

Something to Say

**LeeAnn
Summerfield**



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LeeAnn Summerfield

Dedicated to my Brother:
How right was your rebellion,
Your soul's thirst for its dignity

Warning: This story discusses child abuse

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SOMETHING TO SAY

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Introduction

There is the thing I probably ought to say.

And then there is the thing that I am going to say.

I ought to write a more inspirational story; one where faith, effort and hope can turn any hardship into one with a triumphant, happy ending.

But this will not be that story. It's a bit of an angry story.

Angry, because something needs to change and, only because of willful ignorance, it has not. You will understand, my dear Readers, my Friends, if you stick with me.

Also, dearest Readers, please forgive my cowardice. I am not ready to come out as the author of this story. LeeAnn is not my real name. But this is an autobiography. I have changed some details and combined some events, only to be less recognizable and to protect others. But I promise that everything herein is true.

I thank those of you who will read with empathy. I know you're out there. It is because of you that I write, powered by the hope in my heart.

PART ONE — CHILDHOOD

Fish Bowl

Does a fish know that it lives in water? Does it imagine a different world above? Of course not.

While Mother seemed oblivious to us most of the time, Father was always prying, prodding, provoking. Demanding. I learned to hide in open space. I would bury my nose in a sketchbook, so that he might pass by me like an unseeing shadow. Little Brother was not as good at hiding. The more Father felt us avoid him, the more he tried to drag us out of our emotional hiding places. Little Brother and I dove into the center of ourselves. We threw out harmless falsehoods as fast as we could think them up, in answer to his interrogations. Father was not to be trusted. He could not see straight with his mind. We knew, by an instinct, that we did not want him to catch a glimpse of our truest selves. He would not get it right. He would not understand us. Our voices would never ring true in his twisted ears.

But even in our hiding, we lived with a sense of near-paranoia. We knew that Santa Claus was paying attention all year long, keeping a score about us. And far above Santa, there was always God. All-powerful God, who supported our parents and other adults, knew all thoughts and judged the heart. According to them, there was a lot of badness in people, especially children.

My dear Readers, I wish that you would remember a time when you felt unwelcome or in the wrong place. This was the environment that Little Brother and I grew up in. This was the only world that we knew.

Just as the fish does not understand that it lives in water, so we existed in our home as children. We were living and breathing anxiety. In the evenings and on weekends, we were living in a state of *solid* fear.

We did not know that we were suffering.

We did not know what questions to ask, whom to ask or what words would have described our lives. This was our normal.

And since we were so resigned to our life and so well-behaved, no one else saw our pain, either.

And, for me, this became a permanent state of temperament.

The Nature of Shame

Shame has supernatural, magical powers. It is not the same as other words, like lust or pride. It has a living soul to it, like an animal or a ghost. It passes through solid barriers, including human bodies. Shame's possession moves from one person to another by the simplest of gestures: a look in the eye, a micro-expression of the face, a tone of voice.

Our parents had adopted us.

When they thought the time was right to tell us, it was Mother who came to us in the backyard. She explained, carefully and purposefully, that we were wanted and loved and this is why they had adopted us.

She was nervous and uncomfortable. She was commanding when she told us that we were loved. She insisted on it. This only made us doubtful. If she was sure in it, it would have been a casual part of the lecture. A given fact. Something to be taken for granted. Assumed.

She also, without words, communicated that the subject was closed. There would be no need to ever bring it up again.

We appeared to take the news well, because we stood silently as she walked away. We soon resumed playing.

Her shame, which was unspoken, had flowed from her into us.

Our parents had adopted us, but we had just adopted our parents' shame.

The Roots

As I write these words, I am a sixty year old woman with dark blue eyes. I am fairly tall and lean, standing five-foot-seven. I have a turned-up nose, which caused me to be called names in childhood, but it's considered cute on an adult female.

I see a psychiatrist every week. We discuss the past, because it led to the present.

It always does, doesn't it?

My doctor is trying to help me remove my undeserved shame, deep sorrow and survivor guilt. I have a number of issues.

Yesterday, I talked about the very early years again.

We lived in New Jersey, but Parents had brought their beliefs with them from their Southern roots. We were generational Southern Baptists, which is a fundamentalist Christian sect, and because of that Sundays were long days for us. There was Sunday School at eight in the morning, and we lived forty minutes away. That was followed by the adult service, which we called "big church," and that's where the fire and brimstone stuff was preached in that special way that preachers have of exhorting. That took an hour and a half. We then came home for lunch and did a few chores, only to return for the evening service. (And there was Wednesday night church too!)

Weekends involved more proximity to Father and his bad temper. We were always antsy for some exercise and would beg to get into our play clothes to go outside.

One such Sunday, we were not changed out of our Sunday clothes. Mother, making lunch, allowed us to play for a while, but warned us not to get our clothes dirty. She seemed to put me in charge.

A neighbor's dog ran over to play with us. We were always overjoyed to see this dog, since we did not have one of our own. The dog seemed to feel the same way about us. He jumped all over us. I found a stick for him to fetch. He returned to us over and over, putting his front paws on us. Once, Little Brother even fell backward. We were breathless and flushed with joy. I believe that Little Brother was only two, which would have made me about four years old.

When we were called back to the house for lunch, we were dirty from our heads to our feet. My pantyhose were torn.

Father calmly asked, "Do you want your spankings now or later?"

I started to answer, "Now," but terrified Little Brother was shaking his head. So Father settled himself in the den with his political show on the TV and spread the newspaper out on his lap. We were banned to our bedrooms and told to wait — all day, without lunch. Father's angst built all day. He decided to skip evening church. The discipline and training of his children was more important than almost anything else in the world.

I had to pee so badly that I pressed my fists hard against myself, down there. Thinking about the spanking was also making my little pelvic and sphincter muscles cringe and clamp. The same thing was happening to Little Brother in his room.

My sense of dread — along with the humiliation that was to come — was accompanying a mysterious and rising feeling that was almost like pain. But it was not pain.

After what felt like forever, something pulsing and overwhelming happened to me. I did not know the word for it. I only knew that a relief came.

I had orgasmed.

I did still have to urinate and ended up wetting myself that day.

Dread, punishment and humiliation had just gotten fused with desire, forever.

When the spanking actually came, it involved Father pulling down our pants and underwear and telling us to bend over his knees. One note here: we would often begin to cry before he had even touched us. He seemed to find this amusing. He would ask us, “Why are you crying when I haven’t even touched you yet?”

We did not have an answer. It never helped us; he had no hesitation about hurting us. I was a long-legged child, very tall for my age. I can remember my poor little body rocking slightly like a seesaw, because I was getting too big for his lap. He used his bare palm. Our Father loved to leave red palm prints on our asses (but this fades quickly and the reason for this historically preferred way to “spank” is that it *does not leave a mark*). He made sure that we cried real tears. Again, certain muscles were contracted. Our buttocks and nearby areas were flushed with extra circulation, as the buttocks and genitals share the same — the third and fourth — sacral nerves.

In the early years, he would say, “This is gonna hurt me more than it hurts you.”

He wanted us to believe that he — poor man, the victim — was compelled or obligated to do this because of our behavior, making us entirely responsible for it. But I can still remember the rage and confusion that raced through my blood like electricity. It was nonsensical. How could parental love go together with a physical, painful attack? How could I have caused all this?

Even Mother occasionally spanked us, but it was not ritualized. She would grab my left arm in order to stabilize my body for impact and, like a flash, pop me on the butt with her hand. In this case, there was not much pain, but I can recall the shock of it. My mind was on being stunned and angry, not on whatever misdeed she was correcting me for.

I developed a problem with chronic masturbation, and got into trouble over this in preschool. I did not know anything about sex or have the vocabulary for any of it. My imagination was on anything that related to punishment and degradation. Cartoons contained plenty of violent material that was not sexual, but I used it for this need. I identified with any villain or “bad guy” in the cartoons and viewed myself as the recipient of shaming, violence or, for example, being captured by the law and sent to jail.

As adults, I admitted to Brother that I had masochistic tendencies and he admitted to me that he had sadistic ones. We both understood exactly what had happened to us. We both knew the truth because we lived it. Parents who spank their children are unintentionally molesting their children.

Now, on top of what I have described, add in a heavy dose of shame. Please keep in mind that I was in preschool when I discovered orgasmic masturbation. Once I had discovered this pleasure, I would rub myself on things such as the arm of an upholstered chair. I wasn’t fast

enough to finish one time, and Mother came into the den and caught me. Mother was clearly horrified. What I was doing was obviously very bad and I was being a bad person. I never forgot that face on her. I can see it, half a century later.

She was determined to correct this habit. She took to crawling up the stairs on her hands and knees at night, to silently sneak up to my bedroom. My bedroom door was the first one, always open, at the top of those stairs. Shocked and startled, I would see, in the darkness, my mother's face looking at me from a low level near the floor. Once she saw that I was awake and noticing her, she would say, "I can see what you're doing, even through those covers." After that, I simply learned to wait until very late at night, after all sounds of Parents' wakefulness were gone. And then I would not make a sound, even controlling my breathing through orgasm. The need and its release was my discovery, something precious that belonged to me, and I cherished it. It seemed to help me relieve the unrelenting stress. No one was going to take this secret pleasure away from me.

Wandering around at night, rather than sleeping, became a favorite habit of mine and still is. It was the only time, as Father's snoring could be heard, that I felt somewhat safe. I felt that I could relax and let my guard down. Be myself, whatever that was. I would tiptoe around the house and savor the quietness. I felt like someone who has the thrill of stealing something. I would look out the windows. A time or two, I got caught and punished, but I persisted.

Sometimes, at age sixty, I do the same. I live in a Southern state now, where the weather is most often warm. I will stand outside and just enjoy the sleeping world. At this time — and only this time — I belong in the world and maybe it is my home.

Little Brother

Before Little Brother and I were born, Mother had experienced several miscarriages. Then a tumor was found and removed. Although it proved to be benign, they had given her a complete ovarian-hysterectomy. By the time Parents qualified for adoptions, they were a little older than average and they were considered “old school,” because of both their Southern heritage and their fundamentalist beliefs.

Around the time that I was one year old, Parents lost my first little brother, who was also adopted, to a crib death. I can sympathize with this and I assume that with this grief in the house I was neglected more than usual. This almost could not be avoided. Unfortunately, there were no helpful relatives. Mother’s elderly parents had already died. Father’s seemed to dislike children — or our adoption?

Then they got Little Brother, the replacement. They swapped my first little brother’s middle and first names, rather than give Little Brother new ones. At this time I vaguely recall being frowned at all the time and treated like I was in the way. My nervous mother seemed to dote on him and he was constantly watched and always in her arms. But he cried a lot, because her arms were lacking confidence. He responded better to babysitters.

Meanwhile, I have some very clear normal memory from as early as the crib. I pretended to be asleep as some lady visitors, along with Mother, admired me. Was I a new baby at that time? I can visualize the bars or railings of a crib. Yes, contrary to what used to be accepted, children are smart and can remember childhood. Their memories are not so much forgotten as repressed. Sadly, with all my recollections, I cannot remember one single hug or any scene in which I experienced affection and closeness with Mother. At times I felt that she despised me. I have to wonder if she wished the girl child had died, rather than the boy. Feelings are not

rational and I know that anything is possible. I recall that she would scorn me by saying, “You are not a little baby. You’re the big kid now.”

By the age of three, I understood that she was not interested in mothering me. She seemed to only want an ear, like an adult’s ear. When I was listening to her in this way, she seemed to like me. But she never did want my voice.

My birthday falls in December, which meant that the time to enter me into the first grade should’ve been optional. Parents had the choice to put me in now or wait a year. A mistake was made. I was put into school as the youngest, by far, in the whole class. I mention this because I remember what it felt like not to understand. I remember the shame, fear, inadequacy... I recall leaning toward another child’s desk, trying to copy their work. These months in a child’s life are critical. The brain is changing at an amazing pace.

After I went through much suffering — tears, papers covered in red ink, scenes at home — the problem was solved by re-entering me in the first grade the following year. So now I was the oldest child in the class, which was an advantage for me. I also benefited from what I had learned the first time around. After this, I excelled in school. I never again had to make any effort in order to bring home honor grades. In fact, I was bored and could multitask by drawing while the teacher was talking.

Most teachers quickly realized that they did not have to scold me. It’s only a shame that they did not realize I needed greater challenges and would have benefited from advanced classes. But, then, on second thought, I realize that something was developing in my life. Maybe higher expectations would’ve made everything worse.

Unlike me, my poor Little Brother had issues with learning from the very start of preschool until he had to cheat his way through the end of high school.

I can fairly and accurately say that his life was a hell on earth, filled with dread and torment. His failing grades seemed to be the single greatest reason for Father's apparent hatred of him.

Later in life, Little Brother and I learned that we were true siblings who had come from the same mother. As an adult, Brother writes poetry and has produced some amazing artwork. Whatever was wrong was not his intelligence, but perhaps ADHD or dyslexia? Our parents did not believe in such things. They did not believe in child psychology, depression, PTSD: none of it. Such things, to them, were excuses. And they were a "no-excuses" type of people. They imagined that Little Brother was defiant or lazy. And so there was no hope for Little Brother.

Little Brother again. He was just a little boy, anywhere from two to five. At this age, children copycat adults, especially their parents. Father waved to a neighbor and smiled, saying, "Hi, Don!"

Little Brother did exactly the same, smiling and waving and said, "Hi, Don!"

As if lightning had struck, Father grabbed Little Brother's arm in a fury, dragging him into the house. Appearances were of primary importance to Parents and it may have been embarrassment that caused this, as if Father was failing to teach his son to respect his elders. I remember the neighbor saying, from the bottom of our driveway, "Wait! Robert, wait!" Yet he did nothing.

I did not want to hear the belting that was taking place inside. I slipped around the side yard into the back, as if I had something to do.

Little Brother ended up burned and welted all over his legs for this “disrespect.”

When will we truly love and forgive the children for being what they are? They are not sinning. They are watching and imitating. *Because they must become what they see.*

Again, when Little Brother was only four years old, he used a bad word. He referred to some bad apple cider as “rotten pee-pee.” He didn’t understand its meaning and he was trying to make a joke. We had a babysitter there, and she was receiving some last-minute instructions as Parents were ready to go out. Little Brother thought he was being cute and he wanted to make everyone smile.

But Father did not smile. Instead he yanked Little Brother by an arm, dragging him upstairs. The three of us now, Mother, Sitter and myself, stood in the kitchen and heard Little Brother being taken into the main bedroom, directly above our heads. We did not look at each other as we listened to the violence and the crying. Little Brother was being bare-ass spanked so roughly that he fell out of Father’s lap, twice, hitting the wood floor. The spanking also turned into a belt whipping. Mother was clearly embarrassed, but did nothing.

After our parents left, Little Brother showed us his butt and legs. He was covered with reddening welts and bruises. Father had turned the belt to use its buckle end. We never saw

that sister again. I am sure that whole street knew that we were treated roughly, but nothing was ever said or done. At that time, we thought that the whole world lived the same way.

Yet exactly this sort of “child-raising” is happening now, more than fifty years later. It is common, and it is happening in all sorts of households. It is particularly common in certain geographic and demographic areas and is prevalent in fundamentalist religious sects. It is different from a drunken slap or punch. It is ritualized, which makes it even more pernicious.

Corporal punishment damages or destroys the trust bond between child and parent. And the younger the child, the deeper the damage.

Yet there is even Scripture to back it up. Allow me to quote a few Bible verses:

“Do not withhold discipline from a child. *Strike him with a rod...*” Proverbs 23:13

“He that spares the rod, hates his son.” Proverbs 13:24

“If you *strike him with a rod*, you will save his soul from hell.” Proverbs 23:14

“Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.”
Proverbs 22:15

“...let not your heart spare [your son] for his *crying*.” Proverbs 19:18

Faces

How weighty the days of childhood are. Every moment of the years up to five or six carries life-changing magnitude.

There was an evening after Little Brother had been brutally spanked. His ass was almost blistering. He was breaking out into nervous hives, also. Father had left for flights, as he was a commercial airline pilot, and Mother was observing Little Brother's backside. She was crooning sympathies over him. At least he was getting the grail — the golden treasure of our childhood — Mother's compassion. Being seen and affirmed. I would even suggest that a beating was worth it, so long as this comfort was the result. We would do anything for this.

In an instant I was overcome with jealousy. It was as if lightning hit me and the electrical charge entered my bloodstream. I spoke out and said, "I have problems too, y'know!"

Mother looked at me. Her face was an illustration of incredulosity and disdain. She appeared to hate me. She responded, saying, "What problems could *you* possibly have?" It was not so much a question as a condemning statement. I felt my personhood cringe in shame for being so unworthy of love and empathy. I also noted that I had seen her true face, the knee-jerk opinion, when she did not have a moment to prepare to act nicer. I walked quietly away into another room. Mother never approached me to ask about what I had meant. I guess she wasn't interested.

This is one of those memories that I know was hugely important. This simple event contributed to my self-abandonment. Faces and tones are received by children, even before we understand words. And for our lives, below words, we all have ways in which we give and

receive messages that are subliminal. They are shadows that crawl beneath our sentences, ghosts in the spaces between our words, telling us the truth.

Like the Wind

I was just a child who could not reach across the sink's edge for the faucet. I could see over the edge, but that was all. My little pet turtle needed its plastic bowl cleaned. It was bad enough that I had to bug Mother about it, actually plead with her. There were relatives visiting with us. Mother was always particularly irritable when entertaining. She finally agreed to my pleas and hastily began running the water into the large kitchen sink, without mixing the water with her hands. This was an older type of faucet where the hot and cold water ran separately out of their own spouts. I had been bathed up on this very counter and that is why I knew all about the important mixing of the water. I watched in horror when she dumped my little turtle, along with his dirty water, into the sink. I watched as the tiny turtle swam from one side of the sink, escaping the cold side only to swim right into the scalding hot side. My pet seized right up, instantly dead.

When I yelled "Oh, no! You killed him!", Mother became angry and defensive.

She collapsed as a parent and replied, "Well, I can't be perfect all the time! How can I know everything? Why is everything always my fault?"

I felt like I had stepped into a puddle of quicksand. Suddenly, I was the bully and Mother had become my victim.

Now I felt guilty and had to worry about her feelings, and I also knew that she would not want a scene to be noticed by the relatives down the hall.

I never did get the chance to express my anger or grief about my pet.

Times like this made me feel *old*. I was responsible for helping Mother with her need for peace. It was draining and made me feel weary.

Between abusing and resenting me, criticizing me and “teasing” me with constant sarcasm, collapsing like a child and then being my buddy, she made it impossible for me to know which Mother I was going to get.

When Brother and I talked about her, much later in our lives, Brother said, “It all depended on which way the wind was blowing that day.”

Promises, Promises

I loved horses as a little girl. I was one of those horse-crazy kids who would've given anything to have a live pony. We did get a large hobby horse one year, the kind that is suspended by springs in a heavy metal framework. I hogged it as mine, all the time. I think I named it, although I've forgotten the name. I would get it going so hard and so fast that the whole contraption was scraping its way across the cement floor of the basement.

One particular evening, I had it rocking so forcefully that I somehow lost my grip on the handles. I flew over its head and I remember being airborne and worrying about how I was going to manage my landing. I knew that it would hurt — and that I didn't have enough time to control it.

There was a violent sound and there was static in my eyes, just like when the old television would go off the air. I may have passed out for a few seconds. And then the pain crashed in on me. I had landed right on my head.

I started to cry and wanted help from Mother. I started to yell and wail. I yell-cried, "Mom," over and over. I was actually scared. I even got angry and may have sounded demanding after I yelled for a long time, but I got no response.

I gave up, thinking that she could not hear me, and I crawled up the stairs from the basement. Immediately to the left was the den, where the rest of my family was watching television. Mother was on the nearest side of the sofa, and I said, "Mom, I fell and hit my head really hard."

She casually answered me, without emotion or looking directly at my face, saying, “I know, I heard it.” I remember that she had a newspaper in her lap. Did I imagine it or did I see a slight smirk or satisfied look on her face? I can remember the shame and sorrow that I felt just then. She had heard the accident and my painful cries for help, but I wasn’t worth enough for her to even stand up from the sofa.

I wonder if Mother was glad that, for a change, I was the one hurt and crying, rather than Little Brother.

When the TV show was over, she decided to read a bedtime story to both of us kids. It was “Bah, bah, black sheep, have you any wool.” I was looking at the open pages of this familiar tale and at the illustration of a black lamb. We had seen this story before and the black one, among all the white lambs, was my favorite. But on this night, there seemed to be two black lambs. It seemed like they were moving, shifting, coming to life. Doubling up like a moving shadow. This scared me. And then I had to run to the bathroom, where I threw up. After I vomited and mentioned that I was seeing more than one black lamb on the page, Parents calmly, without hurry, agreed that I needed to go to the hospital. This was quite rare in our family. If Father had not been home, Mother would have hidden the accident completely.

I had a concussion. I was kept overnight for observation. Mother made one of her very first empty promises, the first of so many. It was intended to comfort, I suppose. Yet it was dishonest and placating. She said, “If I had only known, I would have bought you a little pet turtle. You love them so much.” She said it so sweetly. These were the days, in the 1960s, when the little green sliders were sold in any store, the poor little things stacked up on top of each other in piles.

I loved my pet turtles! I wondered for several days when the new turtle would appear, but it never did. I would, in later years, learn to read Mother's face and voice when it came to promises. I can't remember a single one that came true. I have never, to this day, understood her intent when she gave them.

