I got a gun pointed at your back. Move another inch and I put you down.”

I slowly turned to see that Fred had a pistol pointed at me.

“Who the hell are you?” Fred asked.

“It’s a long story,” I told him, taking a couple of steps forward, trying to get closer to him.

“Wouldn’t come any closer if I were you. Answer my question. Who are you?”

“I am just looking to find the killer. My friend is that kid they found alive in the house and he hired me to find out what happened.”

“You a private detective or something?”

“Just a friend trying to help,” I said.

“Should let the police sort this one out,” Fred told me, and reached for the phone.

It was only for a second, but when Fred took his eyes off me to dial the number for the police, I moved quickly towards him.

By the time Fred looked back I was standing beside him and was holding his gun.

Fred fought but after a brief struggle I was able to pull the gun away.

“I am going to walk out of your house, and you will never see me again,” I said, the gun pointing straight at him.

“Leave then,” Fred told me. “I got no more to say anyway.”

When I got back to my apartment, I began to think how I could find out if my dad had murdered Cole’s family. Did he keep something from the crime scene? Was there any proof of his affair?

Reading through the newspaper articles once again, I found my dad’s name mentioned briefly in one of them. It said that he had been questioned but had an alibi for the time of the murder. The alibi was my mom.

Did she know about the murders, maybe even covered for my dad?

Cole’s mother had been missing her wedding ring and the police never found it.

I would go to see my parents tomorrow, hopefully they would not be home, and if I could get in the house and find the ring that was stolen from Cole’s mother, it would be all the evidence I needed.

Whether or not my dad murdered Cole’s parents, Cole had gone through a lot just to get me to investigate, and if he said there was damning DNA evidence against my dad, then he must have something.

It crossed my mind that Cole could be bluffing, but after looking for recent newspaper articles of murders in the area, and coming across a triple homicide, it was too risky betting against him.

The next morning, I left for my parent's house. There were no cars in the driveway when I arrived, and when no one came to the door after I knocked, I was relieved.

Under a fake rock in the garden beside the walkway was a key to the front door.

In the entryway I called out, "Is anyone home?"

No one answered.

I searched downstairs first, went through every drawer, no matter how small. I found nothing.

At around noon I stopped and made myself a sandwich and got ready to go through the items in the upstairs rooms.

Maybe the reason I searched the upstairs rooms last was because I knew if my dad had kept the ring, he would keep it close, probably in his room.

I searched my old room first, and sure enough, found nothing.

Before moving to my dad and mom's room I hesitated, my hand on the doorknob, trying to collect myself. If I found what I feared I would, there would be no going back. My dad would be the murderer, and I would have to confront him.

It did not occur to me what exactly I would say to my dad, hey dad, I know you killed two people some years back, why don't you turn yourself in.

I also had no idea what my dad would say when he found out I knew about the murders. Would he try and stop me, maybe suggest that he and I kill Cole to save both our lives? I did not want to go to jail, and I decided at that moment that I would kill to keep myself out of jail - even if it was my dad who had to die.

I knew where my mom kept her jewelry, and hoped, really hoped, that the ring was not with her jewelry. If it was I would have to confront her also, and I would have to come to the decision of whether to kill them both if they wouldn't turn themselves in.

To my relief the ring was not in my mom's jewelry box.

Part of me did not want to find the ring at all. If I didn't, I would not have to choose between killing my dad or sending him to jail. I would also know he was not a murderer.

After searching the bedside tables, which I knew almost certainly wouldn't contain the ring, I moved on to the closet.

My mom's closet was bare, except for some clothing hung on the racks, neatly arranged and finely pressed.

My dad's closet was the last place to be searched, and when I opened the doors, I was almost certain I would find the ring there; maybe hidden in a box, or atop the shelves. He would have almost certainly put it somewhere dark, maybe to best keep his secret hidden.

I searched the clothes first, inspecting every pocket, and when I came out of that search with nothing, I moved to the shelves.

My dad had a couple boxes there, but they contained mostly old photos. There was me, with my mother; me as a baby; me on my first day of school – but no ring.

The last place to be searched was the floor. I knelt down and found a shoe box sitting in the corner of the closet.

With a sense of dread, I took the top off.

Inside, under some papers, was a diamond wedding ring. I picked it up, my heart threatening to explode in my chest, and looked on the inside of the ring.

Inscribed on the inside of the ring were the initials of Cole's mother.

