MY GOD, MY FATHER, SUCH CONFUSION ▲

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At the Women's March on Washington in January 2017, I took a sip of what it's like for a voice to no longer be silenced. In so many arenas, I saw expression of the need to stop accepting oppressive attitudes. For me personally, the fire that burned within was for the community of repressed little-girl voices and stories, stuffed down far too long into near oblivion.

Yet I begin this exploration of my father with tremendous trepidation, coupled with deep longing to move from a space of extreme weakness to one, at last, of strength. I believe the time is finally ripe for me to see my father in all his prowess and goodness, alongside all of his vulnerability and brutality to the little girl left behind when his lovely wife, my mother, died young. Thus commences a journey of voice finding, a search for what snuffed out that voice, what caused a lifetime of numbness, a search that in the end might allow a coming into a body, in order to finally be capable of feeling, rising up, and crowing out a story of awakening…

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I don't know how often a little girl's image of God is actually that of her dad, but I do know that when this little girl was two and three and four, when she got down on her knees at night to pray, and when God came to her in her dreams, He wore a farmer's cap and khaki work clothes; my God was my father. My dad was the head of Heaven. I tell this fact because it surely compounds the confusion that

goes very deep down into the little girl's, as well as the big girl's, the now aging woman's soul.

My father, I believe, may have splintered into several parts as a severely traumatized little boy himself. He was not planned, and by all accounts, was never really wanted as a child, never well nurtured. A key story rumbling in the back of my head, told laughingly, I'm afraid, by his mother, is one of how he would run home from school as a little boy of six or so, and would hide behind the kitchen door to suck on a bottle. His mother, who surely should have seen this as a tragic expression of unmet needs, instead chose to ridicule him for it. Another story is of how that same mother once sang at Carnegie Hall, rode the train back and forth from the farm in Kentucky to New York City, then suddenly found herself pregnant, and without choices in the matter.

My grandmother found herself stuck early on in the role of farmwife and mother, a role she would never have chosen for herself, except for having succumbed to her husband's carnal desires and perhaps to some of her own, though that is quite difficult to imagine. The two years I lived in their home, just after my mother died, I never saw my grandparents speak a single word to one another, much less demonstrate any sort of affection or tenderness toward one another. Now as I age, having parented four children of my own, and working ever so diligently to help my grandson grow up to be strong and independent, a critical thinker above all else, I see what my grandparents did to my father through a different lens. And I cringe to think what it must have been like to be raised by those two, who begrudged

my father's very existence, who daily bemoaned the adverse effect on their lives of his.

But, my goodness, was he ever able to encourage me as his only daughter after my mother's death. So many from my close and extended family have told me so. "If he did anything right, it was to love you so dearly. YOU were the veritable apple of his eye." And I know I was. On so many levels, I have never doubted that.

After my mother died, people said he saw HER in me. Having had her lovely physical life ripped from our family, we necessarily, each of us, turned to something else to fill a void, the way one must after death. I dreamed sometime shortly after her untimely disappearance from our lives that she came back to us. She walked into our old country kitchen, the one with the potbellied stove, no longer used for cooking, but rather just to heat the room. This stove was in the middle of our kitchen, close to the table where we were sitting, taking a meal. It was the same stove we would go to, to warm up a new calf or lamb that was especially fragile after birth.

In my dream, my mother walked in from the dining room, with a bright, brilliant, blinding halo around her entire body. She was even more beautiful then than before, and utterly unreachable. In the most intense longing of my life, I had to simply sit there and admire her with a cruel and unquenchable desire to feel her arms around me. In the dream, I knew I could not have her anymore. Each of us sat there. I was only aware of my own unique helplessness, being the littlest among us. Then I woke up.

In the light of day, my dad turned me into his sidekick, setting me next to him on the bench of his truck, driving out to count the cows at dawn. Surely there was mutual benefit in this arrangement. My father definitely had a playful side. Though he could be dismissive of my annoyance at his cigarette smoking in the little cab of his truck, he could also snort and croon with a big smile spread across his face, a twinkle in his eye, over any silly thing that an animal or person had done, with his little Cissy by his side.