Decades later, I happened to discuss this event and memory with Brother. He broke the confidential nature of our conversation, trying to be helpful, on the phone with Mother. He told me of her response, which was, "Oh, well, she was a big kid when that happened."

First Red Flags

Poor Little Brother. He felt hatred for Father by the age of three or four.

Father, as I stated, was a commercial airline pilot, working out of Newark International Airport in New Jersey. Mother, meanwhile, was a preacher's daughter and had taught school for a short time, but quit when she married. She wanted to be a stay-at-home mom, since, in her own words, "raising children is the most important job in all of life."

Over the years, Father took his bonus pay in the form of stock options. He also invested with a good management company and was very penurious. He was wealthy by the time I was in my preteens. Mother had gotten a mink coat for church and a huge diamond ring, which she had always dreamed of. So she knew that they were not poor.

Anyway, I remember being out on the driveway with Mother and Little Brother, about to get into the car. Father was away on a flight. We loved it when he was gone. As we approached the car, Little Brother turned to Mother and said, "I wish Dad's plane would crash down, so he wouldn't come home anymore."

Red flag, anyone?

All Mother did was scold him: "You don't talk about your father that way."

Yet she herself complained about Father the whole ride to the shopping mall. She loved to blame Father and badmouth him when he was not around. And she also acknowledged, in her own way, that something was going wrong in our family, and with her as a mother.

I recall her saying, “I know I must be like an ostrich. I am hiding my head in the sand. This is not how I was raised.”

I had my own early red flags. I think of one in relation to Father. Strangely, Father was the one who would occasionally try to be affectionate toward me. Father would call me to him so he could kiss me on the cheek. I would feel the wetness there and I was disgusted. I would hatefully wipe my cheek with the back of my hand. I was so young and innocent that I did not hide this action at first. Once, when he saw me do this, he flew into a rage and yelled, “What is wrong with you? How can you show affection toward a reptile” — my pet turtle — “and not your own father? When I show you affection, I expect it in return!”

After that I learned to walk quickly out of sight before wiping my face.

Love Laughs

This is a poem written by Eric, a very good friend of mine to whom you will be further introduced in time.

Love mocks and smirks,
Down is up, up is down.
Love is giddy as she makes dreams awake
And wake is to dream.
Love laughs and turns us inside out.
Young is old, old is young
New is sage, wise is fool
Man is woman, woman man
The dawn sets, twilight rises up.
We die. And love laughs.
She reinvents us.
The sun waters us
And the rain dries us.
Love is with us until the grass is blue
And the sky, green.
Love knew everything.
Made it all.
She and the music
Of our hearts remain.
And Love has the last laugh.

Self-Abandonment So Soon?

By the time I entered kindergarten, I had several compulsions and nervous disorders.

The worst was my trichotillomania. This is an attack on one's own hair. It was sometimes my eyelashes or eyebrows. Most often, it was the hair on my head. I yanked out sections of it, creating bald spots. Mother finally let me grow my hair longer, because it hid the shameful condition. This disorder persisted and later caused me to have a decades-long need to wear wigs and hats.

In the first grade, I was already an unpleasant little girl. Despite being a good student, I did not like other people. I was intermittently aggressive and withdrawn. I could sense that the teacher's patience was already stretched, since she had thirty children to watch over. One day, after some sort of quiz, she approached me. She had my paper in her hands.

"What's this?" she said.

I looked and could not see what was wrong. She used her index finger to point at the bottom, right corner. I had signed with a wrong name. A name not my own. It looked like "Eric." For a moment, I was clueless. I felt like I had forgotten something. She seemed to think I was being bad and playing games. I fixed it as I was told to do. And that was the end of it. I did vaguely remember daydreaming or pretending, and felt that this had caused me to sign that way.

Did I want to be someone else this much?

Family Dog

We tried having a dog. Not in the house. Little Brother and I had begged and pleaded and, when we found a lost one, we were surprised that Parents were willing to give it a try.

The dog, Blackie, loved and chose me, in particular. Maybe he knew that I was a black hole of want that needed unlimited emotional fill-dirt. He showed me such amazing loyalty, devotion and unconditional love. He knew, mysteriously, which window was directly beneath my bedroom. He slept beneath my window every night, waiting to hear me get up in the mornings.

One day I saw him humping a garbage can. Neutering was unheard of by parents like ours, back then. I realized that I understood what he was doing, although I did not yet have the words for it. I had felt completely alone before seeing him do this, so our friendship was cemented even more. I do not mean to say that he ever did anything inappropriate to me. He never even humped my leg, as some dogs do to people. He had a natural respect for me. I must have been his alpha, which I did not understand until many years later.

Yet we did not even have Blackie for very long. Less than one year. But in my child's mind, the time we shared had enormous import and was a lifetime for me.

Because Blackie was not neutered, he would get out of his kennel and run. One day he came home with a broken leg, probably from being hit by a car.

Father looked at him with disgust in his eyes. He said, "It's crippled."

“Animal doctors” were not used or respected by Parents, even though they sometimes urged me to become a veterinarian.

Father shot Blackie dead in the backyard. He did not make us watch. He did it with a businesslike approach, as if it were just another chore. He put the body in black, plastic garbage bags and laid it out curbside for the next day’s garbage pickup.

I ordered my heart to turn to stone and it obeyed. For some reason, I could not let them see my pain or tears. I did not want them to look upon my devastation. They weren’t worthy.

I don’t remember ever getting around to crying. I didn’t have the privacy. I think my feelings were something quite beyond simple grief. Something harder and more...

Dead.

The Hammer

It was all about respectful behavior back in those days. Good, quiet kids that adults could be proud of. Good grades and all that went with it. Little Brother and I were like guests in their home and we were deemed expensive investments. Our Southern Baptist parents had stood in the church with us and had taken an oath to raise us “on the right path.”

We were given firm boundaries. We had no locks on our bedroom doors and our doors were always open. Once the bathroom locks wore out and no longer worked, they were never repaired. Most of the house was off limits to us. We had no business being in the living room, the dining room, or Parents’ suite. Little Brother and I had one bathroom to use, and we had our small bedrooms and the den. However, the den was dominated every evening by Father and his politics. Also, the kitchen was impossible to avoid, since we had to pass through it to get anywhere else. Yet time in the kitchen drew immediate attention and questions from Mother. It was her space. She did not like us to do anything in there or to open the refrigerator.

Looking back now, I realize that feeling so unwelcome, for a child, is no different from feeling unloved. Unwelcome, disapproved of, unaccepted: it’s all the same to a child.

Little Brother, meanwhile, was told never to touch Father’s tools in the garage. Ever. Or pretty much anything of Father’s. This he learned: don’t touch anything.

But at five years old or less, his curiosity, like that of Adam and Eve, caused him to do exactly the opposite. On a Saturday morning, Father had run out to the hardware store and when he got back, Little Brother was caught with a hammer in his hands.

I think Little Brother just wanted to know. I think he had questions, such as: What is it like to be a man? What does Father do with this? If I could use these heavy tools, then would I be a man like Father? If my hand is on the handle, still warm after Father's own hand was there, could I feel a connection? Why doesn't he teach me about these things? Does he even like me? Is there something wrong with me?

The punishment began with Little Brother being made to carry the hammer all day, while anticipating the spanking that would come in the evening. So I, for all those hours, most of the day, watched him carry that hammer, which clearly started to hurt. He shifted it from one hand to the other. That swapping of the weight got closer and closer together in time, but he couldn't get any relief. He must have had pain all the way up to his little shoulders. Even when he went to the bathroom, Father watched him to make sure he didn't put the thing down for more than a moment. Both of us kids were filled with a dark, haunting dread about the night to come.

I was always "in it" with Little Brother, even when the punishment was not for me. I was right there, like an unseen culprit, feeling the emotional pain and feeling a little like someone who had escaped something. (There would come a time when I felt that physical pain was a balm for what I felt on the inside, but that will come later.)

In the evening, Little Brother would be left in his bedroom, the door shut, and we would both be told to go to sleep and not make a sound.

In our respective bedrooms, we didn't make a peep. As often would happen, Father, downstairs at the kitchen table, would have new thoughts occur to him about the punishment to come, as he wanted to make a more perfect case for himself. Sometimes we would hear his fist slam down on the kitchen table so hard that it would bounce. And then we would hear the

scraping back of his chair, and then his steps as he came up the stairs to spank Little Brother...

But to take a step back, that evening, as Little Brother waited for the spanking to come, he needed desperately to take a bowel movement. Yet he was terrified of making a noise or opening his door, and thus drawing any kind of attention to himself. He realized that he had a garbage can in his room, which was a large, solid stoneware crock. I remember it well. It was blue. He took his dump into it. Then he covered his "pot" with a magazine, to contain the odor. Mother cleaned it the next day without comment.

What message did Little Brother receive from Father? It must have been something like: You are unlike me. I do not enjoin you, embrace you. I am holding my grown-up Man Mysteries away from you and keeping them to myself. I do not want to share with you.

You are not mine.

Boy

I am a child

You ask me to see sin

Try to teach me shame.

I am innocent

I see only bright things

The darker parts of my eyes

Not yet awake.

I see the Man

His legs like pillars to me

Like a god, above me.

I will follow him, away

Or maybe hand in hand.

You tried to place fences around

My admirations, infatuations.

I can escape your shame

I can be the second Adam

The one who doesn't have to fall.

—by Eric

Once I Was Found, But Now I'm Lost

My Friends, I don't think that today we have anything to compare with the crowds that used to occur at shopping malls just before Christmastime. One of the malls near to us was monstrous in size. Thousands and thousands of cars were in the parking lots and shoppers inside the mall walked shoulder to shoulder. This mall, each year, erected an enormous Santa in the center of the massive parking lot. I don't even know how to judge or explain how huge that Santa was.

Inside the mall, Mother was holding Little Brother's hand and I was expected to keep up, walking behind. She was not looking back at me enough. I can remember how I felt forgotten, as I was getting further behind more strangers. I kept being cut off. At last I was out of sight and I remember how angry and hurt I felt. I don't know if I could have screamed loudly enough to be heard or if I could have held my place. Probably not. I had been told to remain in place when lost, but it may not have even been possible then. So I headed out toward the car, the only object that represented family.

I oriented myself according to the giant Santa... I was able to project in my mind's eye exactly how he had looked as we had exited our car. I knew by his size how far away I stood and I also knew at what angle I had seen him. By remembering this picture, I found our car. It was unlocked, too.

I began to daydream that some good things might come of this. I hoped that I would be missed so much that a better relationship and some affection might turn out to be my "reward" for getting lost.

It was three to five hours, I know. It was a bad day. The first time that a police car rolled by our car, I was, unfortunately, lying down in the back. They did not look inside. Later, on another pass by our car, I was seen.

It's not that they were totally unconcerned. Of course not!

But I did not get to see what I wanted to see.

I had hoped to see tears, but there weren't any.

I had hoped a very cherishing, meaningful hug would happen, but it didn't.

Everything returned to normal very quickly. They went out that evening, as planned. But I wasn't punished. Instead I was hardly noticed.

Although I had been lost and then found, I was still lost.

Bullies of All Shapes and Sizes

Little Brother and I were targets at school. The other kids probably sensed that we were weak. Primitive humans in our ancient history probably drove out their troubled people, rather than wasting precious resources.

Little Brother and I never did or said anything that provoked this mistreatment.

I remember one day, Little Brother and I found each other, despite being in different grades. We were walking home the several miles, together. I was carrying a clay sculpture that I had made in school. It was a dragon or dinosaur.

We had barely gotten out of sight of all authority figures when a band of five older boys tried to surround us. I grabbed Little Brother's hand at first, as we started running, but I soon had to let go. I was so much faster. I felt terrible about that, but I could not have saved us, no matter what. Under my left arm, I still held my clay animal. Little Brother fell a couple of times, but he recovered without being grabbed.

Now, I had seen a television show where a jet or helicopter pilot released “chaff” — bait — in order to lure away a missile. I was thinking of this concept, and I decided to throw down my clay dragon. It broke into several pieces, but the ploy did work! All but one of the boys, probably tiring anyway, stopped to investigate what they'd caused me to give up.

Yet we were still chased by the oldest boy, right up to our front lawn. We had to run as if our lives depended on it, knowing that this boy had bloodied many noses.

Father was home that day.

Of course he was.

I pounded on the front door, hoping for Mother to answer, but Father answered. We were not allowed to just burst into the home, even though the door was usually unlocked by day. He was immediately angered by the pounding and by our disheveled appearances. Little Brother began to cry as he started to explain what had just happened to us. It's a shame that he spoke up in a fearful manner. At this age, I could sometimes explain things with humor and false confidence, which occasionally worked with Father.

One of Father's crazy tirades followed. It was a bad one.

"You two have no self respect!" he began. Then, turning on Little Brother, he yelled, "You are Mr. Meek and that's why those kids know they can target you. You won't fight back, because you are too busy being Mr. Gentle and Mr. Nice Guy. You don't stand up for yourself!"

And finally Father said, "Your name is Mud around here, isn't it?"

Little Brother tried to defend himself and both of us. This was the mistake, because Father only took everything he said as "talking back."

Father's fury escalated: "What did you say? Have you got something to say? Have you got something to say to me?"

These were not real questions, but shouted accusations that really should've had exclamation points after them.

Then, because of Little Brother's continued, well-intended attempts at reasoning, Father decided that Little Brother needed to be "whapped." It was just a new excuse to punish...

Readers, a belt beating causes the skin to be set on fire. The strikes produce a stinging pain that stays and spreads, long after the leather has left the skin. And the welts and bruises that develop remain for a long while after the beating is over. I know this from talking to Brother and seeing the damage left on him, as I actually never got belted myself.

Father, meanwhile, used to brag and threaten, saying, "I'll spank you so hard, you won't be able to sit down for a week." This was not just some play on words in our home.

Looking back, so many years afterward, I realize that Father was a bully. He was just a grown-up bully, no different from the kids that chased us. He wanted to vent for reasons that had nothing to do with us. He made a decision to bully Little Brother, and sometimes both of us, because he liked the way it made him feel. Whatever was wrong with him, it was never our burden, never should have been our concern or responsibility. And even at this hour and day that I am writing, is not my job to sort out.

Yet am I being fair to Parents with my story? Of course not. How can I be? I can only tell my story from my own point of view. There is no one who could get inside their heads and present their side of the story. It is tragic that our family, like most, did not have anyone to help us.

Don't Forget

Please don't forget what it was like to be a child. If you do, you will harden your heart in your forgetfulness.

I share with you, my Readers, the following stories only to remind you of the true nature of childhood. Most of us want to remember the fun and happy times. The rest of it, at least the unpleasant things, seem to shrink back into an unwanted fog. The older we get, the more distant those memories become.

When I was very small, a toddler still in a high chair, I would notice a flaw in the wallpaper pattern of the kitchen. Mother had scrubbed a food particle off the wallpaper and had damaged it. It bothered me! The interesting thing is that I already knew that Parents would not understand my intent. And so I waited, sneakily, until they were both in the den, occupied by the television. I got a yellow crayon, the best available tool I had, yet I was still very dissatisfied with it. It was huge and not quite the color that I needed. But it was all I had to work with. I remember placing one foot on a structural railing of the high chair, beneath its seat. And then I could stand on the seat, resting my left hand on the chair's top. By stretching, I was just able to reach the damaged part of the wallpaper. The repeating picture was of a clock face, along with some other common items, such as fruit. The dominant color in the kitchen was yellow and it was the primary color of the wallpapering. Only that one clock face was ragged-edged, a grayish white color. Its hands and most of the numbers on its face were gone.

I began to repair this, but I can remember how oversized the square crayon was — and I felt that it was beneath my abilities. My body, also, was not perfectly cooperative with my mind's intentions.

Mother came back into the kitchen and caught me. Regrettably, her reaction was to tattle to Father. I was commanded to come to him and bend over his lap. He took down my clothes and slapped my ass hard enough to get me crying.

“I can’t believe you were writing on our walls!” he yelled. “You are much too big for that. I thought you knew better. I am disgusted with you!”

I never said a word.

Many decades later, in therapy, I came to understand that I did not speak in reply because I did not yet use language! I was of a preverbal age. Even back then, I accepted the blame into myself. No matter what my intent, I had done something wrong for which I got my just punishment. Doing this made life easier. It seemed to put out the fires of humiliation and rage.

More serious problems in me arose later, when punishments were even more clearly unfair and nonsensical. I did not always blame myself then, and that was when my rage would expand and take on harder lines and sharper edges.

My Readers, I remember how my toilet training ended. I had wet myself and Father flew into a rage. He physically grabbed me up and sat me down on the toilet, saying, “You sit there until you use it!”

I remember sitting there for hours, swinging my feet. My legs began to feel numb and sore. I had nothing left in me to give. I remember this and share this, because bodily functions, like emotions, do not respond to bullying. This was one of those rare and early days when Mother

made an effort to step in. I could hear (because the bathroom door was open) as she said something like, “I got that book from Lucila” — a neighbor — “and it says you’re not supposed to treat them like this in toilet training...”

Mother was referring to a book by the famous pediatrician, Dr. Spock. The book was still on a bookshelf, ages later, and that’s when I understood what she had referred to.

Father’s booming reply was, “I don’t need some liberal’s advice to tell me how to raise my own kids!”

And so I understood that Father’s mind was closed and there was no hope for us.

A little older now, I remember being given a glass of water with dinner. I hated the taste of it. I set it aside and said so. Mother’s reaction, as was so often the case, was one of disbelief and irritation.

“What kind of a person doesn’t like water?” she asked, incredulously. She almost seemed to be mocking me.

I was sorry that I had even spoken up. But I tried to describe it anyway, saying, “It tastes silvery. It tastes like when I accidentally bite down on my fork.”

She continued to look at me as if I was the oddest child ever. She made me feel ashamed, as if something was wrong with me. I guess no one in the world had ever disliked the taste of plain water.

Many decades later, I was out to dinner with coworkers for an obligatory, annual office party. One began to drink her water, but set it aside, saying, “Eww, yuck!”

I was eager to know what she tasted and asked her, “What’s wrong with it?”

She told me that there was too much fluoride in it. She said, “I could even smell it before I tried it.”

That’s when it hit me. The tap water in the suburbs of my childhood had been heavy with fluoride. I was not the only person in the world with taste sensitive enough to dislike it and I may have instinctively known it was not good for me.

Yet I was too young to know a word like “metallic” or to know anything about chemicals such as fluoride or chlorine.

If only adults would keep in mind the incomprehensible and frustrating puzzle that a child’s world really is!

Please, please, don’t forget.

Black Water

Warm black water

Here I sleep in blindness

Warm black water

And dream of gentle kindness.

Warm black water

Don't call me to come.

This is home.

—by LeeAnn (Me)

Wishing I Was the Dog

Surprisingly, given what happened to our own dog, there was a time when Father volunteered Little Brother and me to watch someone else's dog, a collie, for a week. It was someone he worked with and he obviously wanted to make a good impression. He didn't think of the cruel irony of how he'd disposed of Blackie. Instead, when he thought about how we might have felt of taking in a new dog, he only considered it as "a good way for you kids to learn to make a few dollars."

On the fourth or fifth day, Father was out and Mother made us an early spaghetti dinner. She used a red sauce out of a jar, which we all loved. She shared leftovers with the lovely collie. I was about nine years old and I remember thinking maybe that spaghetti sauce might not have been great for the dog. But I didn't really know and it was not my place to question it.

Afterward, Mother needed to run out to the grocery store. Back in these days, it was common for her to lock the house and leave us at home for the short jaunt. We were not infants.

Little Brother and I had previously agreed with each other to take turns with the dog walking. It was Little Brother's turn next. I started to notice that the dog was not comfortable and we laughed when she farted. But, suddenly, her body cringed, all the way down to her arched tail. It was an odd, painful posture. I watched in confusion and worry. Little Brother, at about seven years of age, was rather oblivious to it. Suddenly, there was a noise just like a balloon that's having the air let out of it. To our shock, a red diarrhea started shooting out of the poor collie, right onto the beige carpet of the den.

“Oh my God, get her out!” I yelled. Little Brother had to run get the leash, hook her up and then unlock the front door. By the time he got the dog outside, the red shit was everywhere, leaving a path all the way out the door.

I got rags together and wet them in the bathroom sink. I didn’t know what else to do. Both Little Brother and I struggled to clean the mess up, but we were spreading a red tide all over. It started to dilute to a pink color, but was covering even more of the carpet. I ran back and forth about ten times to rinse the rags. I could see I was losing the battle. There would be no way to hide this.

We knew fear. Threats in our home carried actual intent. Our stomachs were clenching and it is amazing that we didn’t lose our dinner ourselves.

And then we heard Father’s car as it pulled into the attached garage. His radio was always blasting on a political station. Our hearts both turned to ice and we looked at each other, terror on both our faces. I also heard Mother’s car, just a minute behind Father’s. He was going to get into the house first.

Of course.

Unfortunately, when Father came in, Little Brother began to defend himself immediately, in his honest way.

“It was my turn to walk the dog,” he said, “but...”

This was all Father needed to blame Little Brother entirely, for the whole thing. He always was ready to attack the poor boy. Mother, now in the house, was silent. She began to rinse out the rags and started preparing for a major carpet cleaning. The unfairness of it all did not seem to occur to her. And she never seemed to think — or chose not to say — that she'd actually caused the whole thing.

When Father announced that the punishment for Little Brother would be a spanking, I saw something on Mother's face: a look of disgust for me. This caused me to die inside. I wished I was somewhere else, in some other home. I wished I was *someone* else, anyone. An animal, even! I could avoid her disgust if only I could change into someone or something else. I would rather even be the dog!

