

My Father's Child *by Elizabeth Robles*

I remember going with my mother looking for my father at the bar as the sun went down. I was only seven years old at the time. Carefully, I watched my mother peeking through the door of the bar. As soon as she saw he was there, she held my hand tightly, leaving the place without letting my father know she was present. I knew then that something was wrong. Once at home, she got all of us in bed. Silence hung over us like

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darkness before a storm. A few hours later, my father came home drunk. Today, I cannot remember what happened after he arrived. My memory of that moment is gone like a dense fog disappearing into the ocean.

One summer during school vacation, a man who owned a grocery store and had a farm of *cabulla* (a plant used to make sacks to store dried grains), offered a summer job to the kids in town. He wanted us to collect some beetles in jars to protect the plants the bugs were eating. The job was fun; the beetles were fat and brown with a hard texture. It was like a game, grabbing the little creatures while they tried to escape from my hands. Friday came and I went to collect my money. I planned to get lots of candy, but my father got there first. He had collected my money to spend it on alcohol. I was speechless at my father's action and my feelings were trapped like the beetles in the jars. I left the store without the sweet candy, tasting only a sour memory.

My mother always cooked good healthy meals. We had a vegetable garden in our backyard. Pulling the carrots out of the ground was my favorite thing to do. In addition, every day

we got fresh milk from my aunt's cows. There was no need for my father to break into a grocery store to steal a whole bologna to feed us. As I heard my mother whispering to my father, "Why did you do such a wrong thing? We have food." my little world trembled with fear for I expected the police to knock at the door to arrest my father.

The house in which we lived was government property. My father worked for the government, taking care of the coffee fields. Because of his alcohol addiction, he lost his job and we were evicted. We had to move into the house of my grandmother who lived close by. My father then moved to the city to look for a job, and promised he would return in three months. Instead, he came back a year later to take us to the city. One morning, just as the sun rose, we left town in a pickup truck. The back was full of our belongings, and on top of them were all of us—just like the Beverly Hillbillies when they moved to the city.

We settled down in the new house, which had electricity, more bedrooms, and indoor plumbing. However, my world was changing for the worse. Now I had no more vegetable or flower garden. I was not going to be able to listen to my mother singing while she hung the clothes outside on sunny mornings. And I had no place in nature to play.

In the country, I used to play hide-and-seek at nighttime with other children. The hiding place was on top of the trees near my house. After school, my recreation was taking off to the rainforest with kids from the neighborhood. There we spent hours catching frogs, climbing on trees, and searching for any living creatures. When it rained we would crawl under huge leaves waiting until the rain had stopped. In the meantime, we told ghost stories making our stay in the forest more exciting. After a playful after-

noon, and before the night arrived, I ran home where no one had noticed my absence. In the city, however, I would not have such contact with Mother Nature, the one who had protected and nourished me while I was growing up.

When I was eleven years old, we moved from one house to another several times during a year. The presence of the police with an eviction notice became more familiar as time passed. I discovered my father not only had an alcohol problem, but was an abuser as well. How could I not have noticed his behavior towards my

mother? Perhaps I did not want to know what was happening at home. On the other hand, I have some memories of my mother telling her friends of my father's drunken violence. As time passed, the abuse escalated and our house turned into a nightmare.

There were sleepless nights when he verbally and physically abused my mother. Holidays were like hell. On Christmas Eve, instead of waiting for Santa with excitement about the presents, I went to sleep hoping the night would vanish so I would not hear my father coming home.

My mother started working to give us some economic stability, and as a result, my sister and I needed to take full responsibility for the house chores. Now, I became a mom for my younger siblings. I took them to the hospital when they were sick, and made sure they had food and clean clothes. As a consequence of having many responsibilities, my outside social world was limited. My friends never knew what kind of life I led. I did not do well in school for I was exhausted by the time I got there.

Eventually, my mother divorced my father. For a while, he was in denial; he appeared at home just as if he had never moved. One night I was in bed when I heard a noise. Immediately I got up and opened the door, and there was my father choking my mother. I threatened my fa-

ther by telling him to let my mother go or I would call the police, then started running bare-foot towards the police department. My heart was pounding with fear as I heard my father, his voice like the growling of a bear in the woods. Finally, I got to the police station and told them what happened. The police took me home and my father disappeared for a while.

There were other occasions when I sheltered my mother in the bedroom while my father was cursing and threatening to destroy the door. Above all, I remember vividly my mother and I waiting for the bus and my father suddenly appearing, begging her to take him back or he would get himself run over by a car. He then went into the middle of the road. I held my mom's hand and closed my eyes when I saw a truck approaching my father. I did not want to open my eyes and see him lying dead on the ground. After the truck passed, my mother's sweet voice comforted me saying that he had not died. When I opened my eyes, I saw him on the other side of the road laughing. My father was not killed on that day, but he had just killed a feeling inside of me. Time passed, and I became more detached from the feelings I had for my father.

In order to survive at home, I learned how to lie and to create a world of denial. I became a caretaker for everyone but me. School did not seem important because, as my father used to say, "A woman does not need to study—you will get married and have a family to take care of." Eventually, I married a much older man, who did not abuse me physically but knew how to control my life, absorbing my identity through emotional abuse as a sponge absorbs the water. I got di-

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vorced years later, feeling as if I were divorcing my father.

After my divorce, I worked for ten years in a shelter for battered women and children, and my life experiences made it easier for me to understand their situation. I saw my mother in each of them, and myself in each child who came to the shelter with fear in her eyes. I was able to empower women to take control of their lives, leaving me with a rewarding feeling of making a difference in someone's life.

Three years ago, my father passed away. I cried when I heard the news, but not because I was going to miss him. I cried because I was angry that I did not have the feeling I had when my

mother died, the pain of losing a parent whom I admired and loved. Still, my father with his addiction taught me the hardest lessons of life. Many of my dreams were shattered. However, through courage, time, and determination, I am now taking the first steps towards becoming a psychologist. The person I am today I owe to Mother Nature, who taught me the value of beauty and balance, to my mother, who taught me the importance of love and honesty, and to my father, who taught me endurance.

Elizabeth Robles lives in Massachusetts. She works at Logan Airport for a major airline company, which makes it possible for her to fly and explore the world.



Image courtesy of *Picturing Change*, ProLiteracy Worldwide, NY.

Look at the picture above.

What is happening?

Why do you think it is happening?

What do you think can be done to prevent this from happening again?