In the light of day, there is no doubt my father gave me the most valuable gift of believing I could do the impossible, from getting into medical school in the 70s as a young woman in Mississippi, when such was not at all the norm, to raising a family while becoming a doctor in those circumstances, mostly without the support of my children's father by my side. I achieved that surprising feat with my dad's words ringing all the while in my head: "You can do it, girl! You're the best! I know you can…"

So let us look back to the farm fields of Kentucky where that gift was first bestowed, in the hayfields of my youth. Out in those quintessential rolling fields of wheat and hay that were the backdrop of my family's life, there were tractors and wagons; the sweet, dark-skinned field hands, Willie, Milton, John, and their children. My father was often driving the tractor slowly beside the bales of hay so that the other men could throw them up onto the wagon where they would be stacked, prior to driving them to the barn for storage. One of the men was always up on the wagon, quickly arranging those recently baled blocks of

pungent, hot hay, the cows' food through the long, cold winters, while others were on the ground throwing them up.

On this particular day, I was six; I know because that was the year I graduated to full-fledged team member. I sat that morning between my father's legs on the tractor seat, with my little hands on the steering wheel *driving the tractor,* as he was teaching me to do. Little did I know that the big girl I thought I was, in this passive position, was just about to become a whole lot bigger. Likely a cigarette was dangling from his lip that he took one last long drag on before flicking it to the ground just before he separated from me that day.

Perhaps a storm was coming, or the lunch hour approaching with still an entire field of hay bales to be gathered, but for some reason, my father, the big, beautiful, hardworking man that he was, decided to jump down from the tractor to help with the loading of the wagon, leaving me there up on that big old tractor all alone. We were on a long, straight row, so hardly any skill was required for the steering. Still, I was feeling pretty grown-up in the tractor seat all by myself, as it slowly moved down the row of hay bales, with just me behind its big steering wheel, little legs too short to touch the ground. The wagon being pulled behind was getting loaded ever so much quicker with my father working on the ground.

There I sat behind the wheel, quite sure that when the time came to turn the corner, my father would jump right back up behind me, to accomplish the feat of the real driving, like he always did. But instead, on this day in

those redolent fields with the sun burning down on us from the blazing blue sky, my shirtless father ran up to me and shouted from the ground his words of encouragement, to be more than I thought I could be. At six, he said to his daughter, looking through the steering wheel of that relatively huge Ferguson tractor, "You can do this, girl! I'm sure of it…just turn that steering wheel really hard!"

As startled as a little girl could be at this sudden, utterly unexpected promotion, I pulled that tremendous steering wheel hard to the right with all my might, and kept on driving, with heart racing, limbs trembling, for an entire other row of hay. At the end of it, the wagon was loaded, and my father, in his sweaty, happy face, ran up to me with outstretched arms for my proudest self to jump into, hearing his constant chant, "You did it, Cis!!! I knew you could do it!" This tender, loving father believed in me by day like no other.

Our nights together are a whole different story. And yet as I plunge back to those moments that seem to have locked me down sexually for nearly a lifetime, I seem to hear my father's long-hushed voice saying, "You can do this, girl; I know you can. I never meant to hurt you." I now believe, after a lifetime of mystery and discovery, and finally listening to and dissecting my dreams, I believe he may have splintered young into at least two parts, and that he was no more there than I was when the damning moves were made; that we may have both dissociated around whatever exactly happened between the grown man's and the little girl's bodies those long, dark nights.

And his phosphorescent genitalia sways eerily, hauntingly, still, in my mind in the wee hours before waking.

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In van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score,* the wise doctor tells us no one really wants to hear or know these stories, neither ourselves, nor our families, friends, or acquaintances. Then he goes on to say that they are nonetheless necessary, to reconstruct the map of our lives. He says we must relive the memories, in order to make them just that, no longer the driving subconscious forces of our lives, but rather just memories that the little children within us had no control over. We must integrate these truths into our daily lives in order to not be ruled and overcome by them.

After thirty years of working in public health, primarily caring for poor and uninsured women, I wonder if there is not perhaps one out there who will, in fact, want to hear it, because she will resonate so soundly with this story of a lifetime of repression of the hardest-to-look-at truths. I wonder if there might not actually be legends of us who have wasted decades reenacting our traumas, for never having looked at them straight-on. I wonder if my own daughter has not been doomed to also reenact my trauma, by watching my choices and ways of being all of her life.

And so I set out to unravel my life from the very beginning, to untangle the long-taut knots, then to knit it back together again, hopefully much more whole and healthy this time. I tell this story in all its baseness and all its beauty, for

anyone who might need to join me in this search for our long-suppressed strength that has been there waiting, wanting to bubble up all our lives.