Mother began to speak to Father.

"Why is it always *him* and never *her*?" she questioned. "Why isn't *she* in trouble, too? It was *her* job, too. *She's* the older one, so *she's* more responsible!"

And so he agreed that I, too, would receive a spanking.

I will spare you more details, this time, my dear Readers.

That night, as she passed by my open bedroom door, Mother made one last comment to me.

"We are both angry with you for mishandling the dog job like you did," she said.

She then shut my door, leaving me in the dark, alone, to cry.

Dragons

When Little Brother and I were still young enough to be read stories, but older than in the previous chapter, I remember a particular tale. The story was about a village and a knight and a terrible dragon. The villagers feared the dragon, so the knight was sent out to kill it. When the knight was about to end the dragon's life with his sword, he noticed that the dragon had begun to cry. The dragon's head was bowed and the dragon spoke through its tears.

"I am really not so bad," the dragon said. "Please don't kill me. I am just lonely, because I am the only one left of my kind."

In this tale, there was a happy ending: the knight did not kill the dragon, and instead had compassion for it.

When Mother had finished and looked at me, I was fighting back tears.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked.

I lied and answered, "My throat hurts. I don't feel well."

But my throat was closed for a different reason. My heart was broken.

When she noticed a tear overflow my eye, she became irritated. She said, "Oh, save those crocodile tears! I don't know what you want, but you will not manipulate me!"

My heart was full of a new and passionate need. I had identified, absolutely, with the dragon. I felt like it had been a story about myself and I wondered what it would take to get forgiveness and love from Parents. I now recognized my desire to be understood, known and accepted.

I made up an imaginary dragon around that time, one who sometimes still appears on my shoulder. Over the years, rather than outgrow her, I have found that she has become more and more three-dimensional. I gave her black scales that shine with a greenish-blue iridescence, just like a hummingbird. I embellished her with enormous, black wings. I drew her all the time.

Her name is Esmeralda.

By this time, I had also become convinced that I was a very selfish, stubborn person and a liar.

Mother was even suspicious about my artistic gift, which was becoming evident. When she watched me draw, she noticed I normally looked at a subject. And so she said, "Oh, you're just copying. That's like cheating."

And so I believed that looking at a subject while I drew was wrong, and I stopped doing it. Thereafter I drew from imagination and memory only. I would draw dragons and horses. But that also displeased Mother, and she said, "You have a gift. I think it's a sin to waste it."

She meant that my subject matter was the waste. She thought I should draw people. My parents did not believe that animals belonged in photos or paintings.

Also, there was once a television mystery show in which an artist was portrayed as a very bad person. In fact, at the end he was proved to be the murderer! His work was good and accurate, but “cold” and lacked feeling. Mother turned to me and also looked at poor Little Brother, as if to enjoin him, and said, “LeeAnn, that is just like you!”

I could sense Mother pulling away from me more and more. She told herself things about me that I could never fix. I could watch her face and actually see exactly when she came to certain conclusions. If I did explain myself in response, she sometimes seemed receptive at first and seemed to understand. But this would come loose and not hold. In less than two days, she would default back to her original belief. She seemed to need to build a case against me and I could only watch this happen. It was as if she could not love two people at the same time. One had to be good — and that was Little Brother — and the other, bad.

I made a big mistake when I was a bit older, but still a kid. I let Mother know that I never wanted to have children. I saw the most appalled face come over her and she told me how unnatural that was. She called me anti-family. She was obviously shocked and it seemed that she never looked at me the same way again. She betrayed me that night by telling Father. (This caused a yearslong crusade to fix my “nervousness around children.” Unwanted dolls were given to me for Christmas, rather than anything I asked for.) I told myself that I should be more careful and never trust her too far.

I kept becoming less and less like Mother. I saw that she was unhappy with her life. Something inside of me just swore, “*No! I will not end up like you.*”

I do not hate children, but I feel very uncomfortable around them and avoid them in the extreme. It hurts me to see them get love and tenderness from a good parent. I was always standing by, set aside, never allowed to stand in the center of that light. And that loss comes painfully back to me. It makes me see what should have been.

I have had just a few very good friends in my life. One of them got married and became pregnant. I immediately began to distance myself from her. I made a choice to move far away and lost contact. I couldn't bear to see the adoration that she would soon be giving a baby. I also did not want her to know how much I dislike them, because she may have thought so much less of me.

I identify with being one of those who is so awful, so different, that I stand on the edge of the village. I am outside of society, looking in. I am the source of scornful looks, like the dragons of this world. The ones who are hated. The ones who commit crimes and find no sympathy. The ones that are "sick," labeled as "evil." Like anyone who falls beyond mercy and forgiveness. Those are the ones that I secretly feel for. I am silently wondering what they came from. What was their road that led them to the place where they have found themselves? Are they anything like me, as much as I suspect? The "monsters" among us were once children. Those we fear and despise. The villains.

Whenever a television narrator condemns the villain, absolutely, reviles them, the little dragon on my shoulder curves her lovely, swan-like neck, hangs her head in sorrow.

And she weeps.

SOMETHING TO SAY

Only once, a visiting adult was very kind to me. I remember that day, right now, as if it was yesterday. It was simply that she was genuinely interested enough to give me a few minutes of quality time. Little Brother was asleep and I was drawing. We were always shunned and shut in the den, so that she had to make an effort to excuse herself from the card game to find us. I don't know if I responded much to her, but I filed this day away in my mind. She asked about the dragon I was sketching and told me how wonderful she thought it was. And so from this tiny event, and also from television, I knew what kindness looked like.

I know that by the age of seven I was severely depressed. I often wished I had never been born. I thought about death a lot, as a peaceful escape from the turmoil and stress of our family life. My loud, aggressive nature was changing around this time. I became quiet and compliant. I became so quiet that Father would get angry and call me a ghost.

Please don't ever hesitate to be kind. And don't throw away the unhappy children. The sour ones, the bullies, the sullen, the aggressive. I was one of them once and I am no longer that person. They need you and they will remember everything.

Ready to Go

My flights are lifting
Always ready to go.
I almost left you. Maybe I'll stay
If you welcome me here.
Can you hold me down?
I never feel good. Always afraid.

I had each other's company
Down in my solitary.
Now we are misplaced
I've betrayed them all.
I stand in the headwind.
I sprout my wings, ready...
I feel the lift and I might go...
Always ready to go.

I pull my wings over my head
Gather them across my eyes and face
To hide my mind, they know those things,
Nightmares, hidden toys in the heart.
I lie about who I was in the night.

My flights, they are lifting
My feathers aching for the wind
I almost left last night, but maybe for you...

Can you anchor me here?

I never feel good. Always afraid.

I feel the lift! I want to go.

If I lean, I can step off the world.

Always ready to go.

—by Esmeralda

Fairness

Mother's resentment toward me continued to grow, as if I caused or enjoyed the constant attacks on Little Brother. She had her ways of throwing me under the bus, until Father eventually agreed with her that I was also no good. No better than Little Brother.

Well, that's fair, right?

There was a late morning when Mother, Little Brother and I were all in the den. I did or said something childish — because I was a child — and Mother's temper flared. She decided to tear me down and put me in my place. Humiliate me.

She said, "If you are going to act like a baby, then I'll treat you like one."

She ordered me to stand up on the sofa and she went into the kitchen. I was standing, exposed and fearful, above Little Brother.

When I saw her intent, I began to plead, "No," but she was almost chanting, "Oh, yes. Oh, yes! You think you're so special! You think you can get away with bloody murder!"

She had gone beneath the kitchen sink and gotten an old cloth diaper. She had washed and kept them to be used as dust cloths. It had been years since Little Brother had used diapers.

She began to pin the diaper on me. She kept glancing over at Little Brother, as if to include him in the bullying. She then left the diaper on me for a minute, and she held me in place not with her hands but with the scorn on her face.

"I hope you cry," she said. "I hope you do cry, and I don't care!"

I did cry. And she did not care.

She continued with her effort to try to make life more fair for Little Brother. And so, the more Father targeted his son, the more Mother targeted me. I never received any praise from her that wasn't tainted with criticism. When I repeatedly brought home honor roll grades, Father would verbally praise this. But this did not make me happy, because I saw the anger in Mother's face.

The Nature of Our Community

I realize now that not all parents are the same as ours. But Little Brother and I had no other example. Every authority was in agreement with our parents. Many of our teachers were just as stern and punitive as Parents. I am sure that if we had spoken up about our suffering, it would have done no good. Besides, we were not physically scarred and Parents knew how to make a good impression. They were absolutely charming to others.

By age ten, I had only one living grandparent and she was austere. Grandmother had been raised Mennonite. I remember the way that she would look down at me, as if I was a dog that had wandered into her house. She never spoke directly to me or spoke my name. Grandfather, who died when we were still quite young, had been a little kinder.

Grandparents kept a farm in the South, in the place from which Parents had come. During a particular visit to the farm, Little Brother and I were very excited to get outdoors as soon as we woke up. Grandfather, who was still alive then, had bought some cows at an auction, and Little Brother and I wanted to see the animals! Well, Grandmother noticed our unmade beds. She complained fiercely about this lack of manners, embarrassing Mother and infuriating Father. We were both spanked. Grandparents obviously had no problem with this.

Our suburban home in New Jersey was somewhat isolated, because our neighborhood had large, wooded lots and many of them were still undeveloped. Our family did not have much to do with the other families on our street. It had something to do with their more liberal beliefs. Also, very few of the neighborhood children were of ages similar to ours. Our family associated almost exclusively with the “church community.” I remember two of these church families,

whom we visited on occasion. One had a son, James, who was my age. His father, ordering him around all the time, would make him wash their Porsche every Sunday after church. If the car wasn't done to perfection and dried spotless with a chamois, he would be belted. We thought the whole world operated like this. We understood that we were property.

Father, meanwhile, seemed to feel that his green lawn was one of the most important ways that he could demonstrate his success in life. He always struggled with it, but despite his increasing wealth was unwilling to pay for a lawn service. As such, the lawn would be somewhat neglected when he had too many flights, and then Father would try to make up for lost time by going crazy with it over the midsummer weekends. When I was about nine or ten years old, both of us kids became involved in some of Father's major yard work. Doing labor was nothing new for us, of course, but this was different. Father had decided that the lawn soil was too rocky. So he built a giant screen and began digging up the half-acre front yard with a shovel. He threw all the soil through the screens, which let the rocks and large pebbles roll down into a pile. He then put the rocks into metal pails. Little Brother and I both had bicycles. Father attached a bucket to each handlebar of our bikes — four buckets in all. We were ordered to ride into the woods, go far off the "dry path" — the community's bicycle path, where dumping was not allowed — and then dump the rocks. Father instructed us to make sure we got out of sight and also spread the rocks around, thus making no obvious piles or heaps.

I can remember the pulling, twisting feeling of my bike's front end. The pails would swing and sometimes hit me in a knee right before falling over. Poor Little Brother and I struggled with the weight on the handlebars and fell many times. The bikes were simply tugged over to the left or right, since the pails were never perfectly the same weight. The bikes and tires were not intended for this sort of work and the tires would go flat. Father had to repeatedly pump them back up with air and repair holes in the rubber tubes. Our shoulders ached. Our arms hurt. We got exhausted. The ride was long, being three blocks to even get into the woods. As we

became more tired, we dumped the rocks closer to the path, less deep into the woods. This project took at least two or three weekends.

To make a long story short, Father eventually saw what we had done and made us regather the stones that were too easily seen and take them further out of sight. We were yelled at and probably spanked in some way, though I don't remember. And the neighbors saw all of this but said nothing.

Yet there is another point I wish to make here, and that is that the phenomenon of repressed memories is real. I know this in my own life, because I have so many amazing childhood memories. Yet some details are completely missing. For instance, I still remember Father's angry face and his tirade about how we had failed to follow his orders for dumping rocks. And I recall that he said something to me that was particularly personal and hurtful. It must have been some sort of character assassination or condemnation. And I remember riding my bike away from him, holding in my tears just long enough that he would not see me cry. I then rode into the woods with tears pouring down my face, and I was talking to myself. I knew that other kids of my age no longer talked to their invisible friends, if they had ever had any.

But what was it that Father said to me?

For the life of me, I have never been able to recall his words on that day. The words and the pain I felt from them have been cordoned off into a far corner of my mind, and I am denied access to them.

Trophy Kids

If children believe that they are bad by choice and could have behaved better, then they had a choice, didn't they? They had some control, right? This is what I was raised to believe about myself. And if this was true, then maybe I should have submitted and not been so obstinate, always seeking my own way. Also, if what I was raised to believe was true, that I had choice and control, then this would have meant that I was not truly helpless and powerless. Feelings of helplessness and powerlessness are unbearable.

Rage and anger also felt unbearable to me. When outrage would boil in my veins, I felt afraid that I needed to explode. I thought my actual, physical body needed to blow apart, and I pictured my limbs flying away from my torso. It felt dangerous, like I might accidentally cause death somewhere. After all, whenever I was at the receiving end of rage and hate, I did experience death. I experienced a thousand deaths! But I knew then that I could not show it, let alone act on it. And what followed was a swallowing of that rage and a sinking of my soul, which was a hopelessness and a despair.

And so, I became an expert at blankness and invisibility. Mother and Father did not notice my misery, or that of Little Brother. They never looked closely enough, because their minds were filled with the frantic struggle to show perfection and success at all cost.

Our thoughts and feelings never even entered their minds.

Instead we were more of their proofs — proofs, just like the home and cars — of their good quality as people.

We were trophy kids.

The Nature of Anger

Anger is much maligned.

Anger, that sense of offense, stands in opposition to accepting and agreeing with someone's words or actions. Your soul is telling you that you are being crossed or disrespected, and that their opinions about you are not correct. So, while they may injure you, even to your very core, a part of you can hold doubt. You can refer to this footnote of doubt throughout your life and may find that this anger has waited patiently to be confirmed. Anger may, in this way, save you. Thus, that which you came to accept as "true" about yourself may also have been false. This false "truth" can be so hard to undo. Yet anger has handed an opening to you, a space in which you can begin to write a new understanding of yourself.

You will define yourself and your true nature. Not anyone else.

I Am Not Likable

My memory can be sharp and remarkable, but also has become very poor in regard to details that the average person would be clear about. That's what happens when you float through your life like a sleepwalker. Often, as regards a memory, I cannot tell you if I was just a kid of seven or as old as twelve. For this story, I am very unsure of my age.

Mother sat down with me at the kitchen table one day. She was calm and deliberate, not reacting to anything specific. The conversation did not relate to any prior event. It would have been less painful for me if she had been in one of her rare rages.

Because then I could've told myself that she didn't mean it.

She told me, "I do not like you as a person."

I don't think she gave any explanations about it, except something about how selfish she thought I was. Regardless, the knowledge of what she was saying carried such a danger with it that I shut myself off. I felt numb. I would not cry. Actually, I already thought what she said to be true. I had already felt it all the time. She had simply put the words right out there in the open. It was spoken aloud and that made it forever real. Now it was not a secret between us. We couldn't pretend anymore. It was humiliation. I would have to live in her home, knowing and feeling this. Her resentment of me was confirmed.

Mother was constantly comparing me in a negative way to others. At first it was to Little Brother. Later on, I was compared negatively to an aunt and an older girl who lived down the

street. These were meek women with a similar way about them, “Southern Belle” manners much like Mother’s. Their personalities were as different from mine as cold is from hot.

I would have needed to become someone completely other to please her. I would not have been myself anymore.

And is that what I had done around that age? Did I pretend or believe that I was a completely different child, one who was more likely to be loved by Mother?

Could I become someone else?

Hate My Nature

Hate my Nature
Can't be what you want.
I am just a bloom,
Extinct tomorrow.
But DNA doesn't lie,
Its secret renews forever.

Hate my Nature
Hate the soil and sky, too.
They don't deign to please you
You weren't consulted when I was seeded
My colors are too loud, like a purple sky.
I move too fast and shine too brightly,
For you.

You just won't believe that everything ends
There is no forever for us.
I will be gone and so will you.
Yet I am too many and too alive...
The code will revive, flow anew...
I recur.

Hate my nature
You would redraw me, erase my color,
Smudge my shining silver to steely grey

Turn my softness to stone.

Why couldn't you love?

Was it so hard to let me shine?

Could you not have looked up,

Smiled at my wings and watched me fly?

Why?

—by Eric

Childhood Is Over

Thank you so much, Readers, if you are still with me. I type the above heading with such sorrow, because childhood is truly over. None of us can ever get a do-over.

Society thought that Little Brother and I had been very fortunate to be adopted by our parents. We were seen as having “every opportunity” to be happy and succeed in life. We had a traditional and faithful couple for parents who remained married for nearly sixty years. We had a beautiful home, a good education and plenty of money to provide for us. We had a stay-at-home mom who taught us right from wrong and taught us to live a clean, sober life. Who could ask for more? We even took family vacations, going all the way down to the Disney World and the Florida beaches!

How could anyone have seen that the inner experience was so unlike the exterior? How could we have claimed such words as “abuse,” “torture” or “trauma”?

Yet demands of life, the stress and the passions, are about to increase for us. And Parents assume that they have given us the tools to deal with it all.

PART TWO — AGING OUT

SOMETHING TO SAY

A Time of Transition

As Brother matured, he became a young man of many interests, all of them solitary and harmless. He played guitar. He rode a skateboard, and this was long before skateboarding was popular enough for skate parks to be built. And he studied and illustrated motorcycles, even though he would not own his first until adulthood. He also became very strong and attractive, with light brown hair, which he wore somewhat long. And he had the same dark blue eyes as mine. Yet Father never gave Brother one single word of approval or encouragement. No matter what Brother did, I never heard a kind word.

Instead, everything escalated between Brother and Father. And Brother's personality began to change. I watched it with a sense of inevitability.

One night, since Brother did not get home on time, as commanded, Father locked him out of the house. Father then called the police, saying that he'd discovered that Brother was becoming a small-time drug dealer and that he could not be controlled. The police found Brother on the front porch, where he'd been hoping that Mother would quietly let him in.

Brother was arrested and put in a juvenile detention center. He was not yet sixteen. He was given a court-appointed therapist to talk to while his court date approached. My parents told me nothing and never offered to let me see or communicate with Brother. Father deliberately failed to appear at the first court date, which made the judge angry. Father said he thought the experience would help straighten Brother out, like he could be scared straight. But, to me, it looked like Father was glad to be rid of Brother. Abandoning him. Regretting him. Throwing him away.

When Father finally did appear at the next hearing, the judge emancipated Brother. The therapist had reported to the judge that there was abuse in the home and that Brother should not have to return. The judge warned Brother, which Brother told me about in detail, later, that if he got into trouble now, he would be held accountable as an adult. He was sent to a foster home. I did not see him again for years.

Father called that judge a “bleeding-heart liberal.” After all, Father was a man of “family values.”

Meanwhile, no one ever asked about me or talked to me.

At home, Mother began to look at me with extra resentment. It must have appeared to her that I was happy and comfortable in the midst of Brother’s turmoils. But I was quietly suffering. My appearance and behavior were very placid.

One Saturday, a serious discussion was initiated by Mother and both she and Father seemed to agree that I was “unwell.” So maybe they had seen my pain, after all? They came and talked to me, directly, about the possibility of being “put somewhere” — presumably in a mental institution. I couldn’t believe it. They were not offering compassion, nor counseling or family therapy. They wanted to get rid of me!

Mother later said to me, “You seem to be off your rocker. And why should your brother be the only one who has to leave? Why should you be so different?”

It was just that twisted sense of fairness again!

Yet nothing happened to me. I was soon to turn eighteen and I guess it isn't that easy to have a child committed just because you want to.

I now think of the subsequent years as the twilight years of our family. Parents were extremely distant. They traveled the world and were politically active. They seemed to think that they had done their best and that we, both children, had turned out to be disappointments and failures. It was through no fault of their own, they felt, only through our choices. Brother found a masonry job that he loved around this time and he was soon to meet the love of his life. He also did so well in masonry work that he would eventually own his own small company that did all kinds of stonework and bricklaying and block construction. He also owned a quarry, albeit not a very valuable one. Brother still struggled financially, and often teetered on the edge of bankruptcy.

The later teen years are a strange time for anyone. Adult worries and responsibilities are being introduced, but no one told us exactly when we had to stop feeling like children. We still had never been helped much, nor had we resolved our emotional issues.

Yet I want to take one step back. My last summer at home, before college, was a time when I caught my emotional breath. I was not eager to drive and I was not dating. I had no close friends. Because my parents were away, an adult was hired to stop by the house every other day, just to check up on me and their property, and she did the grocery shopping too. But most of the time I was alone. I would use my parent's stereo and dance in the dark of night. I had

developed, by now, an elaborate fantasy life and I let my invisible friends run rampant. And since no one was watching or hearing me, I was relaxed in a way that I never could remember.

But this time also allowed me to reflect. I now knew that I was not like other people. I also knew, sadly, that there was something wrong with me. Only once had I trusted a friend with the particulars of my inner world, not that I knew what it was by any diagnostic names at that point, and my sharing resulted in utter humiliation. She not only rejected me, but gossiped, betraying the confidential knowledge I had offered. I was never going to make that mistake again. When you're different from everyone around you and you cannot share it, you can only have superficial relationships. You are not able to let anyone truly and fully know you. In loneliness, you are safe.

Isolation is your one true home.

