

“Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.”

—Norman Cousins



Variations on the Murder of My Stepfather Who Is (I Think) Very Much Alive or Have You Scene My Stepfather?

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THE THIRD TIME I MURDERED MY STEPFATHER the weapon of choice was formalin, a liquid used to kill and preserve insects and other things once living. Watching the life slowly drain out of his face was quite satisfying. That face is seared in my memory. That hideous face. That mean face.

This took place on stage at the La MaMa Theatre in New York City. In this stage play, I wrote the character Samuel, a young man pretending to be a missionary to gain entrance and access to the parents who abandoned him long ago. He slowly watches his father figure die, poisoned by the formalin, while explaining the science behind moth preservation and lamenting the loneliness of metamorphosis. Mother he beats to death with a lamp, but I'll save those issues for another essay.

Before I started my own business, came out of the closet, survived two terrorist attacks, earned an MFA, paid off my loans, owned property, accidentally joined an anarchist group, was electrocuted in a bathtub, and survived several sexual assaults—before I discovered I was a writer—I was a dirty, shy, curious child. Contra Costa County, California, in the 1980s was an odd little place. Land of meth, corn, and serial killers. When speaking about hunting my first black bear with a bow and arrow, most mistake me for being from the South. When I mention a childhood steeped in Mormonism, most think I was raised in Utah. When I express that there are different kinds of white trash and we were Okies,

it is assumed I grew up *where the wind comes sweepin' down the plain*. But I was born and raised in Contra Costa County.

If you stood on the back porch of our powder-blue, single-story home and looked west, you'd see grape vines near the rabbit hutches, a dying lawn with a laundry line and badminton net, a giant sandbox near a large vegetable garden nestled between a cactus, a palm tree, and a weeping willow. Farther out you would see a faded, western, red cedar dock resting on the shore of a murky man-made lake. Across the lake you'd see floating a few small islands and beyond that Mt. Diablo—pronounced by us Okies as *die-ah-blow*.

My parents divorced in the mideighties when I was three. I remember very little of my biological father in my youth. I was the youngest of three living daughters and one deceased son; I was a tomboy. I was desperate for love and attention. Most of my memories from early childhood involve being tormented by my eldest sister, torturing my middle sister's Barbie dolls, and burying handwritten letters—which I wrote to ask my deceased brother to teach me how to throw a football—in the sandbox. Some kids get invisible friends; I got a dead brother. Then, at age five, Michael (Mike) moved in with us. I do not remember the first time I met my stepfather, but in one of my many unfinished screenplays inspired by my childhood, the moment little Jessa and Mike meet reads as follows:

EXT. HOUSE — BACKYARD

Amanda (7) and Jessa (5) run around in a frantic game of tag. Lynda (9) watches, bored.

LYNDA

Hey Jessa.

SIDE YARD

The girls stare at the chicken hutch.

LYNDA

I don't think anyone is that flexible. I mean, it would be so awesome if it was possible, but I don't think it is.

AMANDA

Yeah.

JESSA

I can do it.

LYNDA

No one could possibly fit in the hutch.

JESSA

No! I can, I can put my feet behind my head, I can fit.

LYNDA

Why are you such a liar?

JESSA

I'm not a liar.

Jessa starts to squeeze into the small hutch. Lynda giggles. Amanda watches. Jessa fully gets inside, squished into a tiny ball.

JESSA

See! Can you see me? Look!

Boom. Lynda locks the latch, locking Jessa inside the hutch. From inside the house, their mother, Cathy, whistles. Lynda and Amanda run inside. Jessa struggles, the wires cutting into her skin.

EXT. HOUSE — SIDE YARD — MOMENTS LATER

Jessa, still in the hutch, continues to struggle. Mike, 35, a bear of a man, comes around the corner. Jessa holds

back tears. Mike tries the latch, but Jessa is stuck. Blood drips down her arms.

Mike's big hands wrap around the top of the hutch. He rips the top of the hutch off and tosses it to the side. From Jessa's POV, the sun shines brightly behind Mike's Jesus-like head of hair and beard. His hands reach down and easily lift her tiny body up out of the hutch.

He smiles, revealing several missing teeth.

MIKE

You must be Jessa.

