

The Last Supper

The siren sounded, thin and shrill, cutting into the eerie silence. The protesters, for and against capital punishment, marched on opposite sides of the road leading to San Quentin Prison. They marched up and down, waving their signs at approaching cars driving through the main gate. The angry faces, for and against capital punishment, stared at him as he drove past. The prison walls, looming ahead, grey and forbidding, mirrored the mood outside the giant fortress. An older woman, held her sign aloft, the words

“Stop the Killing” in bold black letters. Tears streamed down her face. Who was she? Certainly not a friend. He has none. All the legal papers in my possessions consisted of legal correspondence chronicling a twelve-year battle to obtain a new trial.

All legal avenues had been exhausted. The final appeal had been filed. I wondered if he thought about my mother, dead these thirteen years, unable to appeal to a higher court? Did he think about the fourteen-year-old boy, now a man, left behind?

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I had started visiting him on my twenty-fourth birthday at the prompting of my therapist. This man, my father, tattooed from neck to waist, his teeth brown, his skin pale barely resembled the man I remember. His face lit up as I entered the small cubicle, taking a seat behind the plexiglass barrier. He had a disarming smile, despite the gap from a missing tooth. That smile always disarmed me until his eyes, empty and mysterious, met mine, sending a cold chill through me.

On all subsequent visits, I tried to avoid those eyes, and when I couldn't, they filled me with fear.

Growing up in a series of foster homes, I worried. Most foster parents ignored my past, but others less sensitive, wondered if a killer resided within me, and it was only a matter of time before the tainted gene exploded and violence erupted.

My fear was reinforced by the image of my mother, her features unrecognizable, lying in a pool of blood, my father, the murderer, standing over her.

Fear motivated me to visit him over a three-year period. My psychiatrist suggested I write a summary of each visit and my subsequent thoughts, so I bought a journal. The first visit was

awkward.

“Hello Danny. You’re all grown up.”

Obvious, I thought. The world didn’t stop when you went to prison. I nodded, waiting for the next question, aware I was annoyed.

“Did you go to college like your mom wanted?”

He mentioned Mom but showed no remorse. What did he think? I had a college fund. I bussed tables, worked my ass off and... I’m not annoyed anymore, I’m irritated.

“I got an engineering degree.”

“Your mom would have been proud.”

The M word again.

My irritation changed to anger. Dr. Shapiro’s warning came into my head. Express yourself Danny.

“If you hadn’t killed her, you both could have attended my graduation.” My anger subsided. I felt better for speaking my truth.

“You’re right Danny. If she were here.”

He’s calm. Not in denial. Now what?

“I’m glad you came.”

He sounded sincere. If only I could remember our relationship, but the past, our life before mom’s death, died with her. The man sitting before me, a stranger, defeated, not menacing at all. Something inside stirred pity. Dad’s eyes were disturbing, reflections of pain and suffering, which make me uneasy. He’s a broken man. He deserved to die. He took her from me. I lost everything. I had prayed for this ending. My mind went into overdrive as I went over all the reasons for hating him. Try as I could, I couldn’t conjure up any hatred. This was a complete reversal of my former attitude. Unbelievable. How did this happen?

We were sitting across from each other, talking on two-way phones, the heat unbearable. I loosened my tie, my neck wet with perspiration. He stayed calm, his skin dry.

“Are you alright Danny?”

The caring tone disturbed me. This man, a stranger really, a murderer. I didn’t want him to care about me.

I made an excuse to leave and departed hastily. I ran to my car, panting uncontrollably, driving erratically. I found my way to the gate and vowed never to return.

The nightmares increased. always the same. I walked into the room, my mother is lying there, covered with blood, he’s standing over her. I can’t see his face, his back is to me, I back up, he turns towards me, and I run.

I always regretted running away, not facing him, not saving my mother. I play the what if game, tormenting myself with all the things I could have done. Dr. Shapiro says I need closure. Visiting my father will facilitate the process. Reluctantly, I returned.

During our visits, we didn't discuss mom. It was as if he knew the emerging relationship could not take another hit. Something else occurred, the nightmares stopped. This was odd indeed. For the past eight years, at least twice a week, I awoke bathed in sweat and unable to breathe, haunted by the images of my mother, dead in a pool of blood.