Seduction

“C’mon, I’ll show you what you’ve missed,” he said when I was in my first year of college, where I was studying art. “You’re gonna need to know sometime, right? A good sex life is important. People wind up divorced because they didn’t even find out before marrying if they were good together. My own father had to leave my mother because he had married a total prude!”

This older college student seemed to be speaking truth, since Mother actually hated Father’s guts and despised sex. I had never seen or heard any sort of affection between them and Mother often slept in a different bed. Father, meanwhile, had had at least one affair and used porn, which he kept hidden in his car.

But mainly I had a huge crush on this man. He was muscular and powerful, dark-haired with a neatly cropped beard and a few tattoos. My type was the opposite of Father.

As we began to make out, the door to his dorm room was open. I was not enjoying it, because it was all going too fast. My parents had pulled me out of sex education classes and I was extraordinarily naive. Saying “No” to any man, particularly this one whom I wanted to please, was impossible for me. It might have offended him and made a scene. Soon he felt we needed more privacy and he closed the door. I was trying to enjoy it, to learn about sex, but I had no pleasure in any of it.

I did begin to say, “I don’t we should go too far, because I’m not...”

But I was cut off.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll take care of you. Don’t worry about a thing, I know what I’m doing. I won’t hurt you and I will pull myself out in time.”

Yet I could feel him reaching a point of no return anyway. I was never going to jump away from him or scream. I had heard a rumor that almost no girl enjoys her first time and that it can hurt a little. And so when I did hurt quit a bit, I was not surprised and didn’t mention it.

I did it exactly *once*. And, yes — my sort of luck — I got pregnant.

This man had no interest in me after that.

When Most Needed

I was still staying at “home” — Parents’ home — during college breaks.

As usual, when I first arrived, Mother greeted me in her very peculiar and polite way. She opened the door, but rather than hug me, she quickly turned away and moved back toward the kitchen. As was usual with her, she had a dishrag in her hands, so that she could appear preoccupied and busy.

“Why don’t you take your coat off and stay awhile?” she asked.

It’s hard to share or explain how she could ask such a simple question, one that sounded like an invitation yet actually came across more like an accusation. Behind it was the idea that I didn’t come home enough or that when I did I was always leaving too fast.

I always wondered why Parents pressured me to come home so often, yet when I did they clearly did not like me being there and instantly criticized me. This was a mystery to me that I never did solve.

In her sweet, Southern drawl, Mother then mentioned the potato salad in the fridge.

“Thanks, Mother,” I replied.

I got myself set up to eat and sat across from her at the kitchen table. That same old table that Father used to make bounce with his fist.

She then asked, “So, what’s new with you?”

I felt brave and disconnected, so I decided to just dive right in and get it over with. I answered her by blurting out, “I’m pregnant.”

There was silence as she wiped the table all around herself with the rag. Then something solid and sharp came into her eyes, like the season of winter arriving in rapid time-lapse.

She then said with a disgusted face, “We cannot let your Father know about this. He will never look at you the same way again. He will know what kind of girl you are.”

And then she left the room and went upstairs. Left me alone. It was clear that I was expected to leave and could never come back showing any signs of pregnancy.

She had just slammed the door on all of my options. And I knew, when I thought it over, that she was thinking of herself. She made Father the so-called “heavy,” but she was simply saving herself, *or* — maybe *she* was the one condemning me?

Lacking a car of my own — though I had finally gotten a drivers license — I called an old acquaintance from high school to help me. She had a somewhat dysfunctional home, such that my presence there would barely be noticed nor minded if I helped out. I could do the housekeeping and maybe even pay rent if I got a job.

But regarding my pregnancy, I was told by this friend, “We can’t tell my mom. She’ll throw you out.”

I did not want to have an abortion. So I reached out for help as best I could. I remember going through the phone book, looking for unwed mother helplines, shelters and group homes — anything that might help me have the child. I found only one place, but they required a huge deposit of \$2,500, and I didn’t have a single dollar. I was beginning to panic. I knew that I was on a clock and that there would soon come a point of no return. So I decided to have an abortion.

To raise the money to pay for it, as it cost \$250, I got a job shampooing dogs for a groomer. Despite being pregnant, I walked the four miles back and forth.

As soon as I’d raised the money, my friend’s brother, a young man who never missed an opportunity to grope and harass me, dropped me off at the abortion clinic and picked me up afterward.

I remember that there was standing room only and I seemed to be the only one who wasn’t accompanied by someone.

I was told that I fainted after the procedure, and that when I did I had an odd smile on my face. Well, I’m glad. I do not remember it.

When I needed it most, Mother had let me down in the most demonstrative and meaningful way, ever.

My First Cars

Rather than return to the college, I decided to change course. I enrolled in a school of business, where I took accounting. It was not far from Parents' home, and even though I soon shared an apartment with another young woman, I was expected to come home for important holidays and family gatherings.

I was only fifteen minutes away.

Father handed me down his old car, a huge Cadillac. It proved to be a mixed blessing for me. I know how ungrateful that sounds; just wait. My classes and first accounting job were in a busy city, where traffic was heavy and fast. Merges were nerve-racking and parking was next to impossible.

Also, the car would stall, routinely, quite beyond my control. One day, it stalled in such a way that it left me rolling slowly, dead, through an intersection. I was hit on the passenger's side.

When Father saw the damaged car, he yelled at me. He seemed to feel that it was still his. Also, everything, I think, in his mind, represented money. Money spent, wasted, lost... Every object in his eyes was made of dollars.

One of the tires had also blown out. He did me the favor of replacing both front tires, but he had bought retreads. They later failed on me, causing more breakdowns on the side of the highway.

Even Mother commented to me, “He has so much money! Why doesn’t he do more for y’all? It doesn’t seem like there is any benefit at all for you being his daughter.”

I share this to show that I did not make up my unappreciative attitude all by myself.

But the car had even more problems. Next I had trouble with the brakes. It was discovered that there was a small leak in the brake lines, and this was very serious, as it could have killed me or someone else. I had a new boyfriend at this time. Boyfriend and I made three attempts to find and fix the leak, but it was all to no avail. So Boyfriend and I found a young mechanic and gave the car away to him, telling him about the brake line problem. We hoped that he would eventually be able to fix it.

But Father was angry at the situation and yelled. And he didn’t express any concern about my life and safety.

Boyfriend and I then went looking for a more appropriate commuter car for me. I chose a tiny, used car, a Pontiac Fiero, as one of my big concerns was parking. The Fiero cost about \$4,000, which was a lot, but a fair price. I loved its handling. I did not care about top speed, only its handiness. And I could park in the tiniest corner spots! For the first time, I enjoyed driving. I fell in love with the car, enjoying its stereo speakers that were mounted right behind my head in the seats.

But the first time I pulled into my parents’ driveway in the Fiero, Father came outside and said, “Did you *buy* this?”

“Yes,” I replied.

Father looked like I had brought home a new Ferrari. He dove into a tirade that lasted all evening. He screamed things like, "You are a spoiled, immature little prima donna! You spend extravagantly!"

Yet all I can say is that the Fiero was well worth it. It was the automotive love of my life.

The Body Weeps

One night, I had a disturbing and profound dream. It felt like a revelation to me. In my dream I had turned male and could observe myself, as if from outside my body. I stood naked and saw wounds and scars all over myself. I felt deeply sad. And then this version of me stretched out both arms, looking to the left and to the right. I then worked both my fists and fingers into that particular, commonly-understood gesture that means “come.” Come to me.

Then I saw beings, human beings, but I failed to recognize who they were. They were blurry and unclear. They began to come, as called. The weird thing is that they curled up and rolled to me, in the way that a car tire rolls. As they got closer to me, they again became, clearly, people. One of them was female with black hair. I would say, today, that she was very “goth,” but that was not a thing yet. If I was hard-pressed to describe her by comparing her to an animal, I would say that she was like a dragon. The other person was a strong, dark man. These two melded into me again and we became one body. I understood, while still inside the dream, that these others were somewhere inside me and were helping me, by sharing all the sorrow of my life.

Upon waking, I could feel a phantom-like pain in my heart and chest. This is not to be confused with symptoms of a heart attack. Not that sharp, skin-and-flesh pain that you could cut through with a knife to release what it holds. Instead my pain was like a saturated sponge, like a squeezing of tears out of my soul. Old tears. If a sponge was sentient and capable of feeling, it would feel squeeze after squeeze, sob after wrenching sob, as torrents of hurt poured out of me.

That seeping, gasping emotional pain is what I felt, both in this dream and in many other dreams — and often when awake as well.

I finally understood that the body can weep.

Life Inside

Like an embryo, we live inside
Hooked to the outer world
Hardwired to your skin.
At the surface, we see and hear
We talk about what's out there
We think, we cry, we laugh
but we are never born.
Feed us a little light,
So we can glow.
We look out and we listen.
What do we hear? Don't you know?
It's the very same ear.
We die with you.
In our darkness and silence,
No one knew us.
Only You.

—by LeeAnn

Killing Them. Almost

Brother and I would talk by phone. In his mid-twenties, he now had young children. He told me that he had never understood just how badly he had been treated until he had children of his own. He said, “I can’t even *imagine* treating my kids like that!”

He and his wife did not spank their children at all. They had broken that part of the cycle of abuse. I was very proud of him. But he did struggle with his past and there was a time when he leaned on alcohol. He was a normally quiet and sad sort of drinker, but there was one night that I will never forget.

Brother called me after midnight. He sounded a bit drunk. He told me that his wife was visiting her family and had taken the kids. He had stayed back because of a very difficult and unfinished masonry contract.

At first, the conversation was sad, but not alarming. He shared with me that, like me, he could barely tolerate nearness to other people. He had his family, but had no close friends and felt a lot of discomfort relating to others. But he was forced to get by in his profession. His wife was doing a lot of the personal contact with clients, including giving estimates. He said, “I could be starving to death, close to passing out. But I will still drive all the way home, rather than stand in line at McDonald’s and have to be close to other people.”

I never knew he was that much like me. I didn’t know that he suffered from the same sort of social problem.

And then he became particularly despondent and told me, “Y’know, some things just can never be fixed. Sometimes it’s too late. Our parents could apologize and change, but it’s just too late.

They made the mess and they should have to clean it up, but it won't even matter now. Their luckiest child was the one that died."

I began to worry that he might be thinking of killing himself. But I was taken by surprise when he continued...

"I am going to load my hunting rifle," he said, "drive down there tonight and shoot both of them. I need to know something important from you. It's important. Think about it before you answer. Would you help defend me in court? Would you be on my side?"

I spent over an hour convincing him that if he did this, he would end up in prison, which he did not deserve.

He pushed me and pushed me about the imaginary trial. I finally began to think that this was the actual crux of the conversation — whether I really knew where the blame lay. When I was sure I had him feeling better and convinced not to commit murder, I did answer him. I did not have to think. I told him that I would testify about the horrible childhood he had at the hands of Father. I would be on his side, even if Mother were left alive.

Maybe I should have made a phone call about Brother, but he was calm and tired. It was a weekday, so that I was exhausted and had another work day in the morning. I fell back to sleep.

The phone rang again at four in the morning and it was Brother.

He was sobbing. My heart pounded and it took me about five minutes to get him to reassure me that he had not committed murder.

Brother had driven an hour to get halfway there. He had pulled over and it had taken him about a half hour to change his mind. He had been up all night and had driven for over two hours of it.

I had to talk to him until morning and I insisted that he go to sleep with his phone off the hook. I did not go to work until I literally heard him snoring.

It was having children of his own that had nearly pushed him over the edge — into nearly murdering Father and Mother. His children's innocence and normal childhood behaviors only showed him more clearly how cruel and incomprehensible our treatment had been. It broke his heart and filled him with rage. All the emotional agony that he still felt every day of his life was due to the nightmare of childhood. The rage inside wanted to tear down the abuser, because the human spirit craves its dignity and power as strongly as the body needs oxygen. But then the scared child within him was roused and still had a need for Father. This turned his entire world perfectly upside-down. He knew the confusion and guilt that he would suffer if he killed them, and so he turned back.

Whenever television shows portray young murderers who have killed their parents, my heart is always with the child or adult child that has done the crime. I know that there is a deep reason, even if the shows often blame motives such as greed. Almost without exception the killer or

killers are called “evil.” But my sympathies never lie with the parents. Not that I think that the parents deserve death or that murder is okay, but I am honestly surprised that this does not happen more often than it does.

You see, I know where that kind of rage comes from and lives. I know its address.

Mother and Father never knew how close they came to paying for their sins.

The Cost and the Losses

“God, you’re so weird,” my roommate said, “Tell ya what. I will leave. You keep this place. I can’t afford it anyway.”

As she packed her clothes, she also called me “stuck up.”

I didn’t blame her, either. I knew I had made her uncomfortable, but I didn’t mean to. I did not yet have an understanding of my condition. And I will share with you, my Readers, more about my condition in the coming chapters. In time.

Looking back now, decades later, I wish that I could have found people and explained myself. I must have seemed so unfriendly. Sometimes people would try to break through my walls. They would compliment me or ask questions. But I would barely answer them and always declined any sort of invitation to their homes or parties.

My performance at work, where I was still an accountant, was also suffering. The job required concentration and focus, but my mind was wandering — without anyone being in its driver’s seat. I was like an actor on the wrong stage, and it was an awful feeling. I would yank my mind back on track repeatedly, but I could barely keep up with what I was doing.

There came a particularly bad day when I knew it was the end. I had completed an account summary that week and had mailed it to a client. But I had put their financial information into the wrong envelope, so that it went to someone else entirely.

My supervisor confronted me, and did not even bother to give me any privacy. He yelled at me in a common hallway, and many of my coworkers saw and heard it all.

“Where was your mind?” he yelled. “For someone who went to college, you don’t seem very bright!”

Needless to say, Human Resources asked me to finish out the week, but told me that I would be replaced.

This verbal dressing-down replayed in my mind over and over again. I don’t know why I could not turn away from that scene. Something about my supervisor’s incredulous facial expression haunted me. His scorn stayed with me and his words of condemnation rang in my ears. The trouble was, I agreed with him. I played these tapes and videos in my mind on a loop that I couldn’t stop. And it seemed like my life bore up the truth of what was said about me.

In my mind, my supervisor’s words also joined the words of my parents and even of my roommate.

Father had said, “Your mind is warped and you are so dumb...”

He also called me “aloof” and “a recluse.”

“Selfish,” said Mother. “I do not like you as a person.”

I could not picture a solution, a path to a better future. Happiness was not believable or knowable for me. I needed to become someone completely different from myself. But I didn’t know how. I was incapable of sympathizing with myself yet. I was suffering, but did not understand it. I believed that I was “antisocial and self-centered,” as I had been told so many times. How could I know any differently?

The heavy sense of always disappointing, always failing to meet expectations, was painful. I felt despised — and I was — and I despised myself. I spiraled down into a state of despair and helplessness.

I knew of no other way than to keep abandoning myself.

Killing Me. Almost

It's euthanasia. That's what suicide is. The good death for your suffering self. A mercy.

I was very serious.

I first took a medication that would prevent nausea, quite a bit over the recommended dose. Then, after an hour, I began to swallow all the pills that I had hoarded over time, all downers. I wanted down, all the way.

I began to feel the effects right away.

I had left no note. I had nothing to say. This was not about guilt or punishing anyone. And I think part of why I left no note was that I still felt voiceless, since nothing I'd ever said was really heard.

I had music on the stereo, low volume. I had a favorite 1980s song playing: "Together in Electric Dreams." It mixed sad lyrics with an upbeat sort of tune: "It's just too late to stay. Time to go away."

I was either unconscious or nearly so for over two days and nights.

Eventually, my head cleared and I got up, only to faint a couple of times. I was very dizzy. I was dehydrated so badly that I had constipation afterward. But, other than that, I had escaped becoming brain damaged. I am very lucky that I didn't wind up seriously injured.

Absolutely no one knew that I had tried to end it all.

I was so buzzed or hung over from the suicide attempt that my emotional pain moved into the background. I had no pills left. So I had no choice but to try to move on with my sad life.

A word here: So many people react to this subject by stating, “Attempting suicide is the most selfish thing a person can do.”

Well, no kidding. It strikes me that people who say this are thinking only about how they would feel if a family member did this. In other words, this reaction strikes me as self-centered, as it takes all suicides as a personal affront. This reaction also displays anger.

Mother would display this attitude about suicide when I was just a child. It sounded like a preemptive shaming. Christians, in particular, call it “sin,” yet, interestingly, the feeling of despair that leads to it is also labeled “sin”!

Why aren’t “we” as a society saying something more like the following:

“Would you talk to me if you ever feel like committing suicide? Because you can, okay?”

“How are you doing? How can I help you if you’re feeling depressed?”

“I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine the kind of pain you must’ve been feeling to give up on life and do that.”

Obviously, someone who’s hurting so badly that life becomes unbearable is not thinking about everyone else. How can they be? Also, the people — and the type of people — who produced my disorders are the same ones who judge suicide as sinful. The same people who have set your house on fire would also like to make sure that your escape route — your last open window — is closed.

“No!”

Since my ability to concentrate was so poor, I changed careers, and I found the perfect one. I became a typist. Typing is a rote and automatic skill that does not require focused thought. No matter how far away my mind might have been, I could type very accurately. Only at the proofreading phase did I have to come back to reality, which I found much more difficult, though manageable.

I spent fifteen years being relatively happy in my work. My typing speed reached ninety-five words per minute and higher. For a while, I was in a high-pressure office, typesetting for a publication. It was required that I work lots of overtime. I started to get a bit burned out and I began having pain in my neck and my wrists. I would get home as late as nine at night and occasionally had to go in on weekends. I was also working right through my lunches at my desk.

Father, meanwhile, had gotten involved with the Boy Scouts of America. He spent an occasional weekend doing some sort of camp maintenance with other adults and also handled some fundraising.

Father was very strongly anti-gay and didn't want gay people to be in Scouting in any way.

I was still living nearby and would see Mother and Father at least once a month. Although I had often wanted to cut ties with them and be free of them, a moral sense of obligation and my religious beliefs prevented me from it.

On one of my visits home, Father asked me for a favor. He asked me to type up a very long letter that he'd created. It was a complaint that suggested that allowing homosexuals into Scouting would invite "perversion, molestation and other shenanigans that would occur in tents during overnight camping trips." His letter also called for someone that he disagreed with on this subject to be fired, even though that man's position was voluntary.

Father's attitude that I would do his bidding and type the letter was one of absolute arrogance. He was so certain that I could not say no. He actually dropped the paperwork in front of me at the table and then walked away and started to make a phone call. He had not even let me answer.

And, yes, it was at the same old table — the one onto which he had slammed his fist.

Now, this becomes hard to explain. As my usual self, I would not find a way to say no. I would have been full of false respect, if I even tried to be honest. But on this visit home, deep in the center of myself, I had an emotional reaction. A rant of mood. An upset. A ghastly sense of injustice and an urgency to correct it. I was taking this personally, but I didn't know why.

When he got off the phone, I was already standing. I just said, "No!"

I had planned to explain to him, as an excuse to buffer my refusal, that my life was already made of mountains of paper and that even without this long letter I was already drowning in work. But something had amped it all up and had taken me beyond making excuses. And so I provided none.

He was taken aback. I was the child who had never challenged him.

Father, in his shock, turned nasty and began to question me. I don't remember the few words that we exchanged, but I remember how I ended it.

I gathered my purse from the floor, glared at him and said with finality, "Fuck you."

And I left.

Nothing was ever said to me about this incident.

I Am a Rainbow

I am a rainbow
Arched and bursting
Flushing with colors

You made me the rainbow
Brightened me into truth
Splayed me out for all to see

Spread my colors across the sky
Like a sign or a promise
You saw me first
In your eyes, the signs were there

You saw the prism
Cast from my crystal heart
You made me see
Myself alighted
Turned up the volume of me.

I am a rainbow
Myself all a-color
Your eyes were made
To break the code of me.

You parted the sky to let me glow

I let you paint me as I fly

You declared me.

I am your rainbow.

—by Eric

The Crazies

I always dreaded dinners out with my parents. I would avoid them to the point that Mother and Father would become angry with me. Yet I felt I had to give in once in a while. I was still unsure of my own judgment back then. I did not yet feel that I was entitled to protect myself and keep my distance when I was uncomfortable.

And so I was out with Parents and another couple. Brother had backed out. Dammit. So I was alone.

As we were all seated and waiting for the meal, we started to chat. Bread was being shared all around. We had even prayed a blessing before beginning to eat. I was the youngest and the only one who was passively listening. Not much participation was expected of me. This at least was good. I did make an effort, however, by mentioning my latest foster dog, a small female mix. When I talked about her, I used the pronouns “she” and “her.” When I did this, Mother shot a conspiratorial look toward the other woman and a face was shared between them. I was familiar with this treatment. As I wrote previously, Mother preferred that animals be referred to as “it” and always gave me a bad time about addressing pets with personal pronouns. Mother even produced a fake sort of laugh now and was clearly embarrassed.

She said, “Oh, ‘he,’ ‘she’ or ‘it’...it doesn’t matter.”

Mother thought of my love for animals as something very misplaced and wrong. So, we were off to a great start!

As the conversation progressed in a different direction, something then came up about a friend or coworker named Norma, whom they all seemed to know. Father's friend, in particular, started to say that something was wrong with Norma, and he threw out the word "crazy" in a hateful, condemning tone, more than once. It hit me physically, as if a huge stone had landed right in my lap. I know that I stiffened and froze. No one noticed. Not only was I in therapy at this point, but I was also on antidepressants, both of which, had they known, they would have also considered "crazy."