FADE OUT.





image info

Mike was a man's man, and I was a child desperately trying to replace the loss of the firstborn son. Mike taught me how to race remote-control cars. I built my own RC truck called The Terrible Pterodactyl because—like all tomboys in the eighties and nineties—I loved dinosaurs and understood the power of alliteration. We joined a couple's bowling league under the team name Captain Hook and Tinker Bell. The irony was that I was Captain Hook due to my aggressive curve; he, the six-foot-five, 350-pound grizzlyman, was Tinker Bell. He even bought me my own personalized bowling ball, weighted and drilled precisely to my hand.

He taught me to gut a fish, pluck a pheasant, and hawk a loogie. For seven years, I didn't feel lonely. He made me feel special. I called him Dad; he called me Jesue—Jessica Suzanne, Jessa Sue, Jesue.

Mike was a one-man construction crew from actual Oklahoma. He was the kind of dad that would kidnap your bike when you failed to lock it, letting you sweat out the guilt. He was the type of husband who wasn't afraid to grab his woman's ass in public. The only small-business owner who paints a portrait of a bear flipping you off on the side of his work truck. I abandoned any interest in friends my own age, and I spent all my time with him until a month after my twelfth birthday.

Our living room was wild. A floor-to-ceiling mural of a lush, green jungle spread across the fifteen-foot-wide, ranch-style space. The couch was brownish, although when purchased was most likely beige. A door was torn off its hinges, turned sideways, and bracketed into the wall, serving as my mother's sewing table; various measuring tapes dangled over three rusty nails hammered halfway into the edge. A bookcase filled from floor to ceiling with endless folds and bolts of fabrics so bright it would make Lisa Frank blush. An unfortunate amount of spandex. Two huge fish tanks flanked the

west wall across from a terrarium housing two tarantulas. An iguana hutch was there somewhere. There was a TV so old we children were the remote control, and my mother's collection of more than two hundred coffee mugs hung from the ceiling, an upside-down garden of kitsch. Oh, yeah, and two taxidermy deer heads with big, glassy black eyes staring into your soul; their creepiness matched only by the eyes-that-follow-you Jesus painting next to the whoop-the-child's-ass paddle that my mother had hand stenciled with pink and blue Care Bears.

She was a crafty authoritarian.

Mike was watching TV, his Buddha body taking up most of the couch. My mother was in the kitchen, visible from the family room, probably tetrisizing the Tupperware cabinet. Lynda was at the kitchen table, studying for her driver's test. Amanda dragged me down the hall in front of the family.

Jessa got her period.

Everyone looks at me. I look at Mike.

God, now there are four of you.

He turned back to the TV and never looked at me the same again.



The first full-length play I wrote in college ended with a daughter shooting her father in the back with a bow and arrow. He lets her do this. He knows he deserves it. He recognizes he has failed her, that he loved her the wrong way. He doesn't confess but he allows her to punish him. It's very sanctimonious and uncomfortably precious. Like middle school poetry. After writing it I foolishly thought, *That's it, I've done it, I've turned my pain into art, I'm over it, I'm healed.* Seven months later, I wrote a second full-length stage play. It hits its midway point with the following scene in which an abandoned son finds the man who raised him after twenty years of absence:

SON
Why would you do this? How could you
abandon me?

ASHER ushers him to the door.
SON casually reveals a gun.

SON
Why?

ASHER
...self-preservation. We did what we
needed to keep ourselves, living.

SON
That's it? That's all you have to offer me?

ASHER
What do you want?
(Pause)

SON
"What one man can do, all men are capable
of." Do you believe that?

ASHER
Yes.

SON
So...you believe you are capable of
killing your wife?
(SON points the gun toward ASHER'S WIFE)

ASHER
Yes.

SON
Do you believe you are capable of killing
yourself?
(SON points the gun at ASHER.)

ASHER
Yes...

SON
So do I.
(SON puts the gun to his own head.
Pulls the trigger – blackout.)

I don't recall conversing with Mike after I changed from his child to his daughter. Soon after, the movie *Clueless* came out, and I was dubbed Alicia Silverstone's doppelganger. I turned in my Smashing Pumpkins XL T-shirt for a purple crop top and my baggy skater jeans for low-rise bell bottoms—not because I liked them but because they got me attention. Neglect felt worse than getting my front tooth knocked out playing basketball with the missionaries. Not being seen was more painful than the rusty nail that cut through my eye when cleaning around my mother's makeshift sewing table. If no one was looking at me, I didn't exist. So, of course, I became an actor, taking on any role where I could scream at the top of my lungs. I played a rape victim more than once before the age of sixteen.

