TRAPPED

Maybe I shouldn't be writing this.

Maybe you shouldn't even be reading this, especially if you had a normal, happy childhood.

But some of us had a difficult upbringing, filled with shame, secrets, lies, and abuse. As I get older, I find I need to reveal to others what really happened in my early life -- if only to purge my long-withheld feelings, and come to some sort of amends or closure. The anger and regret of those times still pains me to this day. I try to forgive and forget, but it is hard. Yet it is said that 'catharsis is good for the soul', and can lead to healing. So here I go...

Truth be told, I suffered significant emotional and physical abuse as a child. To the casual observer, my family probably appeared to be a typical, lower middle-class clan like any other, living on the south side of Chicago in the 1950s. My mother was a housewife, and my father was an engineer for the Chicago Fire Department, driving the fire truck. I had two sisters, one four years older than me, and one four years younger. But my father was an alcoholic, and my parent's marriage was miserable, with constant fighting and arguing. As a child in such an unstable environment -- who was never told a simple "I love you" by either parent that I can recall -- I was likewise 'on edge' and unhappy. There was no dependable adult 'pattern' or 'good-modeling' behavior to give me a respite from wondering if or when I would get slapped or hit for doing something 'wrong.' Before long, I developed a nervous stuttering problem. I wet my bed well past the age when it normally should have stopped. I sucked my thumb -- so much so that my top front teeth protruded, causing me to need two years of dental braces. In short, I was a confused, lonely mess.

Because I attended a Catholic elementary school, I absorbed in desperation the concept of God as my substitute Father and the Virgin Mary as my surrogate Mother. I prayed for mercy and understanding and hope. Oh, how I begged for deliverance! My trusting, childish faith helped enormously in saving my very sanity. But my greatest desire -- my strongest wish -- was to get away from my pathetic, crazy 'home' and never come back.

I'd like to share with you now a single incident which illustrates the absurdity of my childhood upbringing. I have never told anyone about this event before. You are the first to know about it. I caution you that it is not very pleasant.

My mother was part of a small group of six neighborhood women who met every month -- on a rotational basis -- at each member's house to play cards, specifically Bridge. Special snacks were prepared, the house was thoroughly cleaned, the large dining room table set. Highball cocktails were served. 'Bridge Mix' candies were offered in little glass dishes. Several ashtrays were set out too, because everybody seemed to smoke in those days. The women always got nicely dressed up and put on make-up and perfume. It was a pretty big deal, but no men were ever allowed! It was basically a time for sharing female gossip and neighborhood banter, from 7:30 p.m. to midnight -- playing cards and getting tipsy while being away from their husbands for the evening.

I was a shy, seven-year old in 1958. My tiny bedroom was about twenty-five feet from the dining room where the Bridge Club would be held at our house when it was my mother's turn to host. It was in chilly late autumn night, as I recall.

Being my mother's first hosting of the group, it was a special kind of 'social debut' for her, I suppose. Shortly before her club members arrived, she grabbed me and pressed her long, red-painted fingernails into the flesh of my arm until it hurt, then said to me, "Under no circumstances are you to come out of your bedroom while my guests are here. If you do, you'll get the beating of your life later! Do you understand me?" Her eyes bored into mine like a pair of icy, steel drill-bits. "Yes," I weakly replied, in fear, as always.

After brushing my teeth and using the toilet, I put on my pajamas, then got into bed. (Never had any bedtime stories, sadly.) I could hear strange women's voices from behind my closed bedroom door as they arrived, one by one, whenever my mother answered the doorbell. Eventually, I fell asleep.

But I woke up a few hours later and really had to urinate badly. I suffered in silence, remembering my mother's firm commandment. I started to feel nauseous, so full was my aching bladder. The only toilet in our house was about twenty feet past the dining room, which made my relief about forty-five feet from my bedroom. Finally, in severe distress, I opened my door and tip-toed out in hopes of making it to the bathroom. "Mom, I really have to use the bathroom," I humbly admitted. "I'm really sorry to bother you."

The look my mother gave me was one of barely controlled fury. "Get back into your room right now, and don't come out until morning! I warned you about this!" she barked, then slammed her handful of Bridge cards face down on the table. I knew I was doomed.

The other women -- unaware of the secret drama taking place -- said how cute I was, or pawed at me with outstretched hands or tousled my hair as I slowly obeyed my mother and marched back to my room. Their assorted mixture of perfumes were repulsively blended in with their acrid cigarette smoke. It was a bizarre, grotesque scene. I can still picture and smell it exactly, even to this day.

Back in my dark room, still with a bladder fit to burst, I started to softly cry. I was trapped! I panicked and -- helplessly not knowing what else to do -- started to urinate on the ragged blue cotton throw rug which was on the floor beside my bed. I moved my urine stream back and forth so as to cover any sound the spray might make. Heavenly, blessed relief at last! But I knew I would pay the price the next day.

Sure enough, I got up in the morning and side-stepped the urine-soaked rug. The smell was sharp and unmistakable. Naturally, out of fear, I avoided mentioning anything at breakfast. But my mother quickly smelled the urine situation through my open bedroom door all the way from our kitchen, which was located between the dining room and the bathroom.

She exploded. "What the hell did you do in there?" She started shaking me and hitting my head, her eyes burning in rage. My two sisters quickly left the breakfast table, escaping to safety. My father had already gone to work.

"I didn't know what else to do!" I wailed. "You wouldn't let me use the bathroom because of your company!" I started sobbing.

Her answer to that was to grab a hairbrush from the bathroom and whack me on the bones of my wrists and elbows, as I tried in vain to deflect the enraged blows and protect my face.

It was awful. And -- of course -- it was completely illogical, cruel, and humiliating. This ordeal was not an isolated incident either. There were many other similar scenarios over the course of my tender, defenseless childhood years.

Was every day in my household a living hell? No. Fortunately, there were some days of relative peace. And thankfully, I was never beaten to the extent that I was ever bloodied. Were my circumstances as dire as that of, let's say, a malnourished orphan in impoverished Africa, or of a homeless waif trapped in the filthy slums of inner-city India? Again, no. My various punishments must be seen and be judged in their proper perspective.

But how can an innocent child explain logic to a dysfunctional adult? You really can't, because you are trapped and helpless, with minimal rights or say. You are, in effect, being unfairly bullied by your own parent -- whom you assumed would be patient, nurturing, and understanding with you and, ultimately, who would bestow the unconditional love that you so desperately craved from them. Thus, you ask yourself: Were my parents similarly abused by their parents, and hence didn't know any better? Did other families of that era operate in a similar, unspoken way? Does such odd abuse still happen today behind closed doors?

Later, as a father myself, I intensely focused on achieving the highest standards possible in lovingly raising our wonderful daughter. Thank God, I succeeded in banishing the cycle of abuse that I endured! As a 4th-8th grade teacher for thirty years, I also practiced utmost fairness and sensitivity, recalling the adage: "People might not always remember what you say, but they will never forget how you made them feel."

So, if you suffered a similar dysfunctional upbringing as I did, what can you do? You can release the pain, reveal the dark secrets, and acknowledge your blameless shame. It has taken me sixty-two years to purge myself of such burdens, so it is never too late.

Let it out. Let it go. Be free at last...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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