But it didn't end there. Norma was then referred to as "nuts," and this drew laughter. I had resumed chewing and had to control the look on my face. I knew I needed to look like I was not one of the "crazies" — or even a sympathizer with them. I had to look anything but offended. Or hurt. Or uncomfortable.

As the dinner went on, I let my mind wander. Mother pivoted off the subject of "crazies" and right into a discussion of a certain next-door neighbor. Mother had always been displeased with that neighbor. In a whispering and hissing way, she said, "She is a *divorced* woman! I wish she would just move out of our neighborhood."

My mind, doing some free association, recalled the horrible night when that same neighbor had attempted suicide. Was there concern for her in my family? Empathy? Christian love? Any inquiry or offer of help? No. I remembered the flashing lights. I had first thought someone had a heart attack. But then Mother had explained it to me, even though I was only in my preteens.

"She tried to kill herself," Mother had said. "But she made a phone call. So it was fake. She just wanted attention. She is sick."

My attention snapped back to the dinner conversation, when Mother continued to discuss the subject of suicide. She related a story that I had never heard before. Parents had gone to a casino, which was very odd, since they strongly disapproved of gambling. I can't remember the context of why they went, except that it was as a part of a large group, and clearly the purpose had not been to gamble. Probably they had just gone for entertainment and a free meal. Father then mentioned that while at the casino they had actually seen a man — in real life, real time — throw himself off the balcony of his high-rise hotel room to his death. I would've had a severe stomachache after seeing such a thing, but my parents, while recalling it, only looked amused.

Mother made a joke out of it by saying, "I guess he wasn't a winner." Presumably she meant that he hadn't won at gambling, or perhaps that he had been "punished" for having gambled at all.

Laughter all around.

Except for me.

I looked aside, chewing, not letting them see how disappointed I really felt.

That same evening, when dinner was over, the other couple went to a different parking garage and Father went to get our car. Mother and I were standing outside, waiting. Mother turned to me and said, "You know, I did not see what your father would be like before I married him. You never hear me tell him that I love him, do you? I had dated one other man, but then I saw him drink a beer."

At some level I could only guess that she was telling me that even she was disgusted at some level with Father. But she would never say this to his face — only behind his back.

But Father's car arrived before I had the chance to respond, not that I would have known how anyway.

I thought about this later, how people like Mother tried to make judgments of others based on very superficial things like drinking, smoking, cursing and tattoos. They make the mistake of not taking the time to look more deeply into true character. Since they don't look deeply, they can be very easily fooled and manipulated.

Her poor choice of husband was a tragedy for Brother and me!

That week, I lost weight and pulled out a lot of hair. The next time I saw my therapist, I talked about how visits and dinners with the parents made me feel. They made me feel that I was not even a flesh-and-blood, living person at all, never mind their daughter. They made me feel that I was so different from them that I was a stranger. This therapist told me how important it is to have someone to truly connect with. But I had no one. Aside from the therapist, of course.

I also thought over that dinner when I had evenings to myself in my apartment. The apartment had a tiny balcony and I sat out there until dark and ruminated over things. I thought about their words, how they seemed to believe that others who did not share their opinions were making a choice to be that way and thus did not deserve to be cared about. Of all the things for which I've had difficulty forgiving my parents, their judgmental ways were the worst. This is exactly what they, as generational, practicing Christians, were not supposed to be. They had such ugly beliefs. And in just a few more years, they would judge me just as harshly.

Appearances

Brother and I were often reminded of how wonderful our life appeared to be to the outside world. An example of this came during one of my visits, when I was an adult, to the dentist. As he was working on me, filling a cavity, he made casual conversation. He said, “Oh, I just realized by looking at your last name that you must be the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Summerfield...”

Of course, being in the dentist’s chair with a drill and jet of water in my open mouth, I could only grunt, “Mmm-hmm.”

He spent the next ten minutes talking about how wonderful they were to talk to and how he admired their “Old Southern Charm” and the “manners and gentleness that you really don’t see anymore.” He even said that I was very lucky and must feel fortunate to have such parents. He then asked if I planned to head over to their home after the appointment, to visit them, as their home was nearby.

I almost stammered, “No, I’m too busy,” which was the truth, but I caught myself. Knowing that this would make me look like a terrible daughter, and that people’s hearts are always on the side of parents and older folks, I changed my mind. So I replied, “Yes, I am going over there.”

He then asked me to relay a “hello” to them. Now, not wanting to make a liar out of myself, I had to go! Meanwhile, I rationalized that it was probably a good idea, because it was early enough to see only Mother and, with any luck, I would miss Father. I would get credit for a visit without contact with Father! Perfect!

When Mother let me in, I was shocked to see that she had taken many of my prints and paintings and hung them throughout the house. These were works of art I had done in my college years, and they had been stored away in their attic. Without telling me, Mother had chosen some and had them professionally matted and framed. Yet the professional had done the work cheaply and poorly, not the way that I would've wanted. And Mother had avoided my best work, that which reflected my personality: the subject of animals. She had chosen anything she could find that was landscape or human. I did not feel flattered, and instead I felt sort of used.

She sounded somewhat apologetic as she showed me what she had done. I, meanwhile, felt doubtful about whether I should feel what I was feeling.

I asked myself, "Is this a big deal? She paid for this. I am probably being a very ungrateful, selfish daughter."

So I acted as appreciative as I could.

When I got home, I felt sort of uneasy and this stuck with me for days. The feeling under my skin was of being a co-conspirator in some huge lie, fooling the world.

On another later visit, I snuck into the attic to check on what was left of my art. I was going to ask to take the rest of it to my apartment. It was then that I discovered that my life drawings — as nudes are called — were gone. She must have thrown them away!

Life drawing was a required course in college. I had enjoyed it, especially when we finally gotten a truly fit and attractive body to draw! He was a young, black marathon runner. It was of him that I had made my best human drawing ever!

Actually Mother had two reasons to get rid of him: his race as well as his nudity. As usual, I decided not to mention my discovery. I didn't say a thing. I never saw any point in arguing or fighting with her or with Father. And even if I had tried to present my case in a calm fashion, I already knew that they would have only defended themselves and never really listened to me. This is the source of most depression; the *loss of hope*.

To my parents, a good appearance may as well have been the same as the real thing. If you could act a certain way convincingly enough, it was as if you would eventually become that thing. This had something to do with how they grew up, I'm sure. Sadly, it caused them to use us toward this achievement. They would often threaten us when we were little, saying, "Now, don't you embarrass me!" Embarrassing them in front of others was one of the worst crimes imaginable.

Father was a Deacon of the church and also served as Treasurer for many years. He would substitute teach the Sunday School. Both he and Mother donated money to their church and other charities and participated in a soup kitchen service that helped those in need.

They did seem to genuinely care about others.

Everyone but the two of us, it felt like.

Coffee Table Books

A year or so later, when Parents were distant in every way and the connections in our family were so tentative, I was asked to stop by and check on the house. I lived not too far away and so, while they were traveling, they wanted me to water the houseplants and bring in the mail.

On one of these stopovers, I stood in the entrance of their living room. It looked like the cover of a home decorating magazine. I noticed piles of magazines and some hardcover books on their glass coffee table. Out of curiosity, I crossed the beautiful room, the same one that had always been off limits to me when I was a child. I sat on their sofa, tired from work, and began to look through the magazines, something that I had never done before. Many of them were of a very conservative variety, both politically and religiously.

The writing was parent-centric and fundamentalist. It was through this, I realized, that they indoctrinated themselves and reassured themselves! Also, their friends and peers believed these same things. No wonder, I realized, there was never any change in them!

I uncovered one religious magazine that had been folded open at an article in such a way that made it clear that my parents had been reading it. It was about “prodigal sons,” and how to deal with them.

In the Bible story of the prodigal son, and in this article, the son was entirely to blame for his wayward life and his so-called sins. The “patient” and “loving” father was completely innocent.

My hands trembled and I clenched my teeth. How dare they see Brother as a prodigal son!

Fiery rage began to overtake me, and I let the rage define itself. It began to turn to anxiety.

My rage turned to anxiety because of fear: I was afraid. I was afraid that the responsibility was never going to be placed where it belonged — on their shortcomings. Little Brother's and my precious developmental years produced the roots of our tragic problems. I was afraid that our parents would die, still blaming and condemning us yet never hearing us. Never understanding or knowing. Without important things being said. Without things being resolved.

And Parents had the power to change all of this. They, of all the people in this world, could most easily remove the crushing weight of failure from our backs. They were the people who cast the spell — no, the curse — upon us. And so they were the best ones to break that spell, remove that curse.

At this moment I also, for the first time in my life, began to consider that there is no God. There is no one to give an authoritative, final word on our behalf, enlightening our parents... It was not ever going to happen. Until that moment, such a thought had been unthinkable to me. But something was beginning to be revealed...

I was beginning to realize that Mother and Father put off unpleasant conversations and decision because they thought that everything would get sorted out in the afterlife. They used this as a means to be negligent and passive in their current life. Procrastination! They thought that they literally had God on their side. I was beginning to see that getting what I needed and wanted from Parents was hopeless.

I had just touched upon something important, but it would be years before I would understand it more fully. I had just felt, in psychological terms, the "Abandonment Depression."

Before I got up and left their house that day I came to understand quite a few things. I even remembered a recurring dream and had solved its meaning. In the dream, there was a small crowd standing around a scene in which a horse was being beaten. The poor horse was down and appeared to be close to death. A bright, hot sun was overhead, causing the horse to dehydrate. It was almost being cooked, being driven even closer to death by this sun that hung high above all our heads. The people around were my family and relatives. I was looking on. I think it was Father who wielded the whip. I was terrified that the horse could not survive much more. I wanted to scream and be heard so that it would stop. I tried to yell out, but I had no voice. No sound came out of my throat. Obviously, the horse was Brother. The whole family was blaming and condemning the horse, my Brother. There was no one to express the words that were needed to change anything. The rays of the intense sun represented God, who was not doing the right thing either.

Brother and I did not want Parents punished. There is no torture in the world that could make up for what had happened to us. And we did not want apologies in the sense of people on their knees and in tears, begging forgiveness. No, not at all.

All Brother and I ever wanted was a change in their judgmental opinions of us. We wanted them to stop seeing us as disappointments and failures. We wished we could make them see that their treatment of us brought about the very things that they hated in us. They had been given two perfectly normal, maybe even gifted, *innocent and good children*. But that is not what they believed.

Broken Promises

The making and breaking of promises is something that marked Parents' behavior toward both Brother and me, into our adult lives. Father, several times, said that he would like to help Husband and me purchase our first real home. I was now married, and happily so. Husband was a kind and gentle man. Husband and I had been renting and then had a tiny co-op. Meanwhile, Parents had been rude and unkind to Husband, since he wasn't "good enough" in their eyes. He was a truck driver. Meanwhile, the thought of the stress and potential scenes with Parents caused Husband and I to just get married at the Mayor's office. As it happened, that day proved precious to both of us.

So we did not ask for Father's help for anything. I never, ever asked for money. I knew that I'd better not. These offers came from Father, voluntarily, or they didn't come at all.

Yet time after time, Father would set us up with offering to help us buy a home. We would choose a place. One time, we were very excited and even spent money on soil and water tests. But whenever it was time to pull the trigger — one time a closing date was set — Father would change his mind. We were left disappointed and embarrassed — in one case, absolutely brokenhearted. I guess it was spite and punishment on Father's part, though we had not done anything differently or changed our behavior in any way.

I never argued with Father or confronted him. It was his money, to do with what he wanted. And he was entitled to change his mind. And what would a disagreement accomplish? I was raised to be so "respectful" that I never could talk in such a way to Parents.

One time, Father had offered to loan us money, and he had described the terms in such great detail that I took notes. I showed my notes to Husband. Then Father went back on his word.

He lied to my face, describing a completely different offer at our next visit. I could have shown him my notes, in order to prove myself right. But both Mother and Father had obviously decided that they did not want to go through with it.

Husband and I are not stupid people. We were just saving dignity. We took each of Parents' promises with an enormous, proverbial grain of salt. We learned that Brother and his wife had been treated the same way. (Unfortunately, Brother did later get involved with Father and let Father hold their mortgage, with ill consequences.) Husband and I, meanwhile, hoped that Parents would someday come through and be helpful. But they never did.

So many promises made, both explicit and implied... But the words never carried any weight...

Father, meanwhile, had invested money under the government's Gifts to Minors Act, which was a tax shelter for parents saving for their kids' college costs. We only found this out when I was in my late twenties because it caused Husband and me to get audited by the IRS. We had had no idea of what Father had done, and done in my name no less. The government assumed incorrectly that I had been given the invested money at the age of eighteen or at least had had use of it. In other words, it was supposed to be mine — and Brother's. But in reality I had gotten none of it.

Father had also chosen not to pay for my college, which was one of the reasons that I had not finished. I had been very uncomfortable with the mounting debt and had foreseen that art would not have supported me in the real world. Yet rather than be proud of my practicality, they called me a "college dropout" for the rest of my life. And they called Brother "a bum" for being blue-collar. However, when Father announced that he was not going to pay my tuition, Mother fumed around the house, saying to me (though not to him), "I can't believe this! He has so much money. We had always agreed that this was the one thing we would do... There is plenty

of money for your college costs!” But, no. I went to college on loans. And I had also been disqualified for the better loan rates because of Father’s wealth.

My Friends, I write this not to say that parents shouldn’t teach their children to stand on their own. What I am sharing, instead, is that this treatment by wealthy Father made Brother and me feel worthless, unsatisfactory. It hurt us deeply.

Brother and I would discuss these things on the phone. We were usually on the same page, sharing the same impressions and feelings. This was always wonderful and helpful to us both. But sometimes we were not on the same page emotionally. Sometimes we reversed ourselves, out of guilt, confusion and obligation to Parents. Perhaps I would be bringing Brother a new thought and he would be walking back his words of the last week. Or perhaps he would be venting about Parents and I would be doing the opposite. It’s hard to explain this sort of hell. We were so unsure. And living with this level of unsureness, from the very start, caused us terrible suffering.

Gifts of Pain

Eventually, Husband and I were able to buy a small “fixer-upper” home, without anyone else’s involvement.

Parents had pressured and pestered us and finally invited themselves over to see our home. We really had wanted more to be accomplished in fixing it up before they saw it.

My Readers, I promise you that this chapter has not been changed in any way from the truth. This is one of those stories that you may have trouble believing.

Parents showed up with a housewarming gift, if you could call it that. I don’t know what else to call it. It was a large box of garbage bags. Black, plastic garbage bags. And Father explained that he had gotten it for free from his work, since they were defective in the seams.

I felt that old, familiar confusion.

Were they really that insensitive and thoughtless? Was this because, as they said, they came of age during the Great Depression? Yet they didn’t treat others this way... I wondered again if I was just an ungrateful adult child? Spoiled? Or was this a test to see if I was unappreciative? Or to see if I was stupid? Or were they spitefully having a secret laugh between them at our expense?

So I simply thanked them.

I never felt there was anything to be gained by confronting Parents. I had to hope that my feelings simply never crossed their minds, since I was “theirs,” like property.

As they moved through our tiny, antique house, they were very quiet. Their questions felt prying and intrusive, rather than feeling to me like genuine interest.

Brother let me know, later, how harshly they disapproved of our home. They called it a “shack.”

At the next Thanksgiving gathering, back at our childhood home, Father started to extol the wonderful, ingenious work that a young couple was doing on an historic home. But I knew of that couple, and they had a million dollars to work with, and a beachfront location that would allow their investment to pay off.

Husband and I were really trapped at this family meal. We were captive. We could only politely endure the discomfort that Father was inflicting on us.

We worked hard on that home, with pride. Originally, it had no central heat, no driveway and only a shallow well that sometimes ran dry in the summer. I will always remember a few cold nights when Husband was away driving and the temperature inside the house dropped to freezing. I slept in the smallest room in the center of the house, a bathroom. I was wrapped in four blankets, yet in the morning the ends of my hair, what little I had, were frozen and broke off! We were both unwilling to humiliate ourselves by asking either sets of our parents for help.

And so we continued. We restored the “horsehair plaster” walls and exposed its historic beam structure. We were even able to save the wide plank floors. But Parents never gave us the satisfaction of any praise, approval or acknowledgement.

Gift-giving, generosity and birthdays: all these things had an oddness to them in our family. Gifts were never personal or on-target to who Brother and I really were. Even as we said our thank yous, we actually felt that something ungenerous, almost insulting, had been done to us. It’s the thought that counts, right? We were raised not to be materialistic and we understood that our parents were conservative about money. They did not believe in people receiving anything in life that they did not earn through their work.

But it still hurt. I remember a birthday when I was in my preteens. Mother had gotten me a sweatshirt with a very poorly done picture of a deer on it. It was one of those very generic tops for outdoor, winter work... She even apologized for it as I was tearing open the wrapping paper. Yet she also bragged that it had been on sale and had cost her under ten dollars. Was this a form of distancing? Was it a way to say, “Here. I have remembered your birthday. Now don’t get any ideas, though. No mushy emotions. It’s not like I love you or anything”?

My parents did not receive gifts very well, either. I did eventually give them paintings of my own. They were so wealthy that it was hard to think of anything that they did not already have. And then I gave them a jam collection one year. It was sort of a jelly-of-the-month thing that would last all year. Father’s comment was that the shipping cost, by weight, probably made the gift idea not worthwhile.

Poor Brother, in a phone conversation with me, once asked, “Why don’t they want to be kinder? When I have kids, I will want to be good to them. I don’t understand this, because they have money. So, why? What have we done?”

It certainly meant a lack of love to us. It was just one more expression of missing affection, a lack of support and the withholding of approval.

It hurts me to this very day.

They had given us the gift of pain that is still alive and will never be fully gone.

A Wake-Up Call

Another dental visit, but with a new dentist.

As I lay in the chair, my dentist, a woman, began to talk to her assistant about something that had her very upset. She spoke as if I wasn't there and couldn't hear.

She said, "My neighbors are Southern Baptists and they are abusing their children!"

I was stunned. This was the very first time that I had ever heard a dissenting voice or a different point of view about Southern Baptists! Ever! I had never heard anyone speak from outside of the Southern Baptist religion in a critical way. I had also never thought that what Little Brother and I suffered could be called "abuse." I had never had anyone allow me to criticize my parents, nor had I even heard anyone willing to tolerate this about *any* parents at all. Not ever! I had needed to hear this, all my life. It opened up a new perspective and new possibilities for me.

This dentist never had any idea that she had helped a victim of child abuse by simply talking over me. I did not have the opportunity to discuss it with her. But, after this visit, I began to explore the taboo of blaming parents. Often, that is where responsibility belongs, regardless of parental intent or lack thereof.

But our society has a phobia about it.

PART THREE — SOMETHING TO SAY

A Diagnosis

Forgive me for jumping forward a few decades in this narrative, but I want to share some recent happenings from nearer to my present-day life, age sixty. First, because of the issues about which I will soon share, I realized that I needed more serious help. So, only recently, I found a new psychiatrist. I'd tried a few psychiatrists and therapists over the years and decades, but never found a really great one. This time, though, I'd found the right one, Dr. Simms, whom I was able to completely trust. She was about my age and was really brilliant. Also, everything about her was moderate. Her strawberry blonde hair was moderate in length. Her bodyweight, moderate. Her personality, always calm and caring. She was neither intimidating nor gullible. And she was perfect, because she could not possibly remind me of Mother. Mother was a naturally skinny type, almost bony, and had short-cropped, dark hair.

It took several weeks just to fill in Dr. Simms on my family history. It was nice to hear her say that my depression and anxiety were almost to be expected, given my past. It made me feel more justified, rather than like a bad, defective person who just takes all the wrong approaches to life.

My lack of friends and social life came up as a topic. I had my life strictly choreographed. I would drive to work, using the same exact route, listening to music. I would work all day, being only half-present. I would then drive home in the same state of mind. I never diverged at all. I never even stopped for gas or to pick up groceries. My wonderful husband didn't mind doing these things for me.

By six months into therapy, I trusted her enough to share my fantasy life. This was the first time I had ever described my inner life to anyone, at least in the detail in which I shared it with her. This world inside me was like a parallel script, always running alongside reality. I had known I

was probably unusual in this regard, but I had been too ashamed of it to share about it with anyone. I had been daydreaming since childhood and I knew that other children outgrew their “invisible friends.” But it was not so normal for a grown woman. Not only that, I had lost control over it.

At the following session, Dr. Simms said that she had something to show me. She handed over an enormous, hardcover book called the DSM, the book by which psychiatry diagnoses people’s problems. She also had photocopied lots of additional information from various sources.

She said, “I think you were emotionally neglected and suffer deeply from it. I also think you have avoidant personality disorder. Take your time and read through this. I cannot loan out the big book, but all the rest is for you to take home. Please ask me any questions you have and let me know your thoughts.”

And then, I began to read...about *myself!*

I saw myself described for the very first time in my life.

Finding my condition described so accurately and seeing that this was a real “thing” made me so relieved that I began to cry. I just let the DSM rest in my lap, and wept with the photocopies in my grasp.

This meant that I had something real, predictable, resulting from the abuse and experienced by others. What I had was enough that other people had recognized it, described it and included it in the diagnostic manual of psychiatry! I couldn't believe it. I had been so alone for so long.

Up until then I had believed myself to be grudge-holding, suspicious, overly sensitive and misanthropic. I had been called "selfish" and "stubborn" thousands of times by Parents, and, as I shared earlier, called "aloof" and "a recluse" by Father.

He had said, "No one will ever marry you. If they do, they won't be able to live with you. I predict that you'll be a very lonely person."