I sat with the ring in my hand for a while, wondering what I was going to do next, and finally set the ring back down in the box and picked up the pieces of paper that had been sitting on top of the ring.

The first piece of paper was a love letter that had been signed by Cole's mother. The last letter at the bottom of the box shed light on the reason my dad had murdered Gary and Denise Porter.

Denise Porter had written in her last letter that she could no longer be with my dad. She was ending the affair and rekindling the broken relationship she had with her husband.

It all made sense now. The reason my dad killed them both was because he couldn't be with Cole's mother.

I wondered how my mom could have missed it – if she missed it. Was my mom oblivious to the affair or had she known about it and had decided to remain silent.

Even though I wanted to believe that my mom was innocent, that she was not responsible for my dad's actions, I doubted it very much. At the least I felt as though she must have known about the affair. From that I could come to only one conclusion: that she had known that Cole's parents had been murdered and had known who the killer was. But instead of divorcing my dad, she had stayed married to him, and most likely had ignored the whole thing completely. Now they were living blissfully in retirement, traveling and having so much fun.

I vowed to make sure they would never have fun again.

I stayed at the house through the next day, waiting for my parents to come home, to confront them the minute they came into the house. If I gave myself any time to think about what I was doing, I might not go through with it.

My dad had a gun, and I made sure it was loaded. I had fired a gun before. My dad had used the weapon many times, and maybe even used it to kill his ex-lover and her husband. I would make sure to wipe my prints off it before I put it back in its place.

I had no idea what I was going to say, maybe I would say nothing, but it would be hard to just shoot them as they walked through the door. After all, I had no idea if my mom knew anything.

It was the next night: I was up in my room, sitting on my bed, when I heard a car pull into the driveway.

Pulling the curtain on my window aside, I saw my parents. They were smiling, no clue that I was waiting for them with a gun and their murderous secrets.

After they were inside the house and had shut the door, I made my way to the steps. My mom saw me first.

“Tom,” She said, putting a hand to her chest, “What are you doing here.”

I didn't say anything at first, just eyed both of them. They were still smiling, but not as much anymore. Maybe it was the look on my face that made them uneasy, or maybe it was when my mom realized that I was holding a gun.

“Tom, what are you doing with your father's gun?” My mom asked, the hand still held to her chest.

My dad made his way to the stairs and had placed his foot on the first step. I raised the gun and said, “Stop right there dad.”

“Son,” He said, in the sternest voice I had ever heard. “Don’t raise that gun at me.”

“Did they both deserve to die?” I asked him.

Although my dad did a good job concealing his surprise, my mom did not. I saw her hand that had almost been plastered to her chest fall to her side. She was standing up straighter now and her eyes were wide open. She was no longer staring at the gun instead her eyes were riveted on my dad.

My dad glanced at her and then looked to me.

“What are you talking about?” He asked me.

“I don’t think you can afford to play dumb,” I told him. “I have only a limited number of choices right now, and you only make it easier for me to kill you if you try and act innocent.”

“You are not going to kill me son,” He said, and tempted me by moving up another stair.

“I am serious,” I told him, raising my voice. “Now I want you and mom to make your way slowly into the living room.”

He stepped back down the stairs and then over to my mom. He grabbed her hand, as if to lead her into the living room, and she yanked her hand away.

“I knew in the end we would pay,” She told him. “You just couldn’t keep your dick in your pants.”

“Living room, now,” I told them, as if scolding two bickering children.

They moved along, my dad made no move to touch my mom now, and once sitting I told them their options.

“I have been put into the situation that I am in because of you,” I said, talking to my dad.

“The son of the couple you murdered has framed me for a triple homicide I did not commit. Now

I have to get you to turn yourself in, or he will put me in jail. Since I did not do anything wrong, I don't see why I should go to jail."

"I will never survive in jail," My dad said, a pleading tone in his voice.

"Neither can I," I told him. "But since you are the one who committed the crime you are the one who has to go."

"What if I said no?" He asked.

I raised the gun and waved it in the air. "I don't think you want to do that."

"You will kill your own father?" My mom asked.

"What would you have me do mother?" I asked, turning my anger on her. "You knew about it and did nothing; you expect me to do the same?"

She was silent.

"Now as I said," I said, turning back to my dad. "You can either turn yourself in or I can dole out my own form of justice."

Once again, I raised the gun and wiggled it for emphasis.

"I don't think you will kill me," my dad said confidently, getting to his feet. "And I can't go to jail. So why don't you give me that gun and we can figure something out."