A new fear emerged. If the visits stopped, would my nightmares return? At some point, the decision to end the visits wouldn't be mine. Time was running out.

Dr. Shapiro suggested I bring up the topic of my mother. "Why? I asked, the nightmares are gone."

"There's something you're not facing. Once you face it, the nightmares won't return."

The next day, I received a phone call from Dad's attorney, the last appeal had been denied, the clock was ticking. He had forty eight hours left.

I called in sick and went to see him.

"Hello Danny, how you doing?"

Me, he's the one being put to death. "Um, I don't know."

He smiled. "I've been expecting you."

Every visit. Always in control and I'm not.

"You're at peace," I said, bewildered as usual.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Mom! Don't you remember?" The old hatred surfaced. I loosened my tie.

"I remember, Danny."

"You took her from me." My eyes were dry. A numbness crept through me.

"Do you remember that night?" he asked.

I shot back. "Of course I do." Doesn't anything shake this guy. I'm rocking back and forth, beside myself, and he's unruffled.

"Tell me what you remember."

My mouth went dry. I licked my lips. My hands were shaking.

"Danny, talk to me."

Strange, he cares. My voice sounded far away. I can barely hear it. "I gotta go."

When I got home, I called Dr. Shapiro, who was pleased. He

encouraged me to return the next day, to continue the conversations. Time, he reminded me, was running out for both of us.

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The next day, I returned. The guard escorted me to the visiting area. My dad had been moved to a different cell block.

As I waited for him to join me on the other side of the glass, I noticed my hands were trembling.

“Hi Danny,” he said, taking a seat across from me. “Since tonight’s my last night, I can invite a guest for dinner. Will you join me?”

I swallowed hard. “Sure,” I said. What else could I do?

“What do you like to eat? I can order anything I want.”

It’s his last meal, and he wants to know what I like. With a sudden clarity, I realized my problem. He had won me over. Little by little, pretending he cared, and now, I didn’t hate him anymore.

That night we ate together. Fried chicken, corn on the cob and mashed potatoes, which used to be my favorite meal. “Can I have the legs?” I asked.

“Sure, I prefer the breast, he said. “Do you remember the last time you ate chicken?”

I looked down at my plate, almost empty. The night mom died. “Yes,” I said, meeting dad’s eyes. The eyes that stared back at me had changed. He was holding something back.

“What do you remember about that night?”

This was my last chance. “Blood on the floor, blood on my hands, you are standing over mom, touching her neck.”

Why is she dead, Danny?”

“You were angry. You wanted the leg. She said no. Beyond that I can’t remember.”

Danny, I like the breast.”

A numbness came over me. I tried to speak, I wanted to protest, but I couldn’t speak.

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“It’s over, Danny.”

I couldn’t move. He stood over me. I stood up, and he hugged me.

* * *

That evening, I visited Dr. Shapiro.

“Well how did it go?” Dr. Shapiro asked, taking a seat opposite me.

“Dad suggested that I killed my mother.”

“Oh,” Dr. Shapiro said, rubbing his chin.”

“Even at the end, he couldn’t admit it.”I said, feeling uneasy.

“You tried. Visiting almost every week for what, three years.”

“Yes.”

The nightmares?”

“Gone, I said, standing up. “I won’t be coming back.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

I shook his hand and strode out of his office, feeling a freedom that I had not known until this moment. My earlier anxiety had disappeared.

All these years, after mom’s death, I was filled with fear. Now, I knew why.

A lot of folks believed dad was innocent, but the police didn’t buy the intruder theory. It had too many holes. Yet, dad continued to insist an intruder killed mom. An investigator from the DA’s office believed dad was covering for someone. He visited him several times, but dad repeated the same story. The investigator discounted a stranger. The ferocity of the attack indicated the killer knew his victim. The number of stab wounds indicated an attack fueled by rage of a personal nature.

The migraines had kept me from remembering. Once I faced the truth, realized I was safe, and the only other person who knew would be dead by morning. I was free.

The next morning the phone woke me. The caller ID identified Dad’s lawyer, Dave. Reluctantly, I answered.

“Hello Dave, I said, ready to tell him, he had done all he could to save dad, and I was grateful to him.

“Hi Danny, I got good news. Your dad’s sentence has been commuted to life.

I squeezed my eyes shut, recognizing the start of another migraine. In the background, I could hear Dave asking, “Are you there, Danny?”