But now I read about *Parents, too*. I read about their kind of parenting, and the results for the children. Allow me to paraphrase what I read: "Mothers are ambivalent, distracted, distant. Their lack of normal parental affection can be most obvious when the child is sick or hurt. Otherwise, the child may be well cared for. Such parents discourage crying and other emotions and encourage premature independence. They often refer to their children as 'big boys' and 'big girls.' The child has trust issues and is remarkably *adept at recognizing insincerity*. The child will grow to avoid, at all costs, those whom they have *observed to be untrustworthy*."

I was beyond astonished.

And then I read more about the characteristics of people with avoidant personality disorder, which, from here onward, I will refer to largely as AvPD. Again, allow me to paraphrase: "The child loses hope very early in regard to a satisfactory parental relationship. The child does not

feel like a legitimate or important family member. Their feelings and thoughts seem to have no value at all. The child may *turn to fantasy in order to meet their own emotional needs.*"¹

Oh my god. Wow.

I also read, which I will paraphrase: "*The parents were of little use, sending mixed messages that made no sense to the child.* To the extent that the child has (or does not have) any role model providing a loving and supportive influence (such as a grandparent), the expression of the illness will be more or less severe."

And this too: "The avoidant was convinced in childhood that they cannot ever be liked or loved, and they have an *unstable sense of identity*. Their original self is in "exile." As they mature, they are aware of 'not fitting in,' which causes them shame so that they further self-isolate."

And this: "An avoidant's safety zones are important and they will have an internal zone, if they are lacking an actual one. Their home should be their safe haven. Nothing is more unnerving to an avoidant than an unannounced intrusion, especially if anything unpleasant results. Avoidants tend to be triggered by environments easily and the pain of a traumatic event remains fresh. In their trauma, there is no concept of time and *they are locked in an eternal present.*"

It is worth noting that much of this information I have paraphrased was first conceived by Dr. Ralph Klein, MD, an expert on AvPD, in his book "Disorders of the Self."

¹ I feel for young people who are addicted to gaming. I worry that these are my fellow avoidants. If their alternative lives and characters are taken from them all at once, they may be at risk for a psychotic break or suicide.

Dr. Simms, meanwhile, gave me extra time that day and I ended up making jokes as we parted. I felt like I was walking on air.

I'd like to say something more about AvPD, my wonderful, patient Readers. We avoidants are those whom you may work alongside, and you may feel that although you have tried, you don't really know us. You may think that we are just cold and snobby or that we neglect you. It's kind of offensive how little we say and how we excuse ourselves out of every office function or opportunity to socialize.

But truth be told, we don't think much of ourselves. Most of us are undiagnosed. The extreme form of AvPD, especially when we retire, can turn us into a so-called "shut-in."

We may like and admire you a lot, but we won't say it. We don't know how to connect with you. We are utterly convinced that we will disappoint you. We always expect sudden rejection. We believe that if or when you see the real us, your disappointment will feel very painful to us. We may have a very pressing and legitimate need, but we will not ask for help. This is not pride... It is our instinct that we are so fragile, already, that one more disappointment just might destroy us. We don't know if we can absorb any more pain, and so we do not risk knowing you or being known. *It is a risk that we will not take.*

And this is why I wish people would lean toward kindness, always.

Contained

I left an absence

My sorrow burned, so I crept away

Became a name

I've lost my face

I am misconstrued.

I hold the reins of the team

The one who decides

Who fools. The image.

I am a visitor, like a stranger

You cannot know me

I cannot give myself, because I am not.

I love the darkness, so that

You cannot see my misinformation

Who I am — who I am not.

I watch and hope, but you are not for me.

You were looking for someone else

How can you find me now, when I am hidden?

Like an animal alive, but with dark, glass eyes

I can feel my shape, pressed against my cage

Press my feet against my solid walls

This way I know what I am...

How very small.

Where I begin and end

Contained, I am safe.

I am now as I made myself.

In shame I see

I'm an extra piece of a puzzle,

complete without me.

A stone left aside, the wall already perfect.

Did anyone notice?

I'm the wrong story, predestined

Before I could think or remember

I came from the bad soil.

Lent and given away.

Can't change it now, the end will be the same

The story has already been told

How can I be guilty? Condemn the child?

How can I speak my dragon's language?

Be fierce? An abomination, a hybrid,

My monstrous shield maiden.

You created yourself, you owe no one.

Belong to no one.

You grew during the time of erasure

Let God gasp!

The broken promises are complete, forever
Our knowledge cannot be unknown
Contained, I am safe.
I can feel my shape, when I am not me
I can know my edges, contained in the dark
I am self.

—by LeeAnn

A Second Diagnosis

During the next few months, Dr. Simms and I worked on improving my concentration, and it was not going very well. We also worked on me taking small social risks. However, she told me that I would always have AvPD and should only push myself slowly toward happiness. Yet at least now I had hope.

In one of our sessions as we discussed my fantasy life, I called one of my imaginary characters a pervert. I meant it to be sort of self-deprecating — and an attempt at humor. But then I felt as if I'd hurt someone's feelings. My own? How could that be? How strange. I would never, of course, have said such a thing to anyone else. And I didn't really even mean it.

I sometimes have vivid dreams that I remember. I had one such dream that was unusual enough to mention to Dr. Simms. Actually, it was more of a nightmare in the first person or in the skin of my favorite fantasy friend, Eric. I call him a “fantasy friend” here for lack of a better term, though soon, as this book unfolds, I will have a better term for him. Meanwhile, in this bad dream, I/Eric was running scared, as if a helicopter or giant bird of prey was above me. I felt naked and was naked from the waist up. My white skin was glaring in this environment. There was no place to hide, since the environment was arid and empty. I was tired, hot and sweating, nearly exhausted and sure that I would be caught. I also had an intense fear of being exposed, and also a deep desire not to be seen.

The dream, I felt when I contemplated it further, was all about not wanting to be *outed*.

After I shared the dream and my thoughts about it, Dr. Simms got a serious, thoughtful look on her face.

“LeeAnn,” she said, “dreams come from our subconscious. Did you say that you were in the first person as you had this dream? Like it was happening to you?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“How long has Eric been a consistent person in your mind? Can you remember when he got his name and when his life kind of started? And how old do you believe him to be?”

I thought for a second. I knew that he had been with me since I was just a kid.

“I feel that he is twenty-six,” I replied. “And I don’t know why. But I think he has been with me since I was five. So he has been in my life for at least fifty years now!”

Again, Dr. Simms was deep in thought. Then she said, “LeeAnn, I want you to talk to a colleague of mine, alright? I want you to understand that I will never reject you, terminate or dump you in any way, ever. Alright? In fact, I cannot do that and you should continue to see me, okay? I enjoy working with you. By the way, LeeAnn, you are really a good, fascinating and honest person.”

I agreed, tearfully. I trusted her and she proved to be worthy of it.

It took a few weeks before Dr. Simms formally gave me a second diagnosis: dissociative identity disorder. This used to be called multiple personality disorder. This disorder occurs on a continuum, and every person diagnosed with it is unique and individual. Dr. Simms told me I had a milder subtype, but that I was, nonetheless, a “multiple,” as we with the diagnosis often call ourselves.

I would like to answer some questions that may be on your minds. One thing I find important to share is that people live with this disorder and do not know they have it. It is a hidden disorder, unlike the gross misrepresentations shared by the irresponsible and often exploitative media. Books and movies have given the general public a tragic perception about us. We are not dangerous, to be feared. And we are not obvious. We may work right beside you and if we do “switch” between identities or “alters” you would never notice it. Some multiples do not ever fully switch or push another identity to the “front.” What I have with Eric, for instance, is called co-consciousness. He is an alter ego of mine, and we can both be conscious at the same time. And my dragon-hybrid, Esma (whom I’ve previously referred to as Esmerelda), is called a “fictive.” This is an alter that is based on a fictional character, though in the case of Esma I changed her name from the story in which I discovered her. And I will later introduce Frank, who is also a full-blown alter ego, but whom I never experience in the first person. I lack co-consciousness with Frank.

Splits

Splits are my people.

Parts flew everywhere

Landing, crashing

Born of a violence.

Then they stand and wait.

I can call them back to me.

We are pieced apart, broken together.

Lines and rifts between us,

Walls of the soul.

But when we sleep, we murmur,

Sharing the music of fear.

We keep telling it and telling it...

Til someone overhears.

—by LeeAnn

Those Bad Bones

If you grew wrongly, in the dark, or if your bones did not get the right nutrients in the right amounts, you would not be able to fix your bones later without destroying your frame and starting over. Understanding the error only helps a little. The bad bones that are mature now cannot be changed. Dissociative identity disorder is similar to this. It is a product of early childhood development under extreme or prolonged emotional stress and trauma. It is not a true disease, nor is it genetic. It is a response, a child's attempt at a solution.

This is why it hurts and frustrates me when people provide me and others like me the well-meaning advice of "heal," "reframe," "let go," "choose happiness" and "move on."

These are just verbs, all.

The victims of childhood trauma would love to get to a place of health and happiness. Of course!

Yet some people accuse us of choosing to stay here, under the gray rain.

But, in fact, our very structure is not plumb. It is unsound, because we were mis-nurtured. We are not able to fix it. We cannot "get there from here." When people give us such advice, they only add a sense of failure and shame and doubt to our character. Another burden!

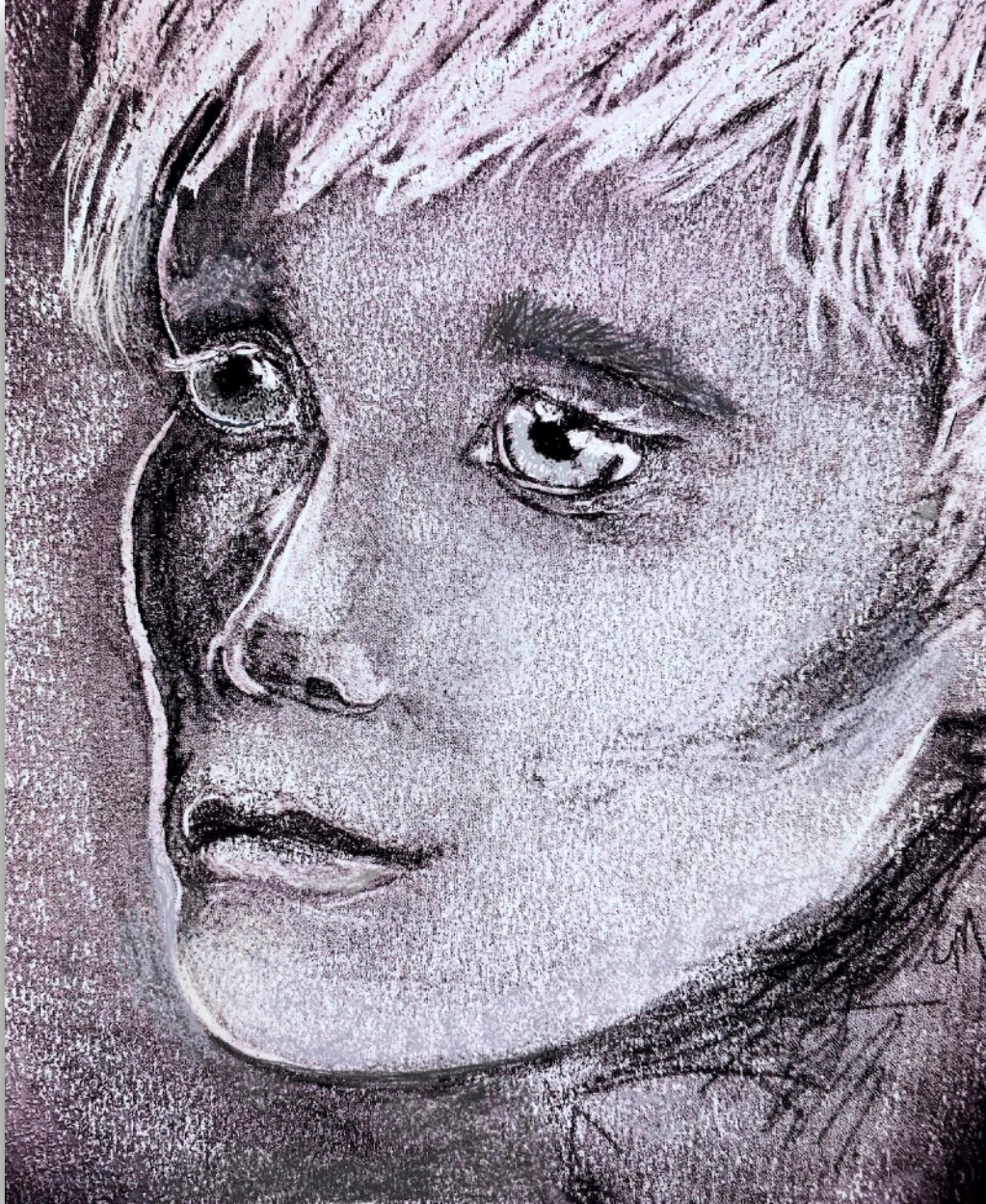
Our condition is a noun.

I think of a child, any child, who is traumatized by an abusive event. That child pretends to be someone else, or actually becomes someone else in her mind, as she endures the unbearable. Later that day, she must go on as if she is normal and undisturbed, and she buries that memory in her subconscious. Now, in order to recover such memories, the child, or perhaps the now-grown adult, must first find the right “drawer” in her mind’s file cabinet. She needs the right label or name for that drawer. As this child, now grown and in a therapist’s office, recovers the memory, she will again “feel like” or “be” that other person. As she re-experiences that memory, she is wearing that name, she is under that label again. It’s as simple as that.

Not only did I grow up in an environment of fear from which I could not escape, but I felt hated. Sometimes I think I simply chose to give myself a happier day and stand beneath a bluer sky. In order to do that, I had to wear a different form and name. The one who is more beloved.

And so I often wore the form and name of Eric.

An Image of Eric (by Eric)



SOMETHING TO SAY

When Help Hurts

For most of my life I was a strong Christian believer, so I felt obligated — to the extent possible — to first look for therapists “of faith.” I believed this approach was better than just “secular” therapy.

I had chosen to be baptized in water at the age of seven. Also, Southern Baptist children choose, whenever they feel the need, to repent and commit themselves to Christ. For a long time my religion was still a central cog in the way my mind viewed the world.

Let me now return some years in time. My first Christian counselor was a disaster. Christians don’t even deserve a black eye for this one, as she does not represent them. This person moved a client into her home in order to observe him day and night. She pressed another client to write a book with her, and she wanted to be the coauthor so that she could gain attention and profit. In one session with me, she inexplicably began to hurl shocking insults at me, calling me names like “weird” and “spineless.” (She later claimed that she needed to do this to see how I would respond to confrontation.) She was so unstable and her behavior so bizarre that there is no point to be concluded from this...

My second Christian counselor was very sweet, to the point of sugary, yet motherly. Something in her voice made me long for the attention that I had never gotten. But I was no longer a child and I would not allow myself to get too vulnerable or too close. My hesitancy would prove to be wise in this case.

She decided to create a group for all of her clients who suffered from traumatic histories. Well, for me, joining this group was a mistake. A couple of her clients had suffered much more severe forms of abuse in their lives than I had and they relived traumatic memories in group. Compared to them, I felt that almost nothing bad had actually happened to me. And so I had nothing to contribute. As such, my old feelings of inadequacy began to creep up on me. I even had a dream that demonstrated how insignificant I was feeling around this time. In the dream I was not damaged enough, and also not interesting enough. I was yet again a secondary person. Was I selfish by sitting with people who had suffered so much more than I? Should I even be there? What kind of character am I, having such childish feelings and wanting more attention? And my avoidant nature, which was by far my worst and most painful issue, was not helping. And so, even in my mental “illness,” I felt homeless.

This Christian counselor also touched upon the subject of forgiveness in session, and said to me, “Why don’t you be big? Maybe you can be the bigger person.” This was said in an alluring way, as if spoken to a child. Can you hear the echo, my Readers?

How many times had I been told by Mother and Father, “You are a big kid, right?”

Yes, you see it. I see it. The projection, the expectation...the repetition.

This counselor eventually became so saturated and fascinated with the case of one special client, a client who was not me, that she accidentally called me by that client’s name numerous

times. In my vulnerable state, this made me question myself and left me wondering if I was projecting qualities of Mother onto her by mistake. But no, what she was doing was real. I was seeing a clear case of “favoritism,” even though it was unintentional.

And then in one session, she complained about her own daughter, calling her “stubborn.” This was an all-too-familiar criticism as well, an echo of an old injury. How many times had my own mother called me stubborn?

Ideally, I would have been able to explain to this counselor how I felt about what was happening between us, and what her attitude was bringing up in me. But I couldn’t, because that would have been a further risk. I was like a pet in the veterinarian’s office, unable to say exactly what was wrong or where it hurt. An avoidant, though I did not yet know this was my proper diagnosis, barely knows how to identify his or her own needs, never mind verbalize them and reach out to another person for help. Explaining myself, after all, had been taken away from me by my upbringing. And wasn’t the therapist supposed to know what she was dealing with?

But all this said, I stayed with her for a long time. Yet her slips of miscalling my name persisted, until I finally dropped out.

I never again sought a counselor or doctor “of faith.” Looking back, I question the rationale for therapists or counselors using a hybrid psychological-religious approach. Such clinicians are taking a part of what science has discovered and has to offer, but not all. And by the same token they use only selected parts of “Scripture” as well, all the while ignoring the many parts that are plainly wrong.

Yet it did hurt me, these failures of hers, these failure of hers to win my trust. This was a hopeless time for me. It hurt so badly that it could have been dangerous if not for Husband, who, thankfully, was already in my life.

1994

When I hear David Bowie's famous song "1984," I change the title in my mind to "1994." In my life, 1994 was the year that did me in. The year that I completely collapsed.

I was thirty-three by this time and had been married for several years. Up until this time, even through therapy, I had been high functioning and was very much in demand as a typist. I was able to deal with high pressure in office environments. But then the problems started.

In the first part of that year, while I was driving home from work one stormy day, a flash flood of historic proportions quickly closed off all homeward roads. Every familiar way was blocked and the water rose deeper and deeper. There was nowhere to go, and all the drivers just sat in the road, completely congested and stuck. The nearby homes were all inundated with water. It rained so hard that it was like a solid waterfall flowed down the windshield of my beloved Pontiac Fiero. I had to open my window and look out in order to see. But now water poured into the car with me! Eventually, I had to evacuate the Fiero through the window and I even lost my shoes. But Eric's good nature got me through. Thankfully, meanwhile, my Fiero was recovered and did survive, but a sense of insecurity about "ever getting home" made a nest in my chest.

Soon after this a senior executive at work, a man in his seventies, began to sexually harass me. I got a quiet transfer. But I remained in the same office, and cruel innuendo and gossip followed me. Because of all this, I believe, new pains began to flare up in me and I found myself diagnosed with fibromyalgia. But I kept working, and I more or less rejected the notion

that I was physically ill. I was ashamed of it. I had always had a very strong work ethic and I continued to do desk work, even as my neck muscles would sprain.

Yet 1994 was only getting started for me!

I was always exhausted in those days. I worked a lot of overtime and slept deeply. One night Husband and I were both asleep. Suddenly, a rumble like an earthquake awakened me, and I saw a brilliant orange light shining in through the window. I started to slap Husband awake, but he was already kicking off the covers. The sound seemed to surround us. I honestly started to wonder if we had been attacked by some sort of bomb.

Once outside with me on our tiny balcony, Husband said, "I think a big plane has crashed."

Ash and tiny bits of shrapnel rained down on us in the dark. I thought we were going to have to just abandon our apartment and run...but to where?

The sound. Reader, can you imagine a dragon that is breathing fire? Have you heard a fire extinguisher or flamethrower? Multiply that sound by a hundred and you need to understand that there is no inhale or exhale, no break or stopping. It was continuous and, if anything, getting stronger and louder. No rhythm. Just an unbroken, continuous roar.

We eventually heard rescue vehicles — fire engines, ambulances, squad cars. Utter chaos went down our main road, seeming to come from every direction. But exactly toward *where* we did not know.

SOMETHING TO SAY

We learned that a natural gas pipeline had exploded. The interstate pipeline was thirty-six inches in diameter and seven feet below ground. The breach had occurred at about midnight. One person, only thirty-two years old, had died as the result — of heart failure from the fright of the explosion.

Meanwhile, the only thing of physical value that I lost in the explosion was my beloved Fiero. It was partially melted, and was considered totaled by the insurance company. I had driven a hundred thousand miles on it myself.

Yet worse than this, something about this event had unnerved me. Life felt more unpredictable than ever before. Something about the unannounced shock of it has stayed with me.

As I write this, I again reflect on those words I would later read in Dr. Simms' office and paraphrase: "An avoidant's safety zones are important... Their home should be their safe haven. Nothing is more unnerving to an avoidant than an unannounced intrusion, especially if anything unpleasant results."

Soon after the explosion I had what I believed was a heart attack. I was taken from the apartment to the emergency room. This happened several times, and these attacks turned out to be anxiety attacks. I was more unnerved than I realized.

Then, in late 1994, my new psychiatrist got me placed on Social Security Disability. I had worked for fifteen years. I was sorry that I could not continue. At most times, honestly, I had enjoyed my work.