He took one step toward me and I raised the gun, pointing it at his chest. I told him to stop.

He took another step forward and that was when I shot him.

He put one hand to his chest, and blood began to seep out from between his fingers.

My mom began to scream, and I don't remember if I warned her before I shot her. But the next thing I knew she had a bullet hole in her head and was sitting still on the couch.

By that time my dad had slid to the floor and remained in a heap. Dead.

I listened then. The nearest neighbors were less than a mile away, and I did not know if they would hear anything. Something in the back of my mind told me I needed to act fast. If someone had called the police, they could be here any minute.

I stood to my feet and hurried to clean up the mess. Taking a towel from the bathroom, I wiped my prints off of the gun and placed it back in the shoebox in my father's closet. I finished by wiping the box the gun was in. I would not need to wipe anything else; I was their son after all, the police should expect my prints to be in the house.

I did take the box from the closet containing the letters and the wedding ring. I carried it with the towel and brought it downstairs. I laid the letters out on the table, alongside the wedding ring. I knew the cops would find them and be able to close at least one unsolved case. Unfortunately, they would have to investigate a new one.

Would I regret later what I did? Only time would tell. But to this day I don't. I gave my parents a choice, but they wanted to take the easy way out. So I gave them what they wanted.

After leaving my parents' house I called Cole.

"We need to meet," I told him. "I want to talk to you."

The other end of the line was quiet for a minute and then he said, "Meet in my apartment. One hour."

He gave me the address. An hour later I knocked on his front door.

He opened before I had a chance to knock and stepped aside to let me in.

"What do you want?" He asked after closing the door.

"Can we sit down? I have an update for you."

He led me into his living room, and I sat on the couch. He sat in a chair across from me and crossed his arms.

“So did your father turn himself in?” Cole asked.

“Not exactly,” I told him.

“What do you mean, not exactly?”

“I took care of the problem,” I said.

“How did you know he did it?” Cole asked.

“I found your mother’s ring in his closet, along with some love letters.”

To this Cole had nothing to say.

“I shot him and my mother with the gun he used to kill your parents. Then I left the letters and your mother’s ring on the table. The police will find them, and they will know who killed your parents. I think that should be good enough for you.”

“Why did you kill your mother?” Cole asked.

He had visibly relaxed for some reason. The tone of his voice had softened and the look on his face was no longer anger, but sorrow. He looked relieved, somber, and almost happy.

“She knew what he did and said nothing. She deserved what she got.”

He looked away.

“So, what do you say, are we even?” I asked.

“I lied,” He told me.

“Lied about what?” I asked.

“About a couple of things.”

Stunned, I couldn’t speak. *What had he lied about?*

“I lied about two things specifically,” He said, as if reading my mind. “First, I didn’t kill the family of three.”

“I saw it in the newspaper though,” I told him.

“We are processing DNA from that crime scene. I just had to have a real case to tell you about. That way if you looked up triple homicides that had happened you would find out there had been one.”

This lie I could accept. After all, he had been right about my father killing his parents. But the next lie surprised me even more.

“Also I lied about who I am. I am not Cole Porter.”

“What do you mean you’re not Cole Porter?”

“I met Cole Porter in one of the foster homes I was in. He and I were together for about a year. He told me about his parents, and it wasn’t until years later that I came across the case.”

He told me about some evidence he had been given to analyze, how when he analyzed it he had found the link to the unsolved murders of Cole Porter’s parents. He had hidden the evidence and concocted the scheme to make me get my father to admit to the murders.

“Cole Porter died some years ago,” He told me. “He committed suicide. So, when I came across the new evidence, I instantly wanted to avenge his death. When your father killed his parents, he effectively ended Cole’s life also. He was my friend.”

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Frank Jessop.”

“You realize that I just killed both my parents?” I asked. “Based on the lies you told me.”

“I think you did a good and noble thing,” Frank told me. “Your father killed Cole’s parents. Cole committed suicide because of him. That is why you killed your parents. Not

because you thought I framed you for murder, or because you thought I was Cole Porter. Justice has been done, that much you can see.”

I sat for a minute, thinking about what he said and, in the end, I came to the decision that he was right.

“I don’t want to ever see you again,” I told him. “If my mother and father’s murder come through your lab, you will make sure I am not implicated. You owe me that much.”

“You did the right thing,” He said.

In the end, I couldn’t disagree.