During my senior year of high school, Mike was rarely home. He was shacking up with some woman named Mimi who lived a few blocks away. Walking home from school, I'd see his truck parked outside her house and wondered why he didn't even bother to hide it. His pickup was big and red. Mike's Discovery Bay Concrete was painted on the side with a portrait of him and my mom as bears. So there it was, the bear image of my mother next to the bear version of Mike, flipping me off.

After Mike took up with Mimi, my mother lost it, although she'd never admit it. The house became unsuitable for a child—it probably always was but no one had noticed—and I moved in with my classmate Anne. Her home was large and clean and filled with food I didn't have to kill to eat. Her mom packed me lunches with notes saying, *Have a great day*. It was weird. I was numb.

The last time I saw Mike was at my high school graduation. Vast blue skies filled with the smell of cow patties from the neighboring dairy farms. My cheap yellow graduation gown hung over my sparkly gold minidress. My hair was recently chopped shoulder length, bleached Barbie blonde with wispy bangs that refused to stay in place. Mike crossed the now empty field, dried cement clinging to his boots, forever crusted in the creases of his massive, tanned hands.

Congratulations.
Thanks.
Good luck.

He handed me a white envelope. As he walked away, I opened the envelope and found three one-hundred-dollar bills. I never saw him again.

✎

In three scripts, I have a scene in which a child mistakes a stranger for her father. He mistakes her for a love interest. In each, there is a moment when the man is teaching the girl to do something—shoot archery, chop wood, dance. In each scene, his hand eventually slips, crossing the boundary, changing a beautiful thing into something ugly. The trauma of hope. In two of these stories, the girl kills the man. In the third, she runs away and becomes a prostitute.

In my twenties I slept with dozens of men without desire. I am gay; I don't enjoy hetero sex. It took me a long time to understand what I was doing, why I drank myself to a place of allowing men to enter me. My sister used to be a cutter. She would initiate physical pain to herself, releasing the emotional pain that she couldn't control. She used razor blades; I used cock.

In graduate school I attempted to write a script in which the daughter runs into her father a decade after abandonment. I worked on the scene for a year and could never get what I needed out of it. The daughter decides to just think of her father as dead. She kills him off in her mind, imagining him falling to his death on Mount Diablo. A kinder end, I feel, compared to the shootings, poisonings, and stranglings. Progress?

So she decides he is dead and offers a short emotionless obituary. And that's it. End of play. It didn't work; the dialogue is without poetics, the scenes are redundant, and the last act anticlimactic. Like a lackluster fireworks finale that makes you think, *Oh, I, uh, guess that was the end*. The worst time for a playwright to realize the end of their play does not work is during the opening night performance. I recommend copious amounts of whiskey when fucking men or watching actors attempt to make up for you not doing your job live on stage in front of an audience. But the audience clapped anyway. They always do.

LAYLA

I have this reoccurring dream that I'm hiking on Mt Diablo, and I see you, by the drop. And you wouldn't say anything to me. I'd be screaming at you, and you couldn't hear me. So I cried. And I cried and cried and cried and cried and cried and cried. Until finally, you turned to me. You hit me. You beat me on my face, on my back. You beat me into the ground til I was covered in blood coated in dirt...I can feel it on me now. I would wake up so happy. Because I meant something to you.

JAMESON

You did mean something to me.

LAYLA

People always ask if I was raped by my father.

JAMESON

Why would—

LAYLA

Because they can't understand how I could be so upset over nothing. Maybe then someone else might be able to understand how much this hurts and how devastating it has been and why, why I almost threw my entire life down the drain because of you. Why I wasted a DECADE of my life. Because this loneliness has always been in me. In me are things that don't connect to anyone in this world. But when you came...it went away. When you came, you understood me. I didn't have to try to translate. You pulled me out of that hell I was born into. But then you took it away. And I just...I've spent so much of my life wanting to die.