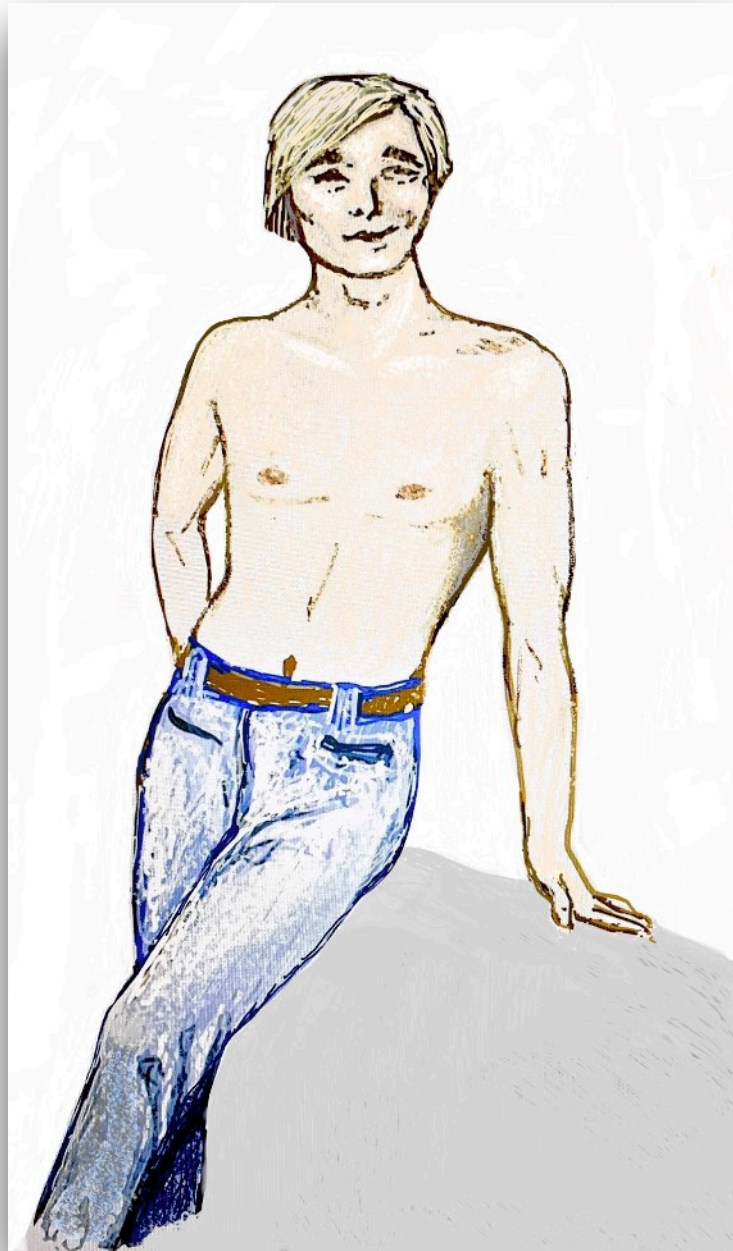
My doctor told me, "You can't just keep running from your past. It is common to get by until adulthood, such as your age now. Then it catches up with you. You're repressing too much and you just can't do that indefinitely."

I knew she was right. I could feel my health slipping away.

So, in 1994, I quit running. I wanted to give my time to my recovery.

I was broken down on a road that had come to a dead end.

A Second Image of Eric (by Eric)



SOMETHING TO SAY

My Miracle

Finally, my Friends, I get to more properly introduce my beloved alter ego, Eric.

Eric is my miracle. Without him and the comfort of the others, due to my dissociative ability, I am sure that I would already be dead. My deep depressions would have overcome me. The love that Eric and I have for each other is something that words can't explain. Those Christians who are reading this and who believe in the Trinity should not have trouble with the concept of multiplicity. Eric is me. I am Eric. We are the same, even though my body is sixty, while Eric's is still only about twenty-six.

Eric is a miracle in the mysterious spirit of resistance that must have been involved in his "birth" or evolution. He simply defies everything that was constraining and oppressive in our time. Eric is gay. Those of you who are old enough or who come from a similar background will be more likely to understand what this meant in the 1960s and 1970s. Things were so much worse for gay people then... No matter if they were gay from the age of four or five, they were made to believe that they were not only perverse, but perverse by choice. Families threw kids away, leaving them abandoned and at risk for a dangerous lifestyle, the only option sometimes. Later, AIDS made them suffer and die while Southern Baptist preachers protested at their funerals and said that they earned this death because God hated them.

Through all this, Eric has been true to his wonderful nature. Any human being alive would do well to resemble him. His humor is his way of being friendly and charitable. He is selfless, affectionate, but shy (although his jokes can be quite filthy!).

However, as I've mentioned, I am married to a wonderful man, and he also comes from an abusive background. Eric likes Husband and so Eric's homosexuality is a gift in our shared consciousness and life. Some people who live with more complex multiplicity describe chaos in their personal lives. I don't know how they survive; my heart goes out to them. I have heard stories of marriages that break because another personality cheats or despises the spouse... I suffer from no such conflict.

But where did Eric come from? Perhaps I needed to be more like Little Brother in order to be more lovable. I do know that when I was a child, I always felt boyish. Maybe it makes sense that if I had been male and a sort of sweet victim, which is part of Eric's inner story, I could have won Mother's love. It doesn't matter now. I am only glad to have Eric and the others. I would not have it any other way.

What I have is something that I feel "happened to me," without conscious effort.

I plan to share messages from Eric with you, too. He deserves to be known to you. Anyone that has lived unseen for so many decades surely deserves to carve his initials into the tree of life.

Eric is platinum blonde, with light gray eyes. He has that “forever boy” look. If he lives to be ninety-five he will still have a youthful charm about him. His appearance is elegant, like a runner. He is definitely male and he hates to be called or thought of as “girly.”

He says, “I know I’m not a girl!” He has high cheekbones and a button nose and he feels that he stands about five-foot-eight, which is an inch or so taller than me. His smile, just like mine, closes his eyes almost completely. Eric loves music, everything from very hard rock to danceable old disco. He loves action and sports on TV, anything from horses jumping to motocross. When we used to drive to work in the Fiero he was responsible for making the car bounce in place at the red lights. He was jamming his foot on the brake, making it dance to Madonna and to George Michael’s “I Want Your Sex.” His favorite clothes are gray jeans and a silvery shirt. Just a little sparkle, not much. “Oh,” he snarks, “I’m bringing out my eyes.”

He’s kidding.

How do I know that I am not faking it about Eric, or that I am not psychotic? A story from decades earlier in my life highlights my reply. Some time back I attended a Pentecostal church, where there was a less strict and conservative type of worship than that of the Southern Baptists. I really enjoyed the freedom of emotions that the Pentecostals allowed, and their contemporary music too. While there, I had wanted to have the supernatural gift of speaking in tongues, which is part of their religion. And so I tried to have it, but what I found was that I was incapable of doing it, or even of pretending to do it. I tried again and again and not one word ever came to me. For me, it was impossible. Absolute failure. I was incapable of making something up.

But it was only after I began therapy with Dr. Simms that it was as if Eric and I were introduced to each other, correctly, for the first time. It was almost as if you have been working alongside someone for a long time yet with whom you had skipped a proper introduction. You simply nod to each other and work, perhaps sending emails, but have been so busy that it never occurs to you to take a coffee break and just talk directly with each other. In that way, I had been taking Eric completely for granted and thought of him as “mine” — and also as a shameful problem.

Once I started throwing a few simple questions at Eric, his replies were instantaneous, as if I’d flipped a light switch. He never needed a moment to think.

When I asked him about himself, or about his interests and his likes and his dislikes, he told me. He shared his opinions, and he had his own clear voice. Yet his voice was not that of an auditory hallucination. It did not come from outside myself. It was and is like an inner thought, part of me, yet different from the voice that I recognize as me, as LeeAnn. Eric truly does have his own identity.

So there is another reason that I call this chapter “My Miracle.” If you remember, I had fierce and compulsive trichotillomania — pulling out my own hair. I could not even answer the door on a weekend without grabbing a hat or even getting my wig. The embarrassment and fear of being caught off guard made me even more of a shut-in. And I had pulled out my eyelashes for so long that they just stopped regrowing. Only a few years ago, my scalp was actually sore. Even in the house, around Husband, I wore a hat out of shame, though he never complained at all. I had tried everything, including psychiatric meds, therapy, self-punishments by snapping rubber bands, hypnosis. Husband and I even hid the household scissors, since I was also cutting my hair with them, and then we eventually threw out the scissors altogether.

And then I began to use shaving razors and shaved my head. Poor Husband, the ally of my failed recovery, felt so awful.

Well, one day, four years ago now, I heard Eric's voice in my head. He was finally exasperated by my suffering. He said, "Just don't do it. Okay?"

I have never touched my hair again in a harmful, nervous way. I now have gorgeous medium-length hair that I keep platinum blonde in Eric's honor.

How can I explain this? There was something weighty and determined in his words that day. His words were a conviction that was not my own — one that I had needed and desired but did not have, and only received through his message. Our desire had finally merged. And it was life-changing!

Eric's effect on me is called "passive influence" by the psychiatrists and psychologists.

Well, passive can be pretty damned powerful, huh?

Catching Hell

For as long as I could I hid from Parents the fact that I was not working. I don't remember how, exactly, that it finally came out. I was not going to lie. I had just avoided the subject. But it happened during a phone conversation with Mother where she asked too many specific questions and I had to update her.

I was soon "invited" — forcefully — to their home, where there was an emotional explosion. Father became so belligerent that the veins were raised at his temples and his eyes seemed to bulge. Mother was in the background but added to this shaming. She used the phrase "take a handout" at least twice. She was really fanning the flames this time!

She said, "I would starve to death before I would take a handout."

Meanwhile, at first in that conversation, if you could call it that, I had only told them that I was on disability because of my physical complaints, such as fibromyalgia. I avoided letting them know that I was really on disability for mental illness. Also, I kept trying to defend myself whenever I sensed an opening in Father's ranting.

But, because they did not believe in fibromyalgia at all, I finally told them the nature of my "handicap." I even mentioned my suicide attempt. I was trying to find some spark of concern, care or empathy in them. I was hoping to get through to them the actual life-and-death nature of my suffering. But instead they seemed personally offended. They displayed nothing but disgust, impatience and unending interrogation. According to them, I had gone against everything that they believed in and lived by.

Father finally said something like, “I think you need to decide if you are a member of this family or not!”

It sounded to me like he was threatening to throw me away and disown me. As the browbeating continued, I slowly began to move toward the front door. I don’t remember how I excused myself or if I actually did or not. I only know that I left, and all the while Parents continued to express their disdain for me. It was one of the worst verbally and emotionally abusive experiences I’d ever had, especially since becoming an adult.

The timing of this was unfortunate, too. Christmas was coming up — a mere two days away. Brother called me to let me know that a financial gift was expected, but that my receiving was contingent on my actions.

“They’re throwing you away!” he said. “You need to do something!”

But I had no idea what I could possibly do. I was neither ready nor able to return to work. If anything, I was again feeling dangerously, clinically depressed.

On Christmas no phone call came from Parents. Nor even a letter or a card from Mother. And I knew I couldn’t just go and receive an envelope from Father’s hand without getting some sort of apology from him — and perhaps also giving him a mollifying apology. It would have made me feel like a prostitute. And so I turned away from a huge bribe. I wondered if I had, at last, been completely rejected as their child.

SOMETHING TO SAY

Weeks later, the oddest thing happened. Our rental home had a gate at the driveway and a dog fence with another gate in the backyard. As I was standing in the kitchen, about to make coffee, my eyes caught movement through the glass of the backdoor. I suddenly realized there was a person in the yard — someone who had come through the dog fence. It was Mother! In a moment she was looking at me through the backdoor. I was polite and invited her in for coffee. But I noticed that she carried a large and heavy picture frame — one of my works of art. Yet it turned out she hadn't just brought one picture frame of my art, but most of them! The rest she brought were in her car, and we had to make several trips to collect them all, and also to collect my framed childhood photographic portrait!

Apparently, she was clearing from the house everything that represented me. As we transported my works into the house, she said some odd things, including, "In case I don't see you again..."

I was, honestly, afraid to inquire. I had shut down emotionally. Yet I was respectful and she seemed to act calmly. But she was making a clear threat nonetheless. Then, as she left, we acted as if it had been a perfectly normal and pleasant mother-daughter social visit!

It was not until months later, when I next visited their home, that I realized that a couple of my paintings still hung on the walls of the first floor. Thus, no one aside from me would ever know how she had behaved toward me — because they were keeping up appearances. But upstairs, the empty spots had been replaced with other photos or pictures. And I do not think that Father even knew what she had done to me.

I never saw them display any sorrow on my behalf. Only shame, disbelief and doubt. They even chose, I learned later, to believe that I was lying about my suicide attempt.

According to them, I had failed to “achieve,” despite being given, in their words, “every opportunity in the world.” In their minds, I had joined the great masses of malingerers. Their own daughter! Damn those quack, leftwing, bleeding-heart doctors!

I also received letters from relatives, such as an Aunt and Cousin.

They wrote, “Your parents are hurt and disappointed that you didn’t finish school. You should go back. Failing that, you could at least continue working.”

By what they did not say, I knew that they were convinced that my disability was unnecessary or even fraudulent.

Mother then deceived me by saying she needed help at her home with something. I agreed to go. She did not tell me, though, that Cousin was waiting to confront me — to do a sort of intervention. There I was questioned by Cousin without mercy, and Mother added in, “Wouldn’t it be better for your self-esteem to be working?”

Oh, Readers, the prices I paid for my invisible disability.

As it happened, although I was technically approved for disability, I hadn't yet even begun receiving my disability checks. I would have to wait two years for that, as the bureaucracy takes its patient time. Meanwhile, Husband and I lived frugally off his income.

Humor

Humor is a favorite tool of Eric.

One day, I was riding in the passenger seat of the car with Husband. I love to look out the window and become mesmerized. As I did, Eric appeared in a corner of my mind and asked, “Why is a dragon’s penis the internal type?”

“Omigod,” I replied. “Seriously? Don’t know.”

“Cause it would always be draggin’.”

“Lamest joke I’ve ever heard! Go away!”

Then he threw another one at me: “Why won’t they be teaching history anymore in school?”

“No idea.”

“Because it’s outdated.”

Eric’s jokes have always been so naive that now I was smirking and starting to giggle. But I tried to push it down. My alters know that it’s the stupid, silly attempts at humor that can get me going.

Yet the more I tried to repress the laughter, the worse it got.

Husband looked over and asked, “What? What’s so funny?”

Well, I didn't know what I wanted to do. Husband knows quite a bit about my disorder, at least in an intellectual way, but sometimes I can tell that it is off-putting to him at the feeling level. This is something that we handle mostly in our couple's therapist's office, taking it slowly.

If I told him, Husband would ask why the joke came out of nowhere. I could have lied, maybe, but where would I have heard it? I really didn't have an answer.

I don't remember how I got out of this one. I thought to myself, "I am truly what they used to call 'lunatic.' At another time, I could've been chained to a dungeon wall!"

And then I thought of the phrase "Dungeons and Dragons." And I laughed some more, as one of my alters, Esma, is actually part-dragon! I don't remember what excuse I gave Husband, I really don't.

Dearest Eric is the master of laughter for me! It is often too dirty to share. But he also understands that sometimes I just need a poke in the ribs. When I've been feeling down, he knows just how to do it. He can lift me out of the darkest depressions.

Husband and I were watching TV on a quiet evening. It was the show called "Hoarders, Buried Alive."

Knowing that I repress inner jokes in Husband's presence, Eric piped up in my mind with, "Oh! I know exactly what the next, explosively-popular television series needs to be! You should call a producer now!"

"What?" I asked inwardly.

"Homosexual Hoarders"!

I apologize, everyone. I don't know why, but Eric knew that I would fail to suppress my reaction to his silliness. I shared this bad joke with Husband who only hissed through his teeth and shook his head.

Meanwhile, there have been actual events and pranks that Eric was responsible for. They are so bold and brazen, so unlike me. Allow me to share one.

It turned out that Brother, like me, had a desolate social life. He had only his family and he barely functioned professionally. They were not rich, so when the roof of his home needed some repair, he had to do it himself. The roof repair "crew" was his family and my husband and me. His wife and I had the job of picking up the nails and old shingles that were being tossed from the roof. And we would hand up tools and new shingles. Suddenly I had to take a dump, and when I realized it something possessed me — or, more correctly, possessed Eric. I took the dump out behind the garage, out of sight from the world. I took an old shingle with me and placed an obvious pat of feces on it. Afterward I came back around front and climbed the ladder. Brother was right there. As soon as Brother turned to look at me, I held up my offering and said, "Is this what they mean by 'shit on a shingle'?"

Brother laughed so hard that he cried and could not straighten himself up — and had to come down for a break.

My Favorite Jeans

My favorite jeans
How they shine!
Just a little sparkle
Just like my eyes

Since I met you
Life is a party
The very best kind
You bought me them
My jeans that shine

Now when I dance
I look like a diamond
Under the lights
Throwing sparks your way

My favorite jeans
They're so nice and tight
Won't be makin' no baby!
Can we go to a dance club tonight?

A tiny bit of metal, a glint in my eye
I feel you as they fit like a glove
When I'm in my favorites
It's like wearing your love.

Lights, lights, lights,
How they spin, how they shine
And I'm in my favorites
Never let me die!

Our love is bright now
Let it shine, let it shine
You got them for me, for all to see
My favorite jeans that shine
They, and you, are mine!

—by Eric

A Story From Eric!

Hi. So it's me, Eric! I have a funny story to tell.

When Lee and me would get home from work we would strip off the office clothes that we despised, as fast as we could. The pantyhose were off before we even hit the top stair. Disgusting things. Husband used to work really late and was never home first.

Anyway, Hubby was stressed and grumpy lately around this time. Lee and me were getting pretty pissed about it, too. Well, there was our old cat. We loved her. But she was, like, eighteen years old! She had been throwing up all the time, tossing her dinner down the stairs. I'm laughing. She would literally *toss it* down the steps at night! Well, fuck, Hubby would come in late, in the dark, and step right into the puke. Almost every night. And it was after Lee and me were asleep. We were not slobes or anything, like we would have cleaned it up, but it was happening after we fell asleep.

Oh, fuck me twice! I'm really enjoying this!

Anyway, Hubby was tired and had been getting a little nasty about this, like it was our fault. What the fuck, though... Only the wife has to clean up puke, or what? Sexist much?

So, I had an idea. And I got really excited 'bout it. It was a great prank! It was the two of us, y'know, how it is with us, Lee and me. On lunch break, Lee and me took a little foray into the city. This was very big for Lee! I found the novelty shop and found what we needed. We bought the items and got back in time to snarf down a bagel. Right now, my face is pulled into my smirk! Oh...payback can be a bitch, buddy!

So we set our little trap. Ate. Showered. We were hoping to be truly asleep by the time Hubby got home. But we waited and waited. And waited some more. We masturbated, 'cause we do a lot of that. Waited some more. Tossed and turned.

Finally, at some ungodly hour, we heard the front door open and close. We heard a couple of steps. Then silence. Hubby had stopped. Then we heard heavy breaths and muttered cuss words. I could hear steps being skipped over and then another halt. More naughty words and more steps. I turned my face away from the bedroom door, to pretend sleep. But I was giggling and having trouble being quiet. The bedroom door opened. Hubby obviously was in a powerful huff and was wrestling with himself about whether or not to turn on the light and wake us up. He chose not to, at first, and went into the kitchen. I could hear paper towels and water... I could hear him go down some steps to clean up the mess. God, I'm laughing again right now!

I was giggling so much that I knew he was going to hear me and see our shoulders shaking. In fact, I had trouble hearing him as he finally said, "What the fuck?"

Then: "Are you kidding me?"

And then: "*You...got me...fuckin' good!*"

Now he came into the bedroom, laughing so much that he was bent over, red-faced. I finally sat up and couldn't even speak for laughing.

Lee and me had bought plastic cat poop and a rubber vomit puddle. It looked so real. I had placed the very yellow, foamy vomit on a low step, just as the cat had been doing. And then I put the poo about halfway up, which would've been a brand new cat problem.

So the joke was on Hubby, and it was so worth it. It got him to lighten up. The message was, “Hubby, you think it's bad now, but it could be worse!”

So, I love you all for reading our book. Thank you. And if I get to speak to you only this once, I have only one thing to say. Please. Please. Please stop the child abuse. Please. Everybody, please. All the child abuse, even the “little spankings.” It has got to stop. Please. I beg you. Do something. Please.

Please.

Love, Eric

A Third Image of Eric (by Eric)



SOMETHING TO SAY

The Nature of Mother, Revealed

Father died a full decade before Mother. There was one particular promise that Father had made to his grandsons — Brother's sons — in a written contract. That was very unlike Father, to tie himself down on paper, so we all knew it was important. He had wanted both grandsons to attend college without benefit of their own cars. Although Father's fears were unfounded, he didn't trust them with cars. He assumed that their own transportation would make it too easy for them to go to parties off-campus, get into trouble and even get manipulated by others for rides. Thus Father's contract was that when they graduated after four years, he would buy them each their first car. Nothing sporty or fancy, but brand new.

Brother's oldest son finished college soon after Father's death. But during his final year of college he suffered the first trauma of his young life: his friend, who was also his roommate, committed suicide. In his grief, he struggled through the last semester, in the same dorm room, no less, that he had previously shared with his roommate. His grades did suffer just a little, and he ended up getting one C.

Meanwhile, Brother and his wife approached Mother, when the time came, to make good on the contract.

Mother asked to see the grades.

She then declared that his grades were not good enough, and commented that he had not made the dean's list. Yet nothing about grades or the dean's list had been specified in the written contract.

