

Facing the Jaguar

A Memoir of Courage and Confrontation

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all my sisters
who were obedient and loyal to their families,
who kept the secrets they were told not to share,
who could not find someone to listen
or someone who could hear them,
who held the pain inside themselves for far too long,
who felt all alone.
Here's to all the family secret-keepers.
Here's to telling.

Introduction

I am neither the victim nor the heroine of this story. I am merely the teller. The events that happened have been seeping out of me over the past seven decades, like water in a tea kettle that begins with a soft hiss as it slow boils, then rapidly increases in intense bubbles until the low whistle erupts into a scream.

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I have this recurring dream throughout my adult life that started in my childhood.

The sun is so high in the sky that it is blinding. Everything around me looks whitewashed and hazy. The ground I am standing on is light beige, the color of sand on a hot beach day. The pallid high cement wall behind us blends into the ground. The air almost seems electric as it makes rippled lines that zigzag and crackle. I struggle to keep my eyes open.

The line of men in front of me are wearing camouflage uniforms in faded khaki.

My mother, my little sister, and I stand huddled before them when the commander calls them to attention.

“Ready,” he shouts. The soldiers raise their weapons.

“Set,” he continues. We can hear the sound of metal catches being released in unison.

Before he can complete his mission, my mother forcefully pushes my sister and me forward. Then quickly crouches down on the ground behind us.

“Fire!”

Prologue

I make the decision. This time I am going to tell him that the relationship is over. No beating around the bush or room for misinterpretation. Crystal clear language in the simplest of terms.

Unlike my other visits with him since my mother died, I am not bringing my father a cooked meal or fresh vegetables from the farmer's market to carry him over for a few days. No gifts or offerings of any kind. No phone numbers for contacting Meals on Wheels. No help with packing up unused clothes to empty Mom's closet. Or cleaning bookshelves crammed with a lifetime of photo albums and musty old paperbacks, or the garage filled with remnants of car and machine parts, or the guest bedroom stuffed with one-of-a-kind oddities like a spare closet. I am on a mission. One that's entirely on my own terms.

I write down the words I plan to say and practice them several times. I anticipate what can go wrong. Nothing, I conclude. I am going to his house and can walk out anytime I want. He is no longer physically well enough to follow or chase me. What I dread most is the invisible, electrically charged current I always experience that radiates from his body and crawls over my skin anytime I get too close to him. The experience is not unlike getting too close to the flames of a blazing fire where the more heat you feel, the more your body is forced back. His proximity has always provoked profound stress.

I arrive empty-handed and don't even want to sit down. He is in the kitchen, one of the few places left uncluttered in the house. The dining and living rooms are now being used for storage of about a dozen boxes with medical records. He plans to read them all and sue the hospitals and doctors for malpractice in their treatment of my mother years earlier. The dining room table is stacked with insurance and police record folders from his two car accidents this past year, of which he believes he was wrongfully accused and they are someone else's fault.

He doesn't get up when I walk in, and I want to be able to look directly into his eyes. So, I sit down across from him on the only other chair not covered in mail. Before I can even start to speak, he tells me about problems he is having. I understand that people who live alone long for someone to witness their daily trials. I notice that I am making excuses for him and will myself to stop.

“The medical alert company is a rip-off,” he starts. “They just raised the monthly cost for something I don’t ever plan on using. Don’t they know that I am on a fixed income? They don’t really care about seniors like me. I have plenty of other watches and will wear one of them from now on. I’ll show them.” He smiles a sly grin as though he is victorious.

The medical alert watch is for his own good, but I swallow my warning.

“Dad,” I jump in before he begins his usual riff.

But he out-shouts me. A typical move. He has had another car accident. Of course, it is the other three cars’ fault. The crooked cops, too. He was taken to the hospital when the police report was filled out. So no wonder the bastards all took that opportunity to put the blame on him.

Of course, he complains about how his three children are so busy that they can’t take care of him. Can’t do the things for him he is having difficulty doing since the accident. Since Mom died. Especially me, who lives so close. Who should know better. He needs someone to fight with the police, the insurance company, the car rental place. Take up his mission with my mother’s medical records. Even if he says nothing else, I can tell he wants me to do something for him that I won’t want to do, that he has no right to expect. I feel shaky but confident with what I’m about to do. I need to interrupt his rant.

But how do I capture a lifetime of hurt? Of pain? Of struggle? Of continued abuse? Now that he’s in pain and wants my help, no wonder I feel sick inside. I am fighting with myself about whether I should or should not help. Why should he get what he needs? What about all those years and what I needed? This is all a one-way relationship. Or is it?

After all, he gave his sperm. He sacrificed, too, with years of working to keep a roof over our heads. But then there were his life lessons—children should be seen and not heard, don’t make waves, I’m doing this for your own good so you won’t be frigid like your mother, you can never tell anyone or I’ll have to kill you, or go to jail, etc.

What do I owe him, really? I didn’t ask for any of it—the good or the bad.

“Dad,” I say a little too loudly, staring right into his eyes. “I’ve made a decision.” I hear my voice shaking a little. But he is hard of hearing and probably doesn’t notice.

I take a deeper than usual inhalation and plunge. “I have something to tell you. So please listen,” I continue. “I feel that I have given you more than I wanted to in my lifetime. That you

have taken more from me than anyone should ever expect.” I notice the cadence of my voice, so much like his when he races and runs on when he doesn’t want anyone else to break in. I don’t want to be like him, of all people, so I pause but hold up my hand. I see that he sees me, and he doesn’t try to interject.

“This is important to me,” I say, speaking a little slower so I can watch the reaction on his face. His expression is like stone. Unreadable. “You took a large portion of my childhood and used it for your own needs.” I see his mouth begin to move and I hold up my palm again. “Almost all of my adulthood has been affected by a stolen childhood and your unhealthy behavior toward me.”

He doesn’t try to speak now, so I keep going. “You have no right to expect me to take care of you or your needs. I spent my entire childhood satisfying your selfish needs at the cost of not discovering or fulfilling my own. You think because the things you did to us are not happening anymore, and it’s over for you, that it is over for us. You’re wrong. Because I was groomed to think I didn’t deserve any better, I confused love with sacrifice. I have spent years in therapy. Ruined two marriages. I’ve made tons of mistakes working out who I am, and how I want to be without your input. I’ve already given all a human being should have to give to another. More than any child owes a parent. You’re on your own.”

When I stand up, I’m shaking. When I walk out, I am still shaking. In spite of the exhilaration that comes from saying these words I’d held in for a lifetime, I also feel something else. I feel sad that our story has to end this way. That I can’t show my father that I also love him without him taking advantage of that.