JAMESON

What do you want from me? What? Are you gonna kill yourself on my account? Are you gonna kill me? Do you wanna kill me? Fine, do it. Put me out of my misery

because no matter what I do I'm wrong and I fuck up everything, and I seem to do nothing to ruin other people's lives, so go ahead! I'm one big fuck up. To you, your mother, to Jillian, my two boys who won't even call me dad any—

LAYLA

I called you Dad...don't you understand what you did to me?

JAMESON

What do you want? Do you wanna kill me?

LAYLA

No.

JAMESON

Do you want money?

LAYLA

No.

JAMESON

Do you wanna...spend some time together?

(Pause.)

I...we could maybe go get something to eat.

(Silence.)

I was thinking of heading back up to California next year.

(Silence.)

Layla...What can I do for you?

LAYLA

Nothing.

A few years ago, my mother mentioned that she knew where Mike was if I wanted to contact him. After finishing the first draft of this essay and realizing I had no end to the essay, I began to consider reaching out. I didn't think I would get my emotional needs met. I didn't think he would cry and apologize and confess. Nor did I think that if he did those things, it would somehow heal me. But I thought at least I could wrap up this essay and know I did everything I could, and know that we never really get fully over parental abandonment. I was lying in bed on a Saturday morning, considering this, when my sister called me. *Mom's house burned down. Her husband is dead. Mom is missing.*

It would be another two months before we could find my mother's dentist and get confirmation that my mother was dead. Two months of questions that still cannot be answered. It wasn't until the memorial when the eulogist mentioned Mike's name that I thought of him again. Fear pierced through my grief. What if he is here? I had been mentally rehearsing and preparing to see extended family, to practice de-escalating with my combative sister and not cursing in the church. But I was unprepared to see Mike. As best I could, I let the fear drift away so I could feel the love of my family and mother's friends crowded in the beige Mormon church, a sea of loved ones

dressed in purple, my mother's favorite color. At the reception afterward, in a circle of aunts and cousins I hadn't seen in over two decades, someone asked, *Should one of us contact Mike?* Silence. Mom was the only one who knew where he was. The stagnant silence made it clear that no one had any desire to hunt him down. I certainly did not want the experience of telling him she is dead. It's hard enough having to repeat it to every friend and colleague.

That night I stayed up late with my biological father, drinking whiskey and talking philosophy and comedy and marketing until I veered into a feminist rant, which is our sign to put the glasses down and go to bed.

It's hard to sleep. I am terrified for when I will lose him. Every time my phone rings my body begins to shake; *who is it this time?* I have read at least fifteen books on loss and grief, and I now know why I couldn't find an end to this essay because there is no end when you lose someone you love. It is a heavy shadow that follows you everywhere, and the best you can do is make friends with it. Or, write about it over and over and over again until someone else finds your shadow useful. So I'll leave you with a moment from the middle of my play, *What Dies Inside Us While We Live*, when a young orphan, Naveen, gets exactly what she needs from her father figure, Ward.

(NAVEEN cuddles up in the quilt. She closes her eyes, lying still.

WARD puts out the cigarette.

NAVEEN turns her back to him. Silence.

WARD stands: he walks to the locked trunk. He unlocks it, it's filled with everything that reminds him of his deceased wife. He pulls out a small leather journal. He walks back to his chair and sits. He looks at the journal. He holds it to his nose and breathes in. Pause. He turns to a page in the middle of the journal. He reads...)

WARD

That face. That little face so lovely, so sweet, such pure and immeasurable kindness behind the wreckage of burned flesh and bruised eyes. I know that once I longed for nothing more than the extermination of that face. That hideous face. That mean face. That physical representation of the cruelty I once thought you had. But oh, how images change, how physicals change, how understanding and belief and seemingly immovable staples of this our simple lives. To know the seed. The seed that grew the tree. To know the water, the water that gave life. To know the soil, the dirt, the arms that held you tight, or not, that pushed you up into the air. To know these things will change a face, to change the eye that sees the face. And suddenly the truth that there is no truth, no right path, that nothing here is wrong, because we are all here not by choice but by force or chance. Because a face might look so strange, might resemble another twisted thing...

(WARD closes his eyes and continues from memory.)

I can no longer make you a monster because my own eye cannot see that you, my most beloved thing that makes me feel that I am home though I have none...you are a child of the soil, the seed, the water, the sun...to hate you is to hate the world.

(WARD gently places the journal down.

NAVEEN opens her eyes.

WARD quietly stands and walks away.)