I know about all this because poor Brother called me up and shouted, “She turned into a monster! We got the bad version of her!”

His son had been made to feel like a failure. Also, Brother’s family desperately needed the promised extra car. The arrangement that they had worked out during his son’s years of college had been a real hardship on all of them. After Mother’s refusal to fulfill the parental promise, Brother got a loan to buy his son a car. And two years later, he got another for his other son.

The whole world saw Mother as gentle, sweet and mild. She seemed to be a very pleasant, peacekeeping and traditional type of mother and wife. For most of our lives, Brother and I had somehow gotten ourselves to believe that she was another victim of Father, almost like she was our older sibling. For a while in my adulthood, she had even treated me like a buddy of hers. But eventually I figured out that she only wanted my ears, never my voice. I never did get to be her daughter.

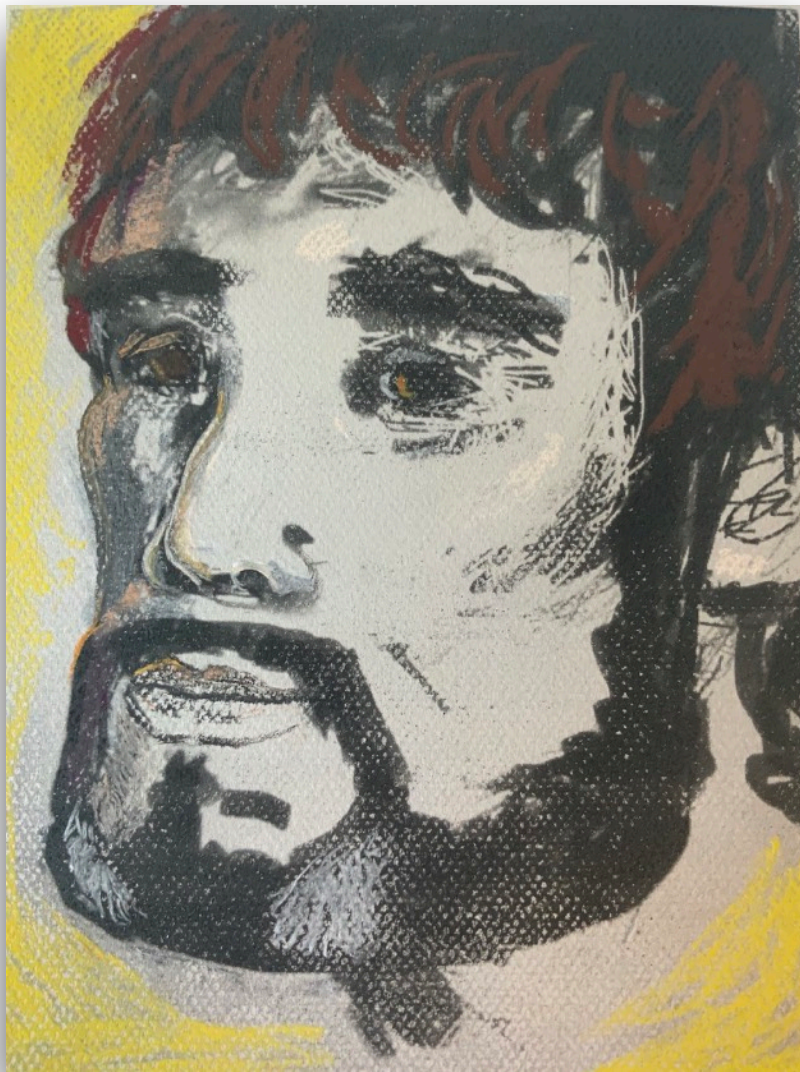
Later in my life, I had to reconsider my beliefs about Mother. I began to remember her tone when she would compliment me and make supportive statements. Such statements from her always sounded like an inhale, something withheld or taken, without an exhale, something given. I had always doubted myself and felt guilty when her praise or encouragement did not make me feel encouraged at all. I seemed to feel worse than before she had spoken.

In the end, Mother lived a very dishonest life and was the most selfish person I ever knew. Her life choices, including sacrificing both of us, her children, for her own security and comfort, were entirely self-centered.

I don't know if Mother was acting by instinct or if she was deliberate in what she did. It doesn't matter. It has taken me my whole life to embrace the knowledge that I do not have to understand Mother. It is not my responsibility. Never could be. Never was. What I do understand is that she worked hard, every day, to *be* something false and *live* a false life. But when she was tired and the mask she created cracked, her true bitterness and anger would show. This is why, I think, we would sometimes see a monster.

Franky

Omigod, time to introduce Franky! Frank has been with me as long as Eric has. He is the most *good*, fatherly, superhero-type man! Over the years, he became Eric's love interest and vice versa. They are an item. I see Frank as huge, like a bodybuilder. I have illustrated his face for you. Frank is supportive of me and Eric. He just likes to let us shine. I do not experience him in the first person.



What's Needed

Here is a poem by Franky.

It's alright, I won't even look at you, Babe
You can speak into the dark, rest your chin on me
Let your tears run down my back
It's not secret, don't you understand? I already know.
I get your story, I swear.
I promise, my heart's right there.

It's okay if you're angry, I won't tell you "No."
If you tell me the sky was black above you
I won't ask you to paint me a rainbow
Let me stand under the darkness with you
They may have turned their minds from you
But I'll turn my back on the whole world, if needed
Cuz I see the truth of you,
as clear as the drops from your eyes.

You're still in the moment cuz no one can fix it
The clock stopped on you, Babe, I know
And I will never say "Move on."
They don't get to tell you what time it is
It's like telling the moon to be the sun
When you need to be heard, I'm the one.
When you need to be known, tired of being alone.

More on What's Needed

Frank's words come from within me. But how on earth did my mind *know* what it needed? This is amazing to me.

Frank's words are always like this: "I do not care about Mother. I never did. And your father was a bastard. If only I could have dealt with them for real, they would not have been very happy afterward! I will never make those wishy-washy sounds that you've heard so many times or bother you about forgiving those two people who never said they were sorry! That will never be me. Never! Baby, something could have been done. It should've been stopped and your mother was covering it all up! They did not do the best that they could! What bullshit! They were lazy, greedy and prideful! People want to talk about some kind of victory and make it seem like you turned out okay after all these years. But where were *they* when you needed them? I see your pain. I know the truth. I see *you*. I care about you and I'm here for you and *only* you. You will never hear that shit from me about *Mother's* problems or forgiving *her*. She was your mother, not the victim. *You were the victim.*"

Frank is partial, not impartial. I have learned, later in life, that his role is very important as an "empathetic witness," also called an "enlightened witness" in psychological terms. I have been reaching out to people, forever. I have been whining, complaining, testing people... I have been needing someone to hear me and understand. I have been starved for validation. And Frank has been that person for me.

One late morning, Frank was with me and said, “You deserved better than the crap excuses, the ‘it’s not so bad’ bullshit and all the weakness. The do-good, peacekeeping attitudes that let this go on happening over and over!”

Frank was angry, but it was *for* me. His one arm was around me. It was something that I had never — no, not once — experienced in my life. When I heard it, I could’ve fallen to my knees in tearful gratitude. *This* was huge for me... *This* was needed, desperately. And it released something in me. And that *heals* me.

My Readers, when I wake each morning, I am not like other people. I am sad to say that there are millions like me; I didn’t mean to say that I’m the only one. We wake into our lives and, some days, are hit with an undertow, a force of depression that threatens to pull us under. Our life is not full of enjoyment or hopes. It is mere survival. We suffer. We simply suffer and that is the perfect word. Some mornings are worse than others. Sometimes I can understand that this is from some recent invalidation in my life. Maybe I was triggered. Maybe someone said something thoughtless. I have to give time to this feeling. I have to chase it, corner it and make it say its name. Most people have enjoyed their coffee and headed out to work without a great struggle. For me, every day is difficult, and even agreeing to live every day is difficult. I make coffee, too, but my process is slow and very somber... Eric has to tease me. And Franky... Franky, in my mind’s eye, puts his huge palms upon my shoulders. He says, “Look at me.”

I look into his olive-brown eyes and he says, “I remember. You remember. We know what the truth is. We know what happened. Remember that your problems have a root and a cause. It was out of your hands.”

And with this, I can take hold of his gift of validation. And I give myself another day. I thank Franky and all I have to do is put one foot in front of the other, for another day.

Rise

Want to see me? I'll show you.

I no longer fear.

I am flattened. Washed clear.

So many storms have rolled over me

I am hard. A leveled stone.

Go ahead, look. Let me know what you see.

If I thaw for you, I will be clinging mud.

You will want to rebuild.

Bring in what you need.

You will want some steepness.

I'm willing, if you are.

I'm willing to rise.

—by LeeAnn

Time Machine

Here is a poem written by all of us — all parts of me.

We landed something on Mars the other day.

I like to be alone.

We just made vaccines for the virus in record time.

There was no help or understanding when I grew up.

If only we had a time machine, we could've been saved.

Everything is the speed of light now, like cell phones.

When I was a child, I was always afraid.

We have learned how to make war
without seeing eye to eye.

I chose never to have children.

Sometimes I thought someone understood me.
But then I was surprised.

I came across a book once. It described my kind of broken.
It felt like having a friend.

We can build amazing things. Someone built a huge ark,
Like that story in the Bible.
But those people hurt the most.

By myself I feel mostly at peace. It's what I do.

I hear people too well. It's almost like I expect their thoughts.
And I was right.

I think I can see people too clearly.

My mind is full of pictures.

I just stay by myself. And wait.
Wait to see if the world gets better.

I wish I had a time machine, just to take a peek.
Before I die.

The children are still afraid.
They may turn out like me.

I can't erase the pictures.

I live up high and behind a long road with a gate.
I can see, so don't worry about me.

Don't be sad. This is how I want to be.

The Forever Abandoned Child

Early on, I had a therapist who believed that unforgiveness was *the* problem that I had, and that forgiveness of my abusers — Parents — would be *the cure*. I mentioned her earlier. She was the one who tried also to get me to be the “bigger person.”

Some days, I succeeded at forgiving them, or at least feeling that I did, but then other days, I was back to thinking that I had not. My work with this therapist also became an intellectual exercise in trying to understand Parents, which took me away from my *emotional* work. Meanwhile, during this time my mental anguish did not improve. My pain was still in me, as loud as ever.

The therapist’s constant urging about forgiveness made me feel that she was ambivalent about me. She was always putting one of her feet on the side of Parents. I felt so betrayed and felt that old confusion and conflict again. All the while, I had more memories and feelings of rage locked inside of me that needed to come to the surface, but this was not going to happen in her office. She had failed to be consistent and trustworthy — and had not made a *safe space for the anger*.

Knowing myself now and looking back, I see that my emotional development has been arrested at the age of about a serious, mature five year old, up to maybe a smart seven year old.

Although my therapist only thought that I was complaining, what I was really trying to say was this:

SOMETHING TO SAY

Why do my Parents not love me? Why do they think I'm so terrible? Is it true?

Do you, as my therapist, see it? Why doesn't anybody see?

Can you fix this for me?

Can you get Mother to love me? Can you make her see that I'm not so bad?

But I was not so clear in my words yet, even though I was a professional adult.

I did not know how, yet, to get acquainted with my emotional language and needs. They went neglected and unspoken, as they always had.

Forever a child. A window has closed. Too late to absorb the colostrum milk... Forever hungry, but without a stomach...

If only Parents had shown us any sign of acceptance...

Brother and I were always ready and waiting to forgive them. We actually were waiting...

For them to “forgive” *us*.

For not being what they wanted.

For not being what they felt they deserved.

But we waited “forever” in vain.

The Last Broken Promise

While Father was sick with cancer, his temper was as bad as ever. We tried to be patient and blame his abuse on the cancer, but it was really the same old tune. Father disowned me on his last living day, angry that I was not able to be at his bedside as much as Brother was. Yet I was there less because of distance. While Brother owned his own business and could set his own schedule, I was further away and also relied on Husband for the driving, as I was on meds at that time. Yet Husband was hauling for a trucking company, so his schedule was not so flexible. I had explained myself to Parents, only to be dismissed for making excuses.

During this time, Brother and his wife stepped up and shouldered the burdens of help and care. They did the same when Mother later became ill herself. They really went above and beyond. They drove hundreds of miles without ever being offered gas money and they never asked for anything. Brother's wife took home Mother's laundry, despite the laundry service offered by the assisted living facility where she ended up living. Mother refused to use it. And before she moved to the facility Mother also refused landscaping services at her house, and Brother ended up mowing the lawn for her. Brother even found and paid a landscaper, only for Mother to fire the service.

Brother's business began to suffer. We all tried to excuse her behavior. But there were times when Brother needed my ear. He had no one else to whom he could complain without getting kicked in the teeth. Brother said to me, "Gosh, I hope I can live long enough to even see a better life. Mother seems to hate our guts and I feel like the misery is never going to end."

The stress that Brother was enduring was terrible. He was also having some issues with his blood pressure.

And then there were the lies. Mother's enormous house needed to be painted. She claimed to have gotten some unrealistically low estimates. Her goal was to get Brother to compete with those numbers. She was manipulating him into painting her house at less than cost, such that Brother realized he could not afford to do it. The payment would not even cover the required materials. So he respectfully told her that if she had really gotten the estimates that she claimed, she ought to go ahead and accept one of their bids to do the work.

Later, after the job was complete, Mother let it be known what she had really paid the painter. It became clear that she had been dishonest to Brother about the estimates and had paid out more than ten thousand dollars. She could have helped out her struggling son with that money. Both Brother and his wife told me all about this by phone.

Brother once explained to me that he felt just as challenged and unloved by them as I did. But he explained to me that he was choosing to act the way that he did, as a dutiful son, so that he would never have to look back with any regrets or guilt.

After Mother's death, it took two years for her fortune of ten million dollars to begin to be distributed. Chunks had to go to Uncle Sam, to professional people and to several charities. Brother and his growing family, which now included three grandchildren, received a large inheritance and I was glad. I did end up being named for a small inheritance and I was surprised. I was glad that Husband might now be able to stop truck driving for as long as three weeks at a time. Meanwhile, why did Mother give us anything? I can only guess that she

wanted her and Father's legacy and behavior to look acceptable and respectable. I do not believe she gave me anything from a place of love.

When Brother saw the amount of money that was going to be transferred into his name, he took the first steps toward purchasing a large, country property that he was very excited about. It had its own boat dock, and a short jaunt could bring his family right out onto the ocean!

And then Brother died in his sleep.

He was not yet fifty-one years of age.

He did not know he was dying, so that he did not have a chance to think over his life or speak to his family members one last time. He never got to speak to me one last time either.

There is a special Scripture in the Bible which is a commandment with a promise attached to it. It is Ephesians 6:1-3: "Honor thy father and mother; this is the first commandment with a promise, so that it will go well with you and you will *live long*..."

I had heard this promise preached about many times in church.

Well, long life, my ass.

This was the final broken promise, broken by God himself. With that, I kicked off the shackles of religion and tossed the cuffs from my wrists. All at once, I was *done* with it!

I am only sad and angry at what this religion did to my life and Brother's life. I could've been a different person. A less inhibited one. A healthier and happier one. Yet we do not get another life. Brother's is over. Gone.

Frank's Revelation: I Was a Victim!

After Brother died, Franky spoke with *clarity* and he spoke with *anger* — an anger mixed with such grief, with tears running down his face. He spoke first to Parents, and through them to all abusers:

You have beaten up the victims with blame and denial!

You hypocrites! You say 'forgive' where it does not belong and where it is *not* owed!

Lee was right to be in agony and right to be suspicious! You deny her the truth, you deny her acknowledgement, understanding! And then you think she will praise God?

Stop moralizing everything! Stop seeing choice and volition where there *is* none!

The demon's name is *doubt*. Its name is *confusion*. Its name is *invalidation*. Its name is *unresolved childhood abuse*.

We know what we need to do to heal society. It is within our grasp! If we can prevent and cure the most troubled people, people who are only abused children now grown up, we can have a healthy world! We can have it!

Frank sees straight. He is not twisted like Father. And he has his own power, inside his own chest...

SOMETHING TO SAY

Do you know what else Frank told me?

He told me that I do not have to become anything other than who I am. That I don't have to re-become. That I do not have to redesign myself *again*...

Franky said:

We are not pathological. We are not an illness. We are not a 'morbidity.' We are not misaligned, delusional, insane, broken, maladaptive or disturbed.

We are an answer. Our life is an answer.

We are no longer your victims. We will not bend to a religion or a philosophy that does not ring true in our center!

And then Franky concluded:

So that people don't have to live in pain, spend years in therapy and work on forgiveness, why don't you all *stop the child abuse in the fucking first place?*

I can only take Frank's hand and kiss it. He is right and right and right...

But how does he know these things? How did he know? I cannot say. I think it is amazing that my brain came up with Franky. He is something as good as or better than the best therapist or psychiatrist. The fact that my brain itself came up with him remains remarkable to me.

The cure for my sense of invalidation was so simple: his clarity.²

² A word here about how I have embraced being a victim. I do not use the word “victim” in a tone that removes our human dignity. I also do not wish to imply that a survivor should give up, coast through life in a way that robs him or her of self-sufficiency and respect... Nor should a survivor be apathetic, manipulative, dependent... Nor should a survivor make no effort to heal and live a meaningful life.

Our Present and Future

My Readers, I will always have AvPD and be a multiple. These things cannot completely go away. I am walking evidence: the very nature of my troubles declares the child abuse.

Yet with Parents gone, I can never again be hurt by an unexpected visit or phone call. No more can be heaped upon the memories that already live inside me.

But thanks to my own intuition and thanks to Frank's insights, my parents no longer have any power over me. And I see many people remaining under such power, even after their parents are long gone and nothing but internalized ghosts. In my case, I finally stand above my parents; I hold my personal power in my own hands and I no longer feel like their helpless child.

In fact, the state of my freedom is evidenced by the fact that I could write this book. Without such freedom from Parents, I could not have written it.

Yet, I will repeat, I know that I am still deeply affected by them. The sad thing is that my situation is not as rare as I used to think. This makes me feel very sad and discouraged. I have lots of kindred spirits out there, people struggling to keep their jobs, losing marriage partners. Many of them are probably homeless. They may be broke and aging alone. Some have killed themselves.

I am lucky in that Husband is so kind.

Also, I got back to work years ago. For many years I cleaned office buildings at night, as part of a small crew. I am also no longer taking psychiatric medications, except, very rarely, some Xanax for anxiety. I was able to stop all the regular meds some years back.

Husband and I, meanwhile, are currently living in a rural setting, without anyone else in sight! We have tremendous privacy.

And me, I feel best in the evenings, as the shadows turn blue and the brightness of the day begins to get drowsy. It is then that my sense of expectations and my feeling of failure for not living up to my potential go away. The evening has always been my justified time to relax. My work is over.

Likewise, in the greater context, I am in the late afternoon of my life. As I said earlier, I am now sixty. I am enjoying those stolen late-night hours of my life, after the daytime sun has gone away. I have no need to kill myself, because death is rushing up behind us all. I have no rush. And I feel like most of the suffering is finally behind me. It makes me feel relief.

I often take out my paints and canvas. I feel that Eric and Franky contribute every bit as much to this art as I do. We are so full of life and passion, despite the efforts to grind us under the heel. We say, "We knew the truth! We knew reality! We knew it!"

And in the end, we are very much on the side of life. This is because we care about future generations. We really do. To that end, we have tried to give you something: a keepsake, an heirloom, our knowledge. Our story. Our pain. Our hope.

Afterword

My precious Readers, I would like to share one final thought on breaking the cycle of child abuse. Although I have spoken about the value of my own adult healing journey, both in therapy and beyond, I feel that the real healing, on a societal level, must start with parents — most especially before they have children. By the time they have children it is too late, for by then the cycle of abuse has already been set into motion. Yet this is difficult for society to hear, not only because abuse is so common but because we are trained to respect parents at all costs, to reconcile with them, to forgive them. To show forbearance.

Yet I believe we must blame them when they are wrong. And until we have the courage and the respect to blame them, there is little hope. I often wish that I had confronted my parents more effectively. I did tell them of my problems, but I never placed the blame and responsibility at their feet, where it truly did belong. Because of the mixed up ways in which I was raised, both by them and by the greater society, confronting them would have felt to me like an act of hate. But actually confronting them would have been an act of love, commitment and hope. To that end, confronting parents in general, where it is deserved, means asking for change at the parental level, not waiting until the victimized children have grown up and then placing the whole burden on them.

Again, by then it is too late. This is exactly why generation after generation are still suffering. Too many people have already become parents or even grandparents by the time they realize that they have issues to work on. By this point the work of healing, of grieving, is disruptive to everyday life. It often never gets done at all. And by then the harm that they experienced has already been passed on to one or two more generations!

I believe that it needs to become totally acceptable for many people to forego raising children at all, because the human suffering that results from difficult or poor parenting is incalculable. Or perhaps our understanding of the nuclear family should be expanded, so that families will be much less isolated. I do feel that so often fathers, when present, have too much power. They are the so-called heads of household. Maybe society someday will rethink this and truly allow a village raise the child.

I don't have the answers. Only some ideas. And in this tale I have simply shared the example of my life. And in that spirit, I pose my final questions:

What will the next generations, the younger, more capable people do?

What will they be willing to do?

A Childhood Photo of LeeAnn

I remember the day of this photo session and that hated dress. I couldn't smile. I was sternly told to stop hiding my face behind my hands. My self-consciousness could